

DESOLATION ON PARCEL ISLAND

Impressionistic Sketch of a Visit to Dangerous Reefs in the South China Seas

By L. DOWDALL

Some few years ago an opportunity and an experience came to me which I think few people have had.

I was travelling up from Bangkok to Hongkong in a steamer of about five thousand tons on which I was the only European passenger, although we had several hundreds Chinese passengers in the steerage.

The sea was as calm as a mill pond and, although the sun was blazing down on the iron decks and making the surface of the sea glitter like a fiery mirror, the gentle South West monsoon made the shaded promenade deck pleasantly cool.

After a breakfast for which the clean sea air, after the steamy atmosphere of Bangkok, had given me sufficient appetite, I was lying in a deck chair, pipe in mouth dozing over a novel which was just sufficiently interesting to keep me from going quite off to sleep, when Captain Ransom, whom I had not seen at breakfast in the saloon, came along the deck.

"Good morning, Mr. Peters," he said. "You look fairly comfortable there. I hope you are not in any special hurry to get to Hongkong."

"Good morning, Captain," I replied. "I am so comfortable here and in so little of a hurry to get to Hongkong that I should not mind if you were to drop your hook right here and let me doze on for a couple of months. We'd get a little more breeze too if we stopped instead of running with it. I wish you would consider it!"

Granting A Wish

"Well now!" he said, with a twinkle in his eye, "you are liable to get your wish. The Chief has just told me that there's something wrong with his rattletrap engines and he wants me to stop for a few hours while he sets it right. I should like to oblige you and another out here, but I'm afraid the bottom is just a little too far down for us to reach it with our anchor. I am going to run inside the Parcel Group and anchor off one of the reefs where I can get a good holding bottom. If you weren't so darned lazy you might be able to go ashore to stretch your legs."

My novel slipped to the deck and I sat up in my chair. Parcel Island! Danger spot of the South China Seas, avoided by all ships and given as wide a berth as possible but nevertheless grave of many a stout vessel. Safe enough, I suppose, in fine weather and in daylight but, with their innumerable sunken reefs and shoals, a place to be dreaded in dirty weather.

"Captain" I cried, "I don't wish McLeod any harm, but I hope he takes at least two days to get his engines going again. Where do you intend to anchor?"

"We are passing the Crescent Group right now" said Captain Ransom. "They are only about ten miles away to port, but so these Islands and Reefs are so low lying that you cannot see them till you get quite close. That's why they are so dangerous. If you are off your course you are right on top of them before you know they are there. We are making for the Amphitrite Group and I intend to anchor off the West side of Woody Island."

Woody Island in Sight

This was very interesting to me. I knew that Woody Island had been exploited for guano by some Japanese several years before but that they had been put out by the Chinese Government who claimed the sovereignty of these islands. Since then several other companies, both Chinese and foreign, had been formed to work the guano but all had come to grief one way or another. Either the deposits were not valuable enough or it was too difficult to get it away. Anyway it would be a wonderful experience to land and explore the island.

Captain Ransom left me to go up on the bridge and I picked up my book but could not revive my interest in it and when, at about eleven o'clock, a message came to me to join the Skipper on the bridge I threw it down and sprang to my feet.

He was standing at the starboard end of the bridge and when I joined him he pointed away ahead. There, low down on the horizon, was a thin streak of white.

"That's Woody Island" he said. "We ought to be there in half an hour and if you like you can go ashore for a couple of hours after tiffin."

Dropping Anchor

Picking up the telescope which hung in brackets on the bridge rail I levelled it at the island. All I could see was a thin strip of snow white beach surmounted by green bushes or trees and, about the middle of the island, a tall coconut tree which stood out boldly against the

clear blue of the sky. The whole island was not much more than a mile long and the highest part was a bare ten feet above sea level. As we drew nearer it looked like a lovely jewel set in the deep and sparkling blue of the tropic sea.

At eleven thirty precisely we had arrived and had dropped anchor in ten fathoms of the bluest and clearest water I have ever seen. As the rattle of the outrunning chain reached the Island a cloud of birds rose from the trees and circled with raucous cries.

"Well, here we are," said Captain Ransom laying down his binoculars. "Come in to my cabin and have a cocktail and then you can go down and have your tiffin. I will have a boat lowered and when you are ready you can go ashore."

After a very pleasant ice cocktail in the skipper's cabin and a hurried tiffin in the saloon I came on deck to find one of the ship's boats in the water alongside with four Chinese sailors at the oars.

A rope ladder hung from the ship's rail and, clambering down this I got into the boat and told the crew to shove off.

"Be back before four o'clock," Captain Ransom called down to me. I must be clear of the reefs before dark. If I want you sooner I will sound the whistle."

"Right you are, skipper!" I shouted back and we started for shore.

Wreckage of Typhoon

As we approached we could see that a level reef or shelf of coral extended for about three hundred yards from the beach to where it shelved off into deep water. Right opposite where we had anchored a long rusty iron pier extended from the beach to the edge of the reef. I could see that it had extended beyond this into deep water, but the end had apparently been wrecked by some passing typhoon and was thrown up on the reef in a tangle of twisted beams and girders.

