

A Strange Island

by Louisa May Alcott, 1832-1888

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One day I lay rocking in my boat, reading a very famous book, which all children know and love; and the name of which I'll tell you by and by. So busily was I reading, that I never minded the tide; and presently discovered that I was floating out to sea, with neither sail nor oar. At first I was very much frightened; for there was no one in sight on land or sea, and I didn't know where I might drift to. But the water was calm, the sky clear, and the wind blew balmily; so I waited for what should happen.

Presently I saw a speck on the sea, and eagerly watched it; for it drew rapidly near, and seemed to be going my way. When it came closer, I was much amazed; for, of all the queer boats I ever saw, this was the queerest. It was a great wooden bowl, very cracked and old; and in it sat three gray-headed little gentlemen with spectacles, all reading busily, and letting the boat go where it pleased. Now, right in their way was a rock; and I called out, "Sir, sir, take care."

But my call came too late: crash went the bowl, out came the bottom, and down plumped all the little gentlemen into the sea. I tried not to laugh, as the books, wigs, and spectacles flew about; and, urging my boat nearer, I managed to fish them up, dripping and sneezing, and looking like drowned kittens. When

the flurry was over, and they had got their breath, I asked who they were, and where they were going.

"We are from Gotham, ma'am," said the fattest one wiping a very wet face on a very wet handkerchief. "We were going to that island yonder. We have often tried, but never got there: it's always so, and I begin to think the thing can't be done."

I looked where he pointed; and, sure enough, there was an island where I had never seen one before. I rubbed my eyes, and looked again. Yes: there it was—a little island, with trees and people on it; for I saw smoke coming out of the chimney of a queerly-shaped house on the shore.

"What is the name of it?" I asked.

The little old gentleman put his finger on his lips, and said, with a mysterious nod:

"I couldn't tell you, ma'am. It's a secret; but, if you manage to land there, you will soon know."

The other old men nodded at the same time; and then all went to reading again, with the water still dropping off the ends of their noses. This made me very curious; and, as the tide drifted us nearer and nearer, I looked well about me, and saw several things that filled me with a strong desire to land on the island. The odd house, I found, was built like a high-heeled shoe; and at every window I saw children's heads. Some were eating broth; some were crying; and some had nightcaps on. I caught sight of a distracted old lady flying about, with a ladle in one hand, and a rod in the other; but the house was so full of children (even up to the sky-light—out of which they popped their heads, and nodded at me) that I couldn't see much of the mamma of this large family: one seldom can, you know.

I had hardly got over my surprise at this queer sight, when I saw a cow fly up through the air, over the new moon that hung there, and come down and disappear in the woods. I really didn't know what to make of this, but had no time to ask the old men what it meant; for a cat, playing a fiddle, was seen on the shore. A little dog stood by, listening and laughing; while a dish and a spoon ran away over the beach with all their might. If the boat had not floated up to the land, I think I should have swum there—I was so anxious to see what was going on; for there was a great racket on the island, and such a remarkable collection of creatures, it was impossible to help staring.

As soon as we landed, three other gentlemen came to welcome the ones I had saved, and seemed very glad to see them. They appeared to have just landed from a tub in which was a drum, rub-a-dub-dubbing all by itself. One of the new men had a white frock on, and carried a large knife; the second had dough on his hands, flour on his coat, and a hot-looking face; the third was very greasy, had a bundle of candles under his arm, and a ball of wicking half out of his pocket. The six shook hands, and walked away together, talking about a fair; and left me to take care of myself.

I walked on through a pleasant meadow, where a pretty little girl was looking sadly up at a row of sheep's tails hung on a tree. I also saw a little boy in blue, asleep by a hay-cock; and another boy taking aim at a cock-sparrow, who clapped his wings and flew away. Presently I saw two more little girls: one sat by a fire warming her toes; and, when I asked what her name was, she said pleasantly:

"Polly Flinders, ma'am."

The other one sat on a tuft of grass, eating some thing that looked very nice; but, all of a sudden, she dropped her bowl, and ran away, looking very much frightened.

"What's the matter with her?" I asked of a gay young frog who came tripping along with his hat under his arm.

"Miss Muffit is a fashionable lady, and afraid of spiders, madam; also of frogs." And he puffed himself angrily up, till his eyes quite goggled in his head.

