

Chapter 1

Shipwreck!

“Breakers under our lee!” screamed the lookout from high in the rigging of the ship.

Those words jarred Captain Josiah Knowles out of a sound sleep. He knew they meant that the clipper ship’s lookout had spotted waves breaking over a rock or reef. The ship *Wild Wave* was in grave danger!

As he leaped out of the bed in his cabin, Captain Knowles’ clock told him it was 1:00 a.m., only a short time since he had gone to sleep. At that time the ship had been moving at thirteen knots per hour, a fast speed for a ship in 1858.

“Bring her about,” the captain shouted to the helmsman as he raced out on the deck. He saw the blur of spinning spokes in the big wheel as the helmsman tried to turn the ship from her course. The next instant he was thrown off his feet as the ship jerked to a stop with the sound of splintering wood.

Sailors and passengers began running about the deck, most of them toward Captain Knowles. In the howling wind, the giant masts and yards that held the sails began groaning and cracking. And copper sheets that protected the bottom of the ship flew through the air and crashed onto the deck.

“Get below decks quickly!” shouted Captain Knowles. “Those falling spars and copper sheets can kill us.”

As he jumped back into the passageway leading to his cabin, the captain tried to decide what he should do next. Had they run aground on a coral reef near an island, or had they hit a lone rocky point far out at sea? In the blackness of the stormy night it was impossible to tell what they’d hit. And to make matters worse, he could hear a sailor shouting from the how, “She’s filling with water, Captain, and she’s going down!”

Ignoring the danger of the falling and flying objects on the deck, Captain Knowles hurried toward the front of the ship. As he neared the bow, a big wave broke across the deck right in front of him. Then another great wave lifted the ship and pushed it higher onto the reef or rock. As the wave passed, he felt the ship settle and then hold firmly on.

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“We seem to be stuck solidly on whatever we hit,” he said to the sailor who had called to him. “If we stay this way and the seas calm down even a bit, we’ll not sink, not with that rock or whatever it is holding us so firmly.”

Cheered by that thought, the captain turned and began picking his way back through the tangle of swinging ropes, spars, pulleys, and copper sheets toward the passengers and crew, most of whom stood fearfully in the passageways.

“I’ve got to calm their fears,” Captain Knowles thought to himself as he saw the fear on the others’ faces. “We’re stuck fast, with little danger of sinking right now,” he assured them. “We can’t do anything until dawn, when we can see how badly the ship is damaged. So get what rest you can.”

When dawn finally came, it was clear that the ship had struck a reef. Between the waves the sailors could see the white coral “reef” just below the surface of the water. From charts Captain Knowles discovered that the low strip of sand about half a mile beyond the reef was Oeno Island, one of the four islands of the Pitcairn group in the South Pacific Ocean. Somehow the ship had gotten off course during the night and had driven onto the reef ringing the tiny island.

Although the seas were stormy and the wind blew with almost gale force, Captain Knowles ordered his sailors to put a small boat over the side so they could row to the island.

“I hope no cannibals live there,” the captain thought as he watched Mr. Bartlett, the ship’s mate, and several of the sailors begin rowing toward the island. The little boat plunged deep down into the troughs between the waves and then rose high on their crests, but the sailors kept pulling toward the tiny strip of sand in the distance. “We can’t stay on the ship much longer,” Captain Knowles thought. “She could slip off the reef and sink at any time.”

In about an hour the mate and the sailors returned to the ship. “There’s no one on the island,” Mr. Bartlett reported to the captain. “We found water, but it doesn’t taste good.”

“Well, that’s good enough for now. Let’s take everything we can off the ship,” ordered the captain. “We’ll have to work fast to get everything we need onto the island before dark. And we’ll need your best seamanship in getting our supplies through those big waves, especially with the wind rising again. So let’s go to work and make for the shore!”

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By the time the sun went down, all the crew, the ten passengers, many supplies, and two boxes containing \$18,000 in gold Captain Knowles was supposed to take to New England had been transferred to the island in the ship's two boats. One of the boats also carried the body of Captain Knowles's brother to the beach. He had died in California and was being transported by ship to his final burial on the East Coast.

The crew and passengers pitched tents made from strips of canvas, located sea birds and eggs in large numbers, and even caught some fish swimming near shore.

