

With John Peel, one never knows what to expect! From Biggles to Doc Ardan, Whitechapel to Pellucidar, Doctor Omega to Captain Nemo, his imagination truly knows no bounds. We certainly recommend his latest two BCP collections, Return to the Center of the Earth and Twenty Thousand Years Under the Sea, to all those who may have missed some of his TOTS stories. In this new tale, John returns to the fantastic worlds of two of his favorite authors, Jules Verne and Edgar Wallace...

John Peel: *The Child That Time Forgot*

1895

I am an engineer by trade, which has led me to many interesting places and varied tasks, none as significant, as fascinating, as frustrating and as fulfilling as when I was engaged to work on Standard Island. There can be few of you who have not heard of this self-propelling island, but for the benefit of those few, I shall briefly describe it.

Standard Island was the work of genius constructed by the Standard Island Company out of (where else?) California. The company was owned by millionaires. Millionaires? No, *hundreds* of millionaires; men who would consider a mere millionaire to be the closest thing to a pauper in their imaginations. Constructed of steel boxes, joined—one would imagine—unbreakably together, then covered with soil, trees, plants and, ultimately, buildings that would form Milliard City. Immense, powerful electrical engines turned immense screws so that the island could be powered and steered wherever it wished to go. And it wished to venture freely across the stretches of the Pacific Ocean. And on Standard Island and in its capital (and only) city of Milliard would live those self-same multi-millionaires and their immediate families. Joining them on this journey of vacation and exploration would be a host of workers and servants—of which I had been selected to be one.

Despite being an engineer, I was not involved in the construction of the island itself. My particular specialty was not in immense projects but in smaller, more intimate mechanisms, and it was for this that I was employed. While there would be a great deal for the inhabitants of Milliard City to see and enjoy merely in a months-long sea voyage, there would, inevitably, be days when boredom might encroach on the ordered lives of these extremely wealthy men and women—and boredom might lead to dissatisfaction, which would never be tolerated. These wealthy scions must be kept amused and entertained at all times! And so the island employed a Master of Entertainment, one Calistus Mumbar, and this Calistus Mumbar employed (among others) myself. I was tasked with helping to create diversions that would keep the owners and inhabitants of the island happy.

It was a challenging and fascinating opportunity for me. Mumbar was an amiable man to work for, if a trifle over-enthusiastic and something of a humbug. He claimed a relationship with P.T. Barnum, and, I confess, it was easy to see a resemblance between the two men. He demanded spectacles and delights to supply to his clients, and it was my job to supply such delights. Nothing was denied me, and I was encouraged to follow whatever pathways my imagination took me. And my salary was beyond exorbitant, so I had nothing to complain of. I was happy in my work.

As had been planned, Standard Island was launched with all due spectacle and pomp. I had a hand in designing the fireworks show that signaled the official start of the week-long festivities that marked our casting off from the Californian mainland where the... ship? City? Island? had been constructed. It worked perfectly; the two huge engines drove our vessel slowly and majestically away from shore and out past the Channel Islands and away from the American mainland—and all the while a vast party was underway. It was an amazing time. I partied a little myself, but with care, as I still had a great deal of work to do, both to justify my large salary and to keep the effervescent Mumbar happy.

Eventually, of course, even this party settled down and ended, and the inhabitants of Milliard City began to learn how to live from day to day on a floating island. Everything was novel, and even the most mundane of tasks would prove to need new ways of solving old problems. There was, however, no pathway to solving the largest problem the island had.

