

Cobra Island

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A Scout's Tale of Adventure
in the Far East

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Cobra Island.

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CHAPTER I

I NEED A REST

OF COURSE, if I had a visiting card handy, it would read, “Mr. Francis X. Gaze, Jr.”, but the truth is, I haven’t, and so I had better call myself what most people do, and say my name is Frank, though the fellows usually change that to “Scouty.”

My teacher says that middle “X” in my Sunday name—just like in that sickening old algebra—stands for the unknown quantity that is always getting me in trouble. But, of course, he’s only joking, for it really stands for the finest saint in Heaven, or—or in any other place. And now that’s over!

Another thing! I’ll never see fourteen again. I am rather sorry, for, believe me, this has been a half year! You know, it’s funny to have happen to you the things you pay to see in the movies, or read in good, decent books. But the funniest thing was, Dad took me with him, ’cause our doctor said I was getting too nervous and needed a long rest. A rest! That was about the only thing, except dying personally, I didn’t have happen to me.

There is one of the twelve Apostles who somewhere in the Bible adds up all the things that happened to him in the course of his wanderings. He was shipwrecked and marooned and knew

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hunger and, oh! had a whole movie of adventures, when he went about starting up our Catholic Church. Well, I don't mean to be er-r-immoral, 'cause I always like St. Paul, but I'll bet you my good scout-knife against a weed in your war garden, I went through just as much trouble and water as he did—and then some more. You will, too, if you will only just listen.

You see, Dad is General Manager of the Cosmos—that's Greek or something, and means "all over the whole world"—of the Cosmos Film Corporation, and he had to start up branches for our film in India, for the war was closing somewhat our European market, and, anyway, Dad says the East is the coming field for the C.F.C., as the natives out there are just about crazy over American films. Well, that shows they have some sense.

Just about that time Doctor Oakes—who has white hair dripping down his cheeks, and is always recalling that he met me when I first arrived on this immortal coil—advised that rest cure and change of scenery for "yours most agreeably."

Dad and Mother and Doc cooked the whole business up privately, and the first I knew I was not to be juggled at Brooklyn Prep any more this year, was one dinner, when I learnt Dad had bought two first-class tickets for Bombay, India—and the other one was for me!

I didn't completely lose my appetite, 'cause I had been playing basketball since school let out,

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but all the same, I didn't take much interest in the remainder of that dinner, and we had apple dumpling and hard sauce, and if you know the faintest thing about me, you know my sentiments towards that dessert.

We had a song then that goes something about "Down in Bom Bom Bay" and "every monkey has nine lives." 'Member, you used to whistle it? So from that, I had a hazy notion Bombay's chief exports were monkeys and tigers for zoos, but as for India or Asia—don't ask me personally!

Surely, I had studied geography—and got a prize for it, too!—and once, when I was little, I could bound Asia. How's it go? On the north by the Arctic Ocean and the North Pole. On the east by the Pacific—that's always safe. On the west by Asia Minor, or Africa, and on the south by the, by the—oh! some foreign land or mountain or water range. But that night, when Mother told me, I couldn't have said whether Bombay was an island or a new battle banging away in France.

That was our regular meeting night, and when I told Father Tumulty, my scoutmaster, that I wouldn't be able to take my First Class Tests in May, he said they'd wait till I came back, and be all the easier. He was dead right. He's a priest and holy as the deuce, and I wonder if he knew what was coming to me?

But when I told the fellows at the Prep, they told me right off what they thought I was. Father Hungerford, who was Prefect of Discipline, and strict as anything, said: "Scouty, I feel ten years

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younger at the news, and what *will* become of Jug”—that’s that kept-in-class after class—“when you seek a place in the sun?” He meant when I went off to India.

My teacher in First High, Mr. Gilbreth, thought the rest would do him good and asked me to promise not to take any study books along. He was smiling, but he talked like he was serious, so I assured him: “Mister, you bet no Latin or Fundamental English leaves the country with me, unless they follow me by parcel post.”

Well, for about a week Ma and I did some shopping along Fulton Street. Shoes and shirts, and new pajamas—blue with tiny little red lines. Two good suits and a traveling cap and a new radium-faced wrist watch, ’cause the last time I was on a slide at Coney something funny must have happened to my good gold one, and it wasn’t keeping regular hours since. And ties and stockings. Mother said she didn’t know how I was going to get them darned—she didn’t mean the ties—but I said, “Don’t you worry. I’ll buy new ones in China or Japan.” And Dad remarked if the worst came to the worsted I could go without. (That’s a joke like Dad cracks. He’s much better at business.) Most do in India. That’s why they’re always getting snake bites.

Anyway, Pat, our chauffeur, who weighs a heap, had to sit on my steamer trunk to lock it. For Dad said we were not movie stars and so our big baggage was limited to two pieces, and anything else we needed we’d get out of our traveling

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checks. And Dad had enough with him to feed peanuts to all the loose elephants in Asia.

Well, on the First Friday of March—'course, we all went to Holy Communion at St. Mark's, but I went specially, for it was my ninth First Friday and I'd have rather missed out on the trip than break them—in March we left Pennsylvania Station.