But night brought no comfort to the shipwrecked sailors and passengers. The wind howled across the island, and blew sand into their tents. Large sand crabs attacked them through their blankets. Sleep was almost impossible.

For seven days, fierce winds roared across Oeno Island and prevented them from putting a boat into the water. Finally on March 13, Captain Knowles told Mr. Bartlett and five sailors to get one of the two boats ready to sail.

"We're going to Pitcairn's Island, about seventy-five miles east of here," he told the passengers and crew members. "Pitcairn's is inhabited. Captains of whaling ships sometimes put in there for fresh water and supplies of fruit. Maybe a whaler will even be at Pitcairn's when we get there and can help us.

"I'll take two birds with us. When we reach Pitcairn's I'll tie a message to their legs and release them. They'll fly back here to Oeno. They are so tame, you should be able to capture at least one of them. Then you'll know what we found.

"If for some reason we don't return for you within four weeks, the second mate is instructed to sail the other boat to Pitcairn's. But don't worry. You have food and water here. I will not rest until we are all safe again," Captain Knowles promised them.

After Mr. Bartlett had loaded the boat with supplies, the captain placed the two boxes of gold on board. Then the sailors pushed off into the heavy surf of the ocean. Once clear of the crashing waves and through an opening in the reef, the sailors hoisted a sail and turned the boat toward Pitcairn's Island. A good breeze sped them southward, but darkness brought with it thunder, lightning, and rain. The wind blew hard, and heavy waves dumped water into the small boat. The sailors used cans to bail water out of the boat to keep it from sinking.

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With daylight, the sailors were cheered to see Pitcairn's Island about thirty miles away. All day long they rowed against a wind that blew so hard they couldn't use their sail. They finally reached the island that evening.

Captain Knowles ordered the sailors to row the boat toward a sheltered inlet on the island safe from the waves and wind. When the boat finally reached the inlet, the exhausted sailors piled out of the boat, wrapped themselves in oilskins, and went to sleep right there on the sand.

Early the next morning, one of the sailors climbed the cliff above the inlet where the others slept. On the other side of the island, he found a little cluster of homes they later learned was called Adamstown. As he walked into the little village, he had a strange feeling. No one was around. Not a sound came from any of the homes. He knocked on a door; no answer. He pushed the door open and went inside. No one was there. He went to another house and found the same thing - nobody there. He went into several other homes, but no one was in any of them. The island was deserted!

He ran back to where the men were sleeping on the other side of the island. As he ran, he was startled as a chicken burst out from under one of the houses, and flew by him in a flurry of flapping wings. "Well," he thought, "at least there are some animals here, even if there aren't any people."

When he told the others that the island was deserted, they were alarmed. Now it was doubtful that any ships would be calling at the island. Their chances of being rescued were not very good if others knew there were no people there.

After they had eaten some food they had brought with them, Captain Knowles led them into Adamstown. On one building they found a piece of paper tacked to the wall. The note explained that the residents of Pitcairn's had left two years earlier for Norfolk Island, far to the west toward Australia. They felt there were too many people living there for little Pitcairn's size, which was about one mile wide by two miles long.

This news discouraged Captain Knowles. He realized that if ship captains knew nobody lived on Pitcairn's, there would be little reason for them to stop there. But he also knew he couldn't let his men see his discouragement.

"We'll stay here a few days. Perhaps a ship will come by in that time," he said. "If not, we'll gather supplies and make our way to the

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Sandwich Islands. There are plenty of people there. We'll probably find a ship there that can bring us back to Oeno for the others. It will be a long journey if we have to make it, but we can do it!"

For the next few days, they took turns climbing to the highest place on the island. There they kept watch for a passing ship. One day as he stood his watch, one of the sailors made a terrible discovery further down the coast. He raced down the mountainside, shouting the news to the others.

"Captain! Captain!" he yelled when he found Captain Knowles. "Our boat is wrecked! The waves must have gotten bigger than usual last night. I looked where we have the boat tied, and it is no longer there. There are just little pieces of the boat washing around among the rocks in the water!"

The loss of their boat, their only way of escape from Pitcairn's, paralyzed the captain and crew. Now they had no way to sail in search of a rescue ship. Without a boat, they were prisoners on Pitcairn's Island.