"And, pray, who are you, sir?" I asked, staring at his white vest, green coat, and fine cravat.

"Excuse me, if I don't give my name, ma'am. My false friend, the rat, got me into a sad scrape once; and Rowley insists upon it that a duck destroyed me, which is all gammon, ma'am—all gammon."

With that, the frog skipped away; and I turned into a narrow lane, which seemed to lead toward some music. I had not gone far, when I heard the rumbling of a wheelbarrow, and saw a little man wheeling a little woman along. The little man looked very hot and tired; but the little woman looked very nice, in a smart bonnet and shawl, and kept looking at a new gold ring on her finger, as she rode along under her little umbrella. I was wondering who they were, when down went the wheelbarrow; and the little lady screamed so dismally that I ran away, lest I should get into trouble—being a stranger.

Turning a corner, I came upon a very charming scene, and slipped into a quiet nook to see what was going on. It was evidently a wedding; and I was just in time to see it, for the procession was passing at that moment. First came a splendid cock-a-doodle, all in black and gold, like a herald, blowing his trumpet, and marching with a very dignified step. Then came a rook, in black, like a minister, with spectacles and white cravat. A lark and bullfinch followed—friends, I suppose; and then the bride and bridegroom. Miss Wren was evidently a Quakeress; for she wore a sober dress, and a little white veil, through which her bright eyes shone. The bridegroom was a military man, in his scarlet uniform—a plump, bold-looking bird, very happy and proud just then. A goldfinch gave away the bride, and a linnet was bridesmaid. The ceremony was very fine; and, as soon as it was over, the blackbird, thrush and nightingale burst out in a lovely song.

A splendid dinner followed, at which was nearly every bird that flies; so you may imagine the music there was. They had currant-pie in abundance; and cherry-wine, which excited a cuckoo so much, that he became quite rude, and so far forgot himself as to pull the bride about. This made the groom so angry that he begged his friend, the sparrow, to bring his bow and arrow, and punish the ruffian. But, alas! Sparrow had also taken a drop too much: he aimed wrong, and, with a dreadful cry, Mr. Robin sank dying into the arms of his wife, little Jane.

It was too much for me; and, taking advantage of the confusion that followed, I left the tragical scene as fast as possible.

A little farther on, I was shocked to see a goose dragging an old man down some steps that led to a little house.

"Dear me! What's the matter here?" I cried.

"He won't say his prayers," screamed the goose.

"But perhaps he was never taught," said I.

"It's never too late to learn: he's had his chance; he won't be pious and good, so away with him. Don't interfere, whatever you do: hold your tongue, and go about your business," scolded the goose who certainly had a dreadful temper.

I dared say no more; and, when the poor old man had been driven away by this foul proceeding, I went up the steps and peeped in; for I heard some one crying, and thought the cross bird, perhaps, had hurt some one else. A little old woman stood there, wringing her hands in great distress; while a small dog was barking at her with all his might.

"Bless me! The fashions have got even here," thought I; for the old woman was dressed in the latest style—or, rather, she had overdone it sadly; for her gown was nearly up to her knees, and she was nearly as ridiculous an object as some of the young ladies I had seen at home. She had a respectable bonnet on, however, instead of a straw saucer; and her hair was neatly put under a cap—not made into a knob on the top of her head.

"My dear soul, what's the trouble?" said I, quite touched by her tears.

"Lud a mercy, ma'am! I've been to market with my butter and eggs—for the price of both is so high, one can soon get rich now-a-days—and, being tired, I stopped to rest a bit, but fell asleep by the road. Somebody—I think it's a rogue of a peddler who sold me wooden nutmegs, and a clock that wouldn't go, and some pans that came to bits the first time I used them—somebody cut my new gown and petticoat off all round, in the shameful way you see. I thought I never should get home; for I was such a fright, I actually didn't know myself. But, thinks I, my doggy will know me; and then I shall be sure I'm I, and not some boldfaced creature in short skirts. But, oh, ma'am! Doggy don't know me; and I ain't myself, and I don't know what to do."

"He's a foolish little beast; so don't mind him, but have a cup of tea, and go to bed. You can make your gown decent to-morrow; and, if I see the tricky peddler, I'll give him a scolding."

