

I lay there for some time, and the sun sank down until it was but a dull, fiery ball on the western horizon; and then all of a sudden I was startled by such a chorus of yells as surely never burst from human throats before.

“A ship! A ship! Sail-ho! Sail-ho!”

A ship! A sail! Oh, pitying God, what did that mean?

I rushed out of my hut. All our fellows seemed to have gone clean crazed. Some were rushing up and down, others had fallen on their knees, some were leaping like madmen, others crying and wringing their hands. And there, far away, true, but with her nose pointed to our island, was a barque, her royals furled, sailing steadily towards us.

You cannot understand. It is impossible that you can; and I cannot tell you how I felt. There are some things which cannot be conveyed in human language, which can only be depicted by thought, and this was one of them. I did not know whether to cheer, to cry, to scream, or to dance. I felt that I must do each and all. It was just madness for the time.

On she came. There was not much wind that evening, and I suppose she had her royals furled because they would not have been much use to her, being close hauled, with a dead noser. But there she was, standing right in for our island.

“Get a fire going—quick! For goodness’ sake hurry there!” I shrieked; and I threw a whole armful of wood on to our fire, which was now only a glowing mass of embers, ready for banking for the night.

“A fire—a fire!”

“A ship!”

“Sail-ho!”

“Hurrah!”

There, what is the good of trying to make you understand how we felt, and how we carried on? We raced here and there. We came near putting our fire out, we piled the fuel so high. But that danger was averted.

Up, up rolled great columns of smoke, heaven high, rolling away before the wind; and then after it darted the great tongues of roaring flame, casting a ruddy glow all round, and making the rolling smoke turn pink and purple beneath its kiss. And still on and on came the ship, nearer and nearer to us!

And the sun sank slowly, and the dusk fell grey upon the sea, and still brighter and brighter blazed our fire, higher danced the flames, and thicker rolled the smoke—and then——

We rubbed our eyes, we shrieked our prayers to them—prayers which they could not hear; but just as we thought that she was making right for us, we saw her head shift round a bit, and then round went her yards, and she started bearing right away from us, in an opposite direction.

Oh, if I ever knew bitter disappointment I knew it then! There was the ship, a good ship, a brave ship—a ship to take us back to life and our fellow men—there she was and going from us—seeming to mock us—leaving us there in our hopelessness and misery.

“Make up the fire! Higher still! Make it blaze more! She must see it—they can’t be off seeing it!”

How it blazed! How it roared in the evening breeze! It cast its ruddy light through the darkness, and made the sea glow blood red. Higher! Fiercer yet—higher!

No use! All in vain. Dimmer, dimmer in the fading light the vessel grew—she was misty and indistinct—she was a speck—a speck that faded—and we were left there alone.

I have asked myself since what it meant. So far as I can learn, no vessel ever reported having seen our signal fire; and yet if they did not see it they must have been blind, for it must have been visible for miles—at least the glow and reflection must have been, even if the flames themselves could not be seen.

But she took no notice; she sailed off, and we were left there as nearly frantic with despair as ever men could be.

It was such a cruel disappointment; it would have been far better not to have had our spirits raised than to have had our hopes shattered so cruelly.

What wonder if some of us uttered bad words and cursed those who might have answered our prayers and carried us to safety. We felt stunned with it, and too miserable to speak to each other.