Nearly every relative I have in New York—and we have more relatives than rabbits have—and my whole Cobra Patrol, 'cept Mousie Moran, who had the measles and his mother never lets him out at night, anyway—were there in the waiting room. The Cobras gave me a brand new scout-knife and I have it yet, only the point is broken off. But no wonder!

Mother's very last words were, as she blessed me, same as she did every night since I can remember: "God keep you, my little Scout, and have a good rest, dearie."

Bonus nox! Good night! If she only knew what I was heading into she wouldn't have made a compound sentence out of that parting, for she'd have put a period after the first clause, and gotten a half-nelson on this Second Class Scout that a Broadway cop couldn't have broken.

It was the same old trip across the continent. You know, wake up next morning, pulling into Chicago and its gray skies and drizzling. Then take in a couple of movies, eat and get "The Sunset Limited" in the afternoon, and sleep three nights in the same upper.

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Of course, I've been out to the Coast, maybe, five or six times, for there's where all our big stuff is filmed, but I never get tired of those white, receding waves of the Rockies—all still and almighty big and snowy—that, somehow, make you feel how tiny you must look to God.

We sailed out of the Golden Gate for Hong Kong on the more or less good ship *Nagasaki Maru*. She had seen better days, and I had been on worse boats, but, war times, you know.

I must say the water at Waikiki Beach isn't so bad—better than anything down at Coney or Palm Beach—and Yokohama and Shanghai were regular side-shows. Say, honestly, I could stop right here and tell you enough about Fair Japan and Foul China to keep you reading till breakfast time, only I want to come to where my adventures really start. So we'll censor that part and say that when I was about six weeks older than when I left my home in Sheepshead Bay, Dad and I sailed out of Hong Kong Harbor on the P. & O. steamer *Khandala* for the eighteen days' run to Bombay—so I thought.

Dad had had a Chinese tailor make us white suits in Hong Kong, and I followed Dad's example and got one of those hats that look somewhat like firemen wear. Only I'd never have the nerve to wear it to the Prep. They call 'em solar topees. That doesn't matter, as you surely do need them after you get under the Southern Cross. For it gets hot like—well, I won't mention that place, 'cause I don't intend to ever emigrate there—but like

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Washington in August, only it stays cooked longer.

The *Khandala* was a small tub, but one of her nice things was the canvas swimming pool that the lascars rigged up in that forward open place, between the end of the promenade and that 'way up forward deck, where they keep the anchors and all those coiled down, greasy chains, and it's messy as the deuce on white clothes.

The second afternoon after we left Hong Kong, with the high hills of China, big, brown slopes, to starboard, was regular swimming weather, and I could hardly wait till the pool was full. I remember I kept looking 'way down the black side of the *Khandala* at the smooth South China Sea slipping by, and wishing the boat might break something so as I could try a header into it.

There were three or four real junks with queer, silk sails, sailing between us and the mainland, and I had heard tell in the Smoking Saloon they were pirates and I was half hoping they'd start something.

Dad was talking to a fat man with pinkish socks in the next steamer chair, about the attack on Verdun and wondering if the French could hold, and he yelled over to me: "Look out, son, or you'll topple in." So I came away and started to look for fun.

As I passed the cabin door, out came a boy about my size and height. Blue eyes and hair like gold, but not too sissy looking. I had heard his mother call him Ivan at table and I knew from the passenger list his last name was Williams. He

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hadn't met me as yet to speak to. You know how icy those English are at first. They don't mean it. It's just a fault of their nationality or something.

He had his swimming suit and bathrobe on and he thawed and looked at me like, "Why don't you do the same, old thing?" That kind of a glance.

That was enough invitation, for I knew the pool forward must be open for business, so I dived down the companion and bumped into an iodine-skinned steward with a tea-tray. He said something fast, and though it was in a foreign tongue, Hindustani or Portuguese, I understood and kept right on my way. Back on deck, I found about five men and that English boy, Ivan Williams, using that pool.

Jiminy! That first dive was good and I turned over and came up, face up, like seals do. I could see 'way up the yellow mast and the black wires of the wireless, and up beyond to where the mast's tip seemed to scrape the solid blue sky. Then I bumped suddenly into a man, or something, and he said: "Pretty good, hey, son!" I knew he was an American all right. It's a funny thing. Out there in Asia, when you meet another Yank, you get friendly mighty soon; even though he does hail from California or Kansas or Louisiana, and you live in little old Brooklyn.

So he and I started fooling in the pool, and everything would have been lovely and my adventures wouldn't have started till the next chapter, if only we had done those stunts in the pool. But Mr. Lee—for that was the name another man

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called him, only he said "Lee"—but Mr. Lee dared me to dive from the rail into the pool. Of course, that was easy, only ten feet and the water was deep enough. I make sure of that—the depth of the water—ever since that day at Steeplechase Baths, down at Coney, when I got foolish and somebody brought me home in a taxi and Doctor Oakes had to pick bits of the "stern and rock-bound" cement bottom of the Baths out of my cheeks for two weeks after. There's a mark on my nose even yet. Sis called it my identification mark, but she shouldn't boast about noses, 'cause—Oh! let it go.