This seemed to comfort the old woman; though doggy still barked.

"My next neighbor has a dog who never behaves in this way," she said, as she put her teapot on the coals. "He's a remarkable beast; and you'd better stop to see him as you pass, ma'am. He's always up to some funny prank or other."

I said I would; and, as I went by the next house, I took a look in at the window. The closet was empty, I observed; but the dog sat smoking a pipe, looking as grave as a judge.

"Where is your mistress?" asked I.

"Gone for some tripe," answered the dog, politely taking the pipe out of his mouth, and adding, "I hope the smoke doesn't annoy you."

"I don't approve of smoking," said I.

"Sorry to hear it," said the dog, coolly.

I was going to lecture him on this bad habit; but I saw his mistress coming with a dish in her hand, and, fearing she might think me rude to peep in at her windows, I walked on, wondering what we were coming to when even four-legged puppies smoked.

At the door of the next little house, I saw a market-wagon loaded with vegetables, and a smart young pig just driving it away. I had heard of this interesting family, and took a look as I passed by. A second tidy pig sat blowing the fire; and a third was eating roast-beef, as if he had just come in from his work. The fourth, I was grieved to see, looked very sulky; for it was evident he had been naughty, and so lost his dinner. The little pig was at the door, crying

to get in; and it was sweet to see how kindly the others let him in, wiped his tears, tied on his bib, and brought him his bread and milk. I was very glad to see these young orphans doing so well, and I knew my friends at home would enjoy hearing from them.

A loud scream made me jump; and the sudden splash of water made me run along, without stopping to pick up a boy and girl who came tumbling down the hill with an empty pail, bumping their heads as they rolled. Smelling something nice, and feeling hungry, I stepped into a large room near by—a sort of eating-house, I fancy; for various parties seemed to be enjoying themselves in their different ways. A small boy sat near the door, eating a large pie; and he gave me a fine plum which he had just pulled out. At one table was a fat gentleman cutting another pie, which had a dark crust, through which appeared the heads of a flock of birds, all singing gayly.

"There's no end to the improvements in cooking, and no accounting for tastes," I added, looking at a handsomely-dressed lady, who sat near, eating bread and honey.

As I passed this party, I saw behind the lady's chair a maid, with a clothes-pin in her hand, and no nose. She sobbingly told me a bird had nipped it off; and I gave her a bit of court-plaster, which I fortunately had in my pocket.

Another couple were dividing their meat in a queer way; for one took all the fat, and the other all the lean. The next people were odder still; for the man looked rather guilty, and seemed to be hiding a three-peck measure under his chair, while he waited for his wife to bring on some cold barley-pudding, which, to my surprise, she was frying herself. I also saw a queer moonstruck-looking man inquiring the way to Norridge; and another man making wry faces over some plum-pudding, with which he had burnt his mouth, because his friend came down too soon.

I ordered pease-porridge hot, and they brought it cold; but I didn't wait for any thing else, being in a hurry to see all there was to be seen on this strange island. Feeling refreshed, I strolled on, passing a jolly old gentleman smoking and drinking while three fiddlers played before him. As I turned into a road that led toward a hill, a little boy, riding a dapple-gray pony, and an old lady on a white horse, with bells ringing somewhere, trotted by me, followed by a little girl, who wished to know where she could buy a penny bun. I told her the best were at Newmarch's, in Bedford Street, and she ran on, much pleased; but I'm afraid she never found that best of bake-shops. I was going quietly along, when the sound of another horse coming made me look round; and there I saw a dreadful sight—a wild horse, tearing over the ground, with fiery eyes and streaming tail. On his back sat a crazy man, beating him with a broom; a crazy woman was behind him, with her bonnet on wrong side before, holding one crazy child in her lap, while another stood on the horse; a third was hanging on by one foot, and all were howling at the top of their voices as they rushed by. I scrambled over the wall to get out of the way, and there I saw more curious sights. Two blind men were sitting on the grass, trying to see two lame men who were hobbling along as hard as they could; and, near by, a bull was fighting a bee in the most violent manner. This rather alarmed me; and I scrambled back into the road again, just as a very fine lady jumped over a barberry-bush near by, and a gentleman went flying after, with a ring in one hand and a stick in the other.