A few yards off the edge of the reef I made the men turn the boat round and back her in so that I was able to scramble off onto the coral without bumping the boat. The tide was low so that the level shelf was a few inches above sea level and showed a mass of coral of fascinating shapes with pools of clear water in which swam and crawled wonderful and fantastic creatures the like of which I had never seen before. Off the edge of the reef, although the water rapidly deepened to fifteen or twenty feet, it was so clear that I could see every outline of the beautiful coral with schools of brilliantly coloured fish gliding in and out of the grottoes and submarine caves.

Telling the men in the boat to shove off and lie on their oars until I returned I climbed up to the pier which was about twelve feet high. Two lines of a light railway ran along the top, rusted and corroded with many years exposure to the salt laden air.

Guano Workers' Settlement

There was no decking and, as I made my way shorewards, stepping from sleeper to sleeper, I walked under a swirling cloud of sea birds that circled and screeched over my head. No doubt they wondered what this strange intruder of their home could be. Sometimes I came upon flocks of them perched on the pier and, so unaccustomed were they to human interference and so unafraid, that I had almost to kick them out of my way.

As last I arrived at the shoreward end of the pier and, this end also having been carried away, clambered down to the beach. With the afternoon sun beating down with fierce force on the pure white sand the glare was terrific and I wished I had brought my dark glasses.

A little way above high water mark grew a tangle of tall grasses and brambles and, about fifty yards further inshore, were tall and spreading trees which covered the whole of the interior of the Island.

Clustered near the base of the pier and well above the beach were the remains of what had been the settlement of the guano workers. Wandering among these, with always my attendant swarm of birds, I saw a long building which had evidently been the living quarters of the labourers. Also a cook house with the remains of a concrete fireplace and a broken iron pot lying on the sand floor.

Mournful Desolation

They had all been built of poles with galvanized iron walls and roofs, but the fury of the gales which had passed over this typhoon stricken region had bent the poles and torn away most of the iron sheets. The whole presented a scene of mournful desolation and I found myself wondering how the men had fared when

the island was struck by the full force of a raging typhoon.

Near the living quarters were the rusted remains of a small water distilling plant and I remembered that these islands, mere uninhabited specks of coral in the immensity of the sea, have no drinking water on them. A party of twenty Chinese coolies had been left on one of them some years ago and when their relief ship came for them some months later it was only to find their sun blackened corpses. They had all died of thirst.

Turning with a little shudder I followed the line of the light railway and plunged into the grateful shade of the trees. Everywhere was desolation—rusted rails and rotting sleepers. Here and there on the rails the remains of some railway trucks, just where they had been left—how many years ago?

Deterred by Sharks

Clambering over fallen tree trunks and tripping over creeping vines I made my way across the center of the island until at last I came out on the eastern side.

Here I saw the same level shelf of coral below the beach, but on this side it ran out for nearly a thousand yards and, before it reached deep water, there lay a rocky island which seemed to stand much higher than the one I was on. It was bare of trees but was covered with bright green grass and low bushes. This, I learned later, was Rocky Island and it rose to forty feet in height.

The tide was coming in now and the coral shelf was covered with two feet of water. I could have waded across to Rocky Island, but even in this shallow water the thought of the sharks which infest these seas deterred me.

Turning southward along the beach I started to make my way back to where the old pier was.

Lonely Graves

Shells of all sizes and of strange shapes and lovely pastel colours strewn the beach. Occasionally I came across the tracks of a huge turtle where he had made his way from the sea and up across the soft sand to feed on the green grasses, but did not come across one of the creatures such as I should have liked to.

Halfway back to the pier I came across what had evidently been a small clearing in the bushes. Going up to it I saw a row of low mounds, each about eight feet long and three feet wide. At the head of some of them were weather-stained boards on which I could just discern Chinese characters (or were they Japanese?) Here, in this most desolate of spots, were laid to rest the weary bones of some of the adventurers.

Further along I was very surprised when I saw a large dog. He trotted out of the bushes a couple of hundred yards ahead of me, stood at gaze for a moment and then trotted back into the tangle of shrubs and grass and was gone. Had I been dreaming? No. When I came to the spot there were his tracks in the sand. Poor chap, I thought. He must have been left behind by the last people who had been there.

How long had he been there all alone and did he come down to the beach sometimes to gaze wistfully out to seaward waiting for his master to come back?

I called and whistled to him but got no response. He was probably crouching in the bushes watching me warily, wondering whether I were friend or foe. Indeed he would have found me, friend had he ventured to come to me.

At last I came back to the pier and, clambering up onto it again, made my way out to the end, the birds swirling and screeching round my head. Perhaps they were sorry to see me go soon.

Getting back into the boat I was rowed out to the ship to find Captain Ransom leaning over the rail.

"I was just about to whistle for you" he called down to me. "McLeod has finished and I want to get away into open water before it gets dark."

Left Far Behind

As I was sitting over a refreshing cup of tea with the captain in his cabin and recounting my adventures to him I heard the clatter of the windlass talking up the anchor and when, half an hour later and much refreshed, I made my way down to my cabin to have a bath Woody Island was a thin streak of white low down on the horizon astern.

I had actually been ashore on the Parcel Islands where few white men had ever been and where no sailor ever wished to be. But I had come in a stout ship and in fine weather and the same stout ship was now carrying me back to civilization with its teeming towns, crowds and bustle. Fading away astern, lonely, desolate and dangerous but indescribably beautiful with their snowy beaches and sparkling blue seas, were the Parcel Islands.