

A
Breath
of Air

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*And, sowing the kernels of it in the sea,
bring forth more islands.*

—THE TEMPEST

*(from which I have also taken
the story of the book. R.G.)*

A Breath of Air

CHAPTER I

THE noise that the Water Star made as she came down out to sea sounded on the island like the humming of an insect, but it was in the very early morning when most insects are asleep. A few islanders, out early, looked up at the sky; they knew of aeroplanes but, seeing nothing, they went on with their daily business. The men out with the fishing boats were more puzzled, but none of them was as far out to sea as the Hat, and no one saw her settle with a first splash on the water. They shrugged their shoulders and went back to their fishing.

The island was the island Mānoa, now called Terraqueous, in the Indian Pacific, long. 123.15E, lat. 11.40S.

CHAPTER II

IF A magician's stick had been waved and the island had appeared out of the sea, Valentine could not have been more surprised to see it.

"Did your father make a spell?" he asked Charis afterwards. He laughed as he asked it, but then it had been no laughing matter. They had been far out, over the sea, when the engine gave its first cough. "Christ!" said McGinty, but Valentine did not turn back; instead he flew on. "What made me fly on then?" he asked afterwards. "It was damn stupidity. Perhaps I was light-headed."

McGinty thought so. "You're flaming crazy!" cried McGinty. "If we come down on that sea we'll break up. And even if we don't break up, they'll never find us. Skipper! Vall For Christ's sake!"

"Shut up!" said Valentine.

He looked at the altimeter which had at last come to rest. It showed five thousand and dropping. The engine coughed again, and he looked down into the twilight gulf.

"For Christ's sake," McGinty began again.

"Look," said Valentine.

A mark lay like a slur on the horizon. Valentine had not seen it himself until that moment. The engine spluttered and, in a minute or two, ceased. "Can you make it?" McGinty's voice was a whisper. His face was white.

Valentine did not answer. He was listening. As the engines ceased the plane became all sound, the sound of flying; out of the air, muted, except for her own sound, the Water Star glided down on the island that seemed to rise, as islands in a transformation scene, out of the sea to meet her, assuming height and contours. Now Valentine saw it was too far away, but nearer was its satellite, a small rock island rising from a cream edge of lather, and as they circled, coming down on it, it was the shape of a hat, its brim the lather of breaking waves, its crown a hill of greyish rock from which floated a trail of smoke like a feather. "Volcanic," said Valentine.

The other island was now impossibly far away, a long shape, blue with distance, rising into a mountain. "We can't reach it," said Valentine, and presently, gently, he brought the Water Star down in the bay of the hat island. The water came up round the Water Star, deluging her, and then sank away, leaving them rocking on a dark swell where the rollers might have been whalebacks rising and falling.

"Where the hell are we?" asked McGinty. He was not ungrateful for the island, but his fright had made his voice shrill and angry. He released the pin of his harness and shook it off and climbed out on the float.

Here, on the surface of the sea, it was barely light. The Water Star heaved and rose drunkenly on the swell, wing up, wing down, but her life and impetus were gone. McGinty chafed at her helplessness but to Valentine there came an

extraordinary sense of rest. "We might be anyplace!" said McGinty, looking at the bare rocks, the surf, and the twilight sea; even to him his voice sounded small in the emptiness. "We're lost," said McGinty.

Valentine shook his head.

"What else are we?" asked McGinty aggressively.

"Safe," said Valentine and shut his eyes.

He did not want to be disturbed; the sounds of that first sea morning beat softly on the air, sounds empty of life except for the sounds of birds and of waves. To Valentine it felt like the first morning of a new world. Was that because I had thought we should not see morning again? he thought. He was reluctant to speak or move; he felt he must begin to live and stir slowly, gently, as embryo life stirred, letting time uncoil itself. He rested, lulled by the sound of the surf, but beside him McGinty fidgeted. Valentine knew that if he did not speak first McGinty would; reluctantly he half opened his eyes. The first sunlight had come down on the sea, and it struck his eyes with brightness, dazzling him; he felt it on his lids. "And there was light," said Valentine and shut his eyes again.

McGinty took no notice. He was used to Valentine. He had been with him since Valentine bought his Proctor, the Water Star, and they had done a good few hundreds of hours together. "Clever chap but talks punk!" McGinty would have said of Valentine.

Valentine would talk in poetry for an hour or more, and McGinty had long ago learned not to listen, though bits, words, and phrases had seeped into his mind and sometimes came up unexpectedly among his own limited stock of words.

"I wonder where we are," said McGinty restlessly again. "There's nothing here but rocks. We must get to that other

island. I wonder what it is." Valentine sighed and opened his eyes. There was nothing to give them a clue; there was only this small conical island and the bigger island that lay behind it. "What island could it be?" asked McGinty.