"What very odd people they have here!" I thought. Close by was a tidy little house under the hill, and in it a tidy little woman who sold things to eat. Being rather hungry, in spite of my porridge, I bought a baked apple and a cranberry-pie; for she said they were good, and I found she told the truth. As I sat eating my pie, some dogs began to bark; and by came a troop of beggars, some in rags, and some in old velvet gowns. A drunken grenadier was with them, who wanted a pot of beer; but as he had no money, the old woman sent him about his business.

On my way up the hill, I saw a little boy crying over a dead pig, and his sister, who seemed to be dead also. I asked his name, and he sobbed out, "Johnny Pringle, ma'am;" and went on crying so hard I could do nothing to comfort him. While I stood talking to him, a sudden gust of wind blew up the road, and down came the bough of a tree; and, to my surprise, a cradle with a baby in it also. The baby screamed dreadfully, and I didn't know how to quiet it; so I ran back to the old woman, and left it with her, asking if that was the way babies were taken care of there.

"Bless you, my dear! Its ma is making patty-cakes; and put it up there to be out of the way of Tom Tinker's dog. I'll soon hush it up," said the old woman; and, trotting it on her knee, she began to sing:

"Hey! My kitten, my kitten.

Hey! My kitten, any deary."

Feeling that the child was in good hands, I hurried away, for I saw something was going on upon the hill-top. When I got to the hill-top, I was shocked to find some people tossing an old woman in a blanket. I begged them to stop; but one of the men, who, I found, was a Welchman, by the name of Taffy, told me the old lady liked it.

"But why does she like it?" I asked in great surprise.

"Tom, the piper's son, will tell you: it's my turn to toss now," said the man.

"Why, you see, ma'am," said Tom, "she is one of those dreadfully nice old women, who are always fussing and scrubbing, and worrying people to death, with everlastingly cleaning house. Now and then we get so tired out with her that we propose to her to clean the sky itself. She likes that; and, as this is the only way we can get her up, we toss till she sticks somewhere, and then leave her to sweep cobwebs till she is ready to come back and behave herself."

"Well, that is the oddest thing I ever heard. I know just such an old lady, and when I go home I'll try your plan. It seems to me that you have a great many queer old ladies on this island," I said to another man, whom they called Peter, and who stood eating pumpkin all the time.

"Well, we do have rather a nice collection; but you haven't seen the best of all. We expect her every minute; and Margery Daw is to let us know the minute she lights on the island," replied Peter, with his mouth full.

"Lights?" said I, "you speak as if she flew."

"She rides on a bird. Hurrah! The old sweeper has lit. Now the cobwebs will fly. Don't hurry back," shouted the man; and a faint, far-off voice answered, "I shall be back again by and by."

The people folded up the blanket, looking much relieved; and I was examining a very odd house which was built by an ancient king called Boggen, when Margery Daw, a dirty little girl, came up the hill, screaming, at the top of her voice:

"She's come! She's come!"

Every one looked up; and I saw a large white bird slowly flying over the island. On its back sat the nicest old woman that ever was seen: all the others were nothing compared to her. She had a pointed hat on over her cap, a red cloak, high-heeled shoes, and a crutch in her hand. She smiled and nodded as the bird approached; and every one ran and nodded, and screamed, "Welcome! Welcome, mother!"

As soon as she touched the ground, she was so surrounded that I could only see the top of her hat; for hundreds and hundreds of little children suddenly appeared, like a great flock of birds,--rosy, happy, pretty children; but all looked unreal, and among them I saw some who looked like little people I had known long ago.

"Who are they?" I asked of a bonny lass, who was sitting on a cushion, eating strawberries and cream.

"They are the phantoms of all the little people who ever read and loved our mother's songs," said the maid.

"What did she write?" I asked, feeling very queer, and as if I was going to remember something.

"Songs that are immortal; and you have them in your hand," replied the bonny maid, smiling at my stupidity.

I looked; and there, on the cover of the book I had been reading so busily when the tide carried me away, I saw the words "Mother Goose's Melodies." I was so delighted that I had seen her I gave a shout, and tried to get near enough to hug and kiss the dear old soul, as the swarm of children were doing; but my cry woke me, and I was so sorry to find it all a dream!

