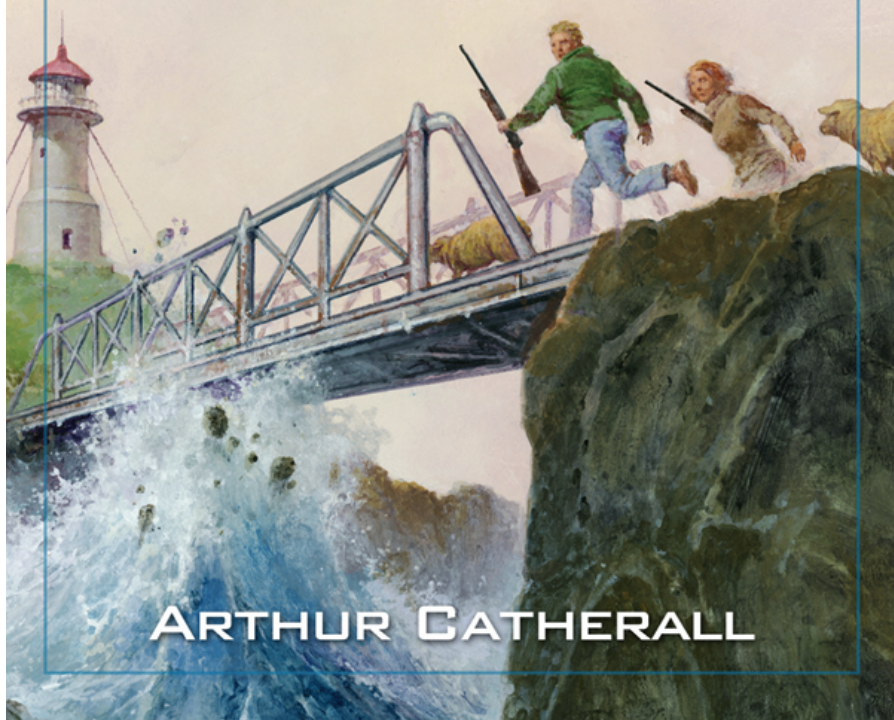


THE STRANGE INTRUDER



THE STRANGE INTRUDER

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The Strange Intruder



Arthur Catherall

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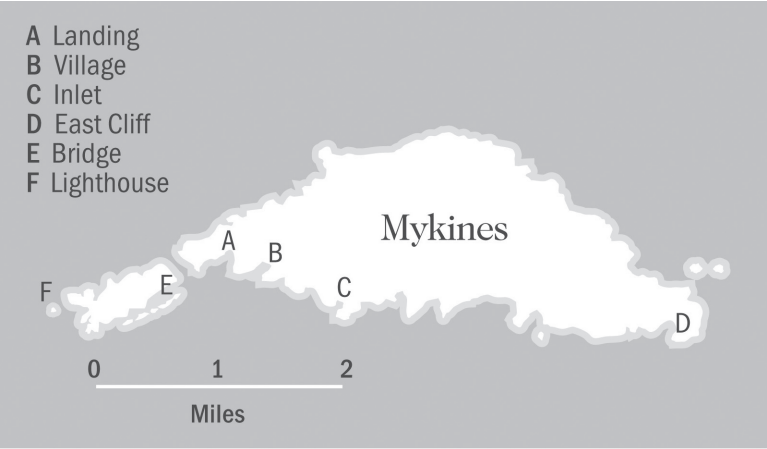
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Contents



1. Collision!	1
2. Sven's Disappointment	6
3. The Gale Strikes	18
4. A Lone Swimmer Gets Ashore	32
5. Trapped!	49
6. The Bear's First Kill	62
7. Besieged Village	75
8. Duel with the Bear	90
9. All Torches Lit	102
10. The Defenses Crack	114
11. Race for Survival	127
12. Unexpected Ally	140



THE STRANGE INTRUDER





1. Collision!

LIKE A BANDIT waiting for a victim, the large piece of iron-bound timber lay almost hidden, with only an inch or so showing above the surface of the water. Eight months earlier it had been part of the wheelhouse of a Scottish trawler, which had gone ashore one stormy night and been pounded to pieces on one of the Faroe Islands. This chunk of wreckage, weighing several hundred pounds, had floated slowly northwest, and now lay some fifty miles distant from the tiny island of Mykines, the most westerly outpost of the lonely Faroes.

In those desolate northern waters, where the Gulf Stream meets an icy current coming down from the

Polar seas, rain, mist, sunshine, and high winds can follow one another in a matter of hours. Few ships cross that part of the northern Atlantic, and it seemed as if the sodden piece of driftwood could float forever without meeting anything. Yet, like a needle drawn to a powerful magnet, a vessel was driving relentlessly toward it.

Aboard the 900-ton cod schooner *Faroes Seeker* everyone was happy. After a hard six months' trip up the Davis Straits, the men were looking forward to docking within twelve hours. Ahead of them was Thorshavn, capital of the Faroes. They would be paid off there and could go home.

The crew were putting the finishing touches to smartening up the ship; only the master and the mate watched the sky. The seas were unnaturally smooth; in addition the glass was falling, sure sign of imminent bad weather. There was not even a cat's-paw of wind, so the big sails hung limp. In an effort to make harbor before night fell, the diesels had been put on full throttle and were thrumming away busily.

The nearest Faroes Island, little Mykines, was less than fifty miles away when the schooner's bows ground the piece of wreckage under, and rolled it along the keel.

The engineer felt the slight but unusual vibration, and looked up for a moment from his logbook in which he was making an entry.

Then, from the stern, came a series of sickening

thumps as the iron-bound timber drifted into the clutches of the three-bladed screw. The helmsman was flung sideways as the brass-bound wheel spun wildly—sign that the rudder had been forced hard over.

Within moments the thumping stopped, and the steady thrum-thrum-thrum of the diesels changed. The propeller shaft had snapped off, dropping the buckled screw down into the depths, and freed from its load, the diesels screamed to a speed which could only end in destruction.

Dropping his pencil and notebook, the engineer rushed for the controls, but before he could throttle back, the damage was done. From within the green-painted engine casing there came a terrifying “whump.” In an instant the engine room was filled with flying pieces of metal, as deadly as shrapnel from an exploding shell.

Flames leaped high. A fractured feed pipe spurted oil for a second, and then flame. The engineer was thrown across his locker, where he lay like a broken doll.

The schooner, with blue smoke pouring from her engine-room casing windows, began to turn, for her rudder was jammed hard over. Men who had been polishing brasses dropped their rags and looked to the wheelhouse for orders as a bell began to ring, calling them to fire stations.

Half an hour later the radio operator at Thorshavn picked up a faint whisper of Morse. It was the *Faroes*