His young pink face was strained with tiredness, his eyes looked sore. Valentine knew he must be bruised and chilled and stiff and hungry, as he was himself, but McGinty was McGinty still. "I am I," McGinty said to all the world. "You are you," and unless people were the same as he and things were accustomed, he had no way of participating in them. Nothing that impinged on McGinty was allowed to alter him. To Valentine that had seemed a virtue; now, suddenly, he found it irritating. He ought to be shocked at the very least, thought Valentine. He ought to be shaken out of himself after a night like that.

Valentine yawned and stretched as much as he was able in his seat; he was reluctant to move, but he knew he must do something: he looked at the journey log, looked at his watch, added in the landing time. "That last leg was eleven hours, nineteen minutes," he told McGinty. "With the winds in that weather, God knows how many miles we are out of course."

"And I wonder where that storm hatched itself out from?" said McGinty resentfully. "There shouldn't have been a storm. The met had nothing to say when we left."

All trace of storm had vanished from the light though there was an extra coolness in the wind and darker colours in the sea; the morning was cool, clear, and as indifferent as a child. "But don't be deceived," said Valentine. "Indifferent, yes, but not a child," and he remembered the first moment in the darkening light when the Water Star seemed to have been lifted and dropped, with the force of a lift down a shaft, into a void of darkness in which she was not flown

but blown by the wind, lifted and dropped and hurled and twanged. Sometimes we must have gone down a sheer five hundred feet or more and come up with a big enough jolt to make you think we had hit the sea, thought Valentine. He remembered how McGinty's eyes had rolled round to look at him and at the St. Elmo's fire that ran in two vague balls on the wing tips and made a halo in the arc of the propeller. McGinty had not seen a storm like this.

"If we had hit a big cu-nimb," said Valentine to McGinty now, "it would have broken us up like a match-box!"

McGinty nodded. "And the bloody radio going dead!" said McGinty. Everything that McGinty relied upon had failed him.

Valentine had been afraid to use up petrol in an attempt to climb up above the weather, and he could not use the sextant. The rain on the windshield was so heavy that they might have been under the sea, except for the violent bucketing and dropping of the plane. They were shaken and chilled to the bone. They did not have time or a smooth enough moment for coffee.

Valentine still felt, now, as if he were in the plane, his hands still gripping the wheel, his body pulling back as he tried to lift it, feeling each gulf and abyss of air; his head was still spinning and seemed at first large, and then to shrink away to a pin-head. At last there had come a curious suffusing of light round the plane, a paleness in the blackness, paleness without light, creeping. McGinty touched Valentine's arm; far off, high up on the port wing tip, was a crack of light. It swung below their feet as the Water Star tilted; as they dropped it rose, and dropped as they came up, and, gradually, the blackness dimmed and grew pale, and Valentine saw McGinty's lips shape "Dawn," and he nodded. He remembered now how his

neck had hurt as he nodded. Five minutes later they had broken out of the storm and were in a clear sky.

They had looked down and found they were flying over a faintly glimmering sea scattered with islands. Beyond them a wide sea stretched like a gulf. "Flying west a half-north," Valentine had said. "We must be hundreds of miles out of our way."

"Bet we'll be running pretty low on juice, Skipper," said McGinty. "Why not come down here?" And it was then that Valentine had shaken his head.