Well, some of the other passengers had come up and were hanging over the rails, watching the free show and, I bet a million dollars, wishing they were in the water. For the sun was not loafing on his job.

So with them looking on, I climbed out to the side of the boat and dove from there into the pool. It was a cinch, and, I guess, I was feeling frisky, for as soon as I came up, I started to repeat the performance. I went up the wet steps and out on to the very edge of the boat. On one side was the canvas bottom of the pool and on the other, maybe, forty feet down, was the whole China Sea, looking bluer and almost calling a chap. But I resisted that temptation.

Then, just as I poised to dive into the pool, the siren of the *Khandala* roared at a junk that was trying to cut across ahead of us.

I told you before, our Doctor said I'm too nerv-

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ous, for I must have jumped, and the next I knew I was falling, falling, and seeing bits of blue sky and black side of the vessel, and water rising rapidly. And I wasn't falling into the deck pool either!

There must be something catlike about me. You know, n'matter how close to the floor you hold a kitten upside down, and drop her, she manages to twist right in a fraction of a second and land properly on her four paws. Why! I held our Trixie once—but that was another time. So I must have unconsciously turned right in the air, for I was going head first, hands out, when I met the South China Sea. It was a deep dive too. Perhaps, the very deepest Scout Gaze ever took, for I was too distracted to turn up, and so I might have kept right on—opposite to what I used to say when I was little—and come right out some place off my home in Sheepshead Bay. Wouldn't Mother and Sis have been surprised!

But, finally, I remember coming up on the same side of the world, without much wind, and the next second something round and white came sailing through the air and hit the water—splash!—within three feet of my ear. Did I crawl in best Australian style to that life preserver? That's an oratorical question.

The awfully high black side slid by and then the stern of the *Khandala* was just passing, not so far away either. The water churned green and white like in an outdoor swimming pool, when it's sunny and they are turning the fresh water into it, and a lot of little undertows pulled me as

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though they were scraping over me.

I could see passengers leaning far out from the rails and shouting and waving, like I was doing an election bet. Some crazy fool idiot threw another perfectly good life preserver, that for all I know is floating around yet in that distant sea. That's what I call extravagance!

The waves were higher than I had ever imagined from the deck of the boat, and so, one minute, I would be down in a kind of "Soup Bowl" hollow, like they have at Steeplechase, Coney Island, with that everlasting hot blue sky over me, and the next minute I would be lifted up on the top of a little green glassy mound, like the base of a granite monument, and I could see all around the horizon, same as a periscope, and notice the *Khandala* growing smaller.

After about the time it would take me to eat my third ice cream cone, if I were hungry—only, tough luck! they didn't sell them out there in the China Sea—I saw that the steamer was turning slowly and they were lowering away a boat. The boat was white and stood out distinctly against the dark side.

There was no need of them doing that, for I could have climbed up a rope, if they had backed and came near enough to give a fellow half a chance. And then, if they had kept on, there was a humpbacked looking island over to the westward, and with the aid of the life preserver, and an S.O.S. to my Guardian Angel, I could have swum to China dead easy.

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I suppose I should have said some prayers while floating around, strap hanging to that life preserver, but all I did was to squeeze my scapular medal and tell Our Lady she knew I was a member in good standing of her Sodality at the Prep, and that she had better look out for her property.

Then the old white boat came bobbing across the waves like a motorboat. You would think the sailors were racing, or rowing home to dinner, or something. And the next I knew, my first swim in the South China Sea was over and I was being hauled in by Mr. Bookie, the Second Officer, who said: "There you are, my lad! Don't be scared. The sharks didn't get you this trip."

Sharks! Gee! It surely was a good thing I had never thought about them!

That officer fellow made me drink some whiskey or something, that burnt going down worse than a poker, and made me cough.

I was afraid he was going to start jawing me, but he was nice and he never did. Neither then nor ever.

About everybody on board the *Khandala*, even the ladies who had gone to bed seasick, were lined up by the upper rails. Below, on the main deck, there were massed hundreds of red and white and green turbans of Hindus and, maybe a thousand John Chinamen in their pajamas. In fact, all the steerage must have quit gambling, and they do not call off fan-tan often in those waters, even for meals.

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I felt bashful when they cheered in different speeches, and up on the promenade deck, they were yelling in language a fellow could understand. I heard that boy Ivan's voice above them all. (It did not sound a bit British and reserved for once).

Then I began to feel limp and all the strength rushed out of me, like you pulled the plug. The next I knew I was looking up at the yellow and whitish ceiling of my stateroom, with all those folded up, ready to use, life preservers above the strips of wood, that always remind you of shipwrecks.

Dad and the ship doctor were looking at me. Doctor Roberts was smiling, but Dad was not, and he said sternly: "Frank, the next time you attempt a stunt like that, you'll take the first steamer back to your mother."

But I was too tired to tell him I had not done it deliberately, so all I did was to turn my face to the cabin wall and sleep. No dreams.