"For God's sake," said McGinty, "you're not going to take her out over that sea! If we come down there we've had it!" But Valentine flew straight on.

~~~~~It is said, when a ship moves, she loses her hull. The rubber dinghy had no hull, but she came on airily towards the larger island, buoyant on the swell, two streams of bubbles in her wake and small inundations shining where the paddles had pitted the sea.

From far off the larger island had seemed itself to be floating in the air, a pale blue cumulus miraged above scintillating water; but, as they paddled nearer, in the increasing light it began to detach itself from its background and stand out clearly, with a cloud to cap its mountain; it gave the mountain a look of being capped with snow and drawn up into infinity. "It always seemed larger than it was," said Valentine afterwards. He might have said it seemed like the whole world.

The island was familiar to Valentine, and he knew why. Everyone, at some time or another, has visited an island or had an island of his own, a coral island, a desert island,

a treasure or Swiss Family Robinson island, an island of the mind. To Valentine this one was so familiar that it was stereotyped. It opened on a crescent bay that had a settlement of native huts and trees at the far end.

"There are people here," said McGinty with satisfaction.

Valentine felt it was almost a pity. "Yes. There's a town," he said and sighed.

McGinty sighed too; if that were all the town it was serious for them.

Flying fish went past them, sprinkling them with light drops and pocking the waves. The sun had grown stronger, and where they dipped their paddles the water broke into infinitesimal rainbows, small arcs and prisms of colour. The rainbows seemed significant to Valentine and he remembered that, no matter how stereotyped his islands had been, they were always magical to him. He lifted his head to look at the sweep of white sand along the margin of the bay, at the green above it and the hill with its white cloud, and in that moment he had from the island a sense of music, invisible music that crept by him on the water. All music is invisible, argued Valentine, or is it called invisible when its source can't be seen? This, if it were music, which his sense denied though his ears heard it, was intrinsic in the island itself; if it were anything, it was wind and water music, and he could see the waves, even the wind that suddenly wrinkled the sea. Nonsense! said Valentine severely to himself. It isn't music at all. But still the music persisted.

Valentine was, by habit, cool and sure; he refused to be anything else. "I want my head in the clouds but my feet on the ground," said Valentine. He was sometimes asked, "Mr. Doubleday, what is the secret of your great success?"

"Only that I haven't a secret," Valentine answered, and he always said, "I work."

That was true. He had worked passionately. To the outside world his rise had been surprising; to Valentine it had been logically slow. "I started at ten," he might have said. "I was ten when I went into *Pelican Pie*. It has been twenty years. Twenty years is a long time, and mine have been twice as long because I worked twice as hard." He was well named Doubleday, because he fitted in twice as much as most people into each day. "I don't remember much of the first ten years," said Valentine, "but you can double my twenty." He found, to his surprise, that made him fifty years old. "That is nearer my age," said Valentine. He felt at least fifty; he was tired. Bone tired, thought Valentine. Perhaps I am tired out.

He did not know. He felt worse than tired. He felt unutterably stale. For the past few weeks—months? years? thought Valentine, he had had a distaste for life; lately he had not been able to sleep and it was difficult to talk or eat or work. "I can't *work!*" the words burst from him in a frenzy of worry. The more he worried, the worse he worked. I used to work easily; now I can't work at all. What has happened to me? thought Valentine. Why can't I get back to what I was before? Now he rested his paddle on his knees and the music sounded in his ear, the music that he said was nonsense.

"It's not a town," McGinty was saying in disgust. "It's hardly a village, just some huts." He was looking through Valentine's glasses. "I don't see a road," said McGinty, turning the glasses, "or anything that you could call a building. There doesn't seem to be any life about."

"If there are huts there must be islanders," said Valentine.

"It looks a one-horse place to me," said McGinty.

"I don't see even one horse," said Valentine. He was wrong. There was one horse.

Their arms and backs and shoulders and legs were aching; they seemed to have been paddling this clumsy dinghy for an æon; when an eddy of current caught it, it sometimes spun round or moved like a crab sideways. Valentine's neck hurt and his head at the temples felt stretched. His feet were cold and his whole body felt chilled though he was sweating; he was clammy with sweat.

"What a goddam place to get landed in," said McGinty, looking morosely towards the island.

"For God's sake!" snapped Valentine. "Can't you wait till we have landed before you start to crab it?"

"I only said—" McGinty's voice was surly.

"Yes, I know," said Valentine.

"It's you who want to get back," said McGinty. "It's your play we're tearing back for, not mine."

"Yes, I know," said Valentine wearily again. He looked at the dispatch case between his feet. He had automatically picked it up when they left the Water Star. Now he came to think of it, he wondered why they had not taken anything else, not as much as a razor. Well, I suppose we shall come back, he thought, but the thought seemed to have no certainty in his mind. Everything seemed drifting, cut loose. The dinghy wallowed and turned round clumsily; they seemed to be making no headway at all. The sun was getting higher. We must have been all of two hours, thought Valentine.

"We have to get petrol, don't we?" McGinty was asking, aggrieved. He looked again towards the shore, at the trees and dots of huts. "How the hell will there be any petrol there?"

"There won't," said Valentine.



“Well then?” asked McGinty aggressively.

“Well then?” said Valentine. He was almost too tired to care.

Imperceptibly they were coming nearer the island. The current brought them nearer, and they rounded a promontory that up till then they had not seen; it ran out, making a headland above the sea. A house came into view, standing in trees, a house like the native houses, thatched and brown-walled, but a large house. Valentine took the glasses from McGinty and, looking through them, saw flowering trees above lawns and steps leading down to the beach, where boats lay at anchor and a jetty was built out into the water on wooden poles; it looked empty, rapt. Then he saw that smoke was going up from the back and a flag was flying from a flagpole and fluttering on the breeze, a flag of blue and white. Valentine looked at the flag, the house, the smooth lawns and plumes of blossoming trees. “Someone discovered this island before we did,” he said.

“It must be someone white,” said McGinty. “No wog would keep a garden like that.”

“What about the garden of Eden,” said Valentine. “Adam was a wog.”

“He wasn’t!” McGinty was beginning indignantly when the dinghy came up with a bump against something that was floating in the sea.

At first it looked like two pig-bodies floating, swollen in death; then they saw that they were two canvas bags, fastened to a floating cork that was dragging an end of chain and must have broken loose from a buoy. The bags were padlocked and sealed and labelled. “Mail,” said Valentine. Gingerly leaning over, he dragged them to the side of the dinghy.

“Careful! You’ll have us over!” said McGinty.