I've mentioned that the owners and inhabitants of the island were millionaires many times over. This did not mean, however, that they all thought alike or had the same aims in lives. This cannot be surprising, after all. Though some of these families had been born wealthy and had always been brought up in an environment where money was no object, others had earned their fortunes. We had amongst us steel magnates, stockbrokers, and newly-rich oilmen. Some were filled with fire and ambition, while others wished only to bask in what their money had accustomed them to expect out of life. Standard Island was divided into two for convenience—we had a Starboard Harbor and a Larboard Harbor, for example. This way, whichever side of the island would be closest to one of the more fixed islands we visited would have a harbor from which to venture or to which supply ships might dock. But aside from being administrated in two halves, the island was split into two camps. One group were staunch Protestants, and the other devout Catholics. One side had an impressive church and the other a majestic cathedral. And both sides had an equal say on the city's council.

And both sides had to be entertained by Calistus Mumbar, and—by extension—myself. The two sides were, of course, far too genteel to go to war with one another over matters, but if one side approved a plan, the other side would invariably find reasons to dislike it. And if one party praised and supported an idea, the other would poo-poo and denigrate it. This caused Calistus Mumbar distress, and whatever caused him distress led to my being inconvenienced. As a result, it wasn't long before my overgenerous salary and free working conditions began to look parsimonious and restricting. For example, though the island was large, there was still insufficient acreage for a horse racing track, and millionaires like to wager on such sports. So I proposed to build an electrical track, with mechanical horses on a small scale that could be run and that gamblers could bet upon. It should have been a perfect solution—but, alas, one side thought it marvelous and enthusiastically supported my plans. Naturally, then, the other held firmly to the belief that gambling was an abhorrent evil and in no way to be encouraged. (Somehow, though, the island's casino never seemed to lack from devotees from both parties...)

As there was nothing I could do about this problem, I simply sighed and worked on other ideas. At the same time, I had made the acquaintance of Commodore Simcoe, who was the Captain of the vessel that was Standard Island. As an engineer—and also as merely a man filled with curiosity!—I was intrigued by the mechanisms that enabled the island to exist and move, and with the Commodore's blessing, I was able to visit and study the island's lower regions, its engines and its steering mechanism. It was an elegant piece of engineering, and I was duly impressed.

I discovered that I was not alone in my researches. There was another student of the island, and a very pretty one at that. This was Cecile DuBois, a lovely and lively blonde lady from France. She was employed as a governess and tutor by the Tankerdon family—leaders of one of the two factions (the other being the Coverleys). Though originally from Normandy, she spoke fluent English, German and Italian, thus recommending her as a governess for the younger offspring of the family. And, like me, she found Standard Island fascinating, and was determined to understand all of its secrets. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that we joined forces in our explorations. It is even less surprising that I found myself falling in love with this enchanting and highly intelligent young lady.

Because of our interests, we were on hand when our strangest adventure commenced. We were conversing with Commodore Simcoe on the plans for the next port of call. We were still more than a week from—ah, but no; I shall not reveal our destination, for to do so might give away information that we later vowed never to reveal. I shall merely say that it was a small island chain of reputed beauty, at which Standard Island was planning to remain for a week or so before moving on. As I said, we were about ten days out from our target islands when the Commodore received a report from one of his staff. He briefly read it, and then scowled and read it again, more slowly.

“That's rather odd,” he observed.

“What is, sir?” I asked. “If it's not a matter of secrecy, of course.”

“No secrecy,” he replied. Then he chuckled. “In fact, something that might interest the both of you—students of the island that you are.” He waved the paper slightly. “We are experiencing slight turbulence that appears to be originating towards the east.”

Cecile furrowed her pretty brow. “But that would suggest we are approaching land,” she remarked. She gestured at the chart we had been examining. “And, yet, there is nothing indicated close by.”

“Yes, it does, and no, there isn’t.” He shook his head slightly. “It is... intriguing. Though I must admit that this section of the Pacific Ocean is not altogether thoroughly explored—we are off the major shipping lanes, after all, and any vessels that may have strayed this far out might simply have missed a solitary island. It is a vast ocean, after all.”

“Will we be investigating, then, Commodore?” I asked, hopefully. Exploring known islands was most enjoyable, but the thought of a hitherto-undiscovered land was most intriguing.

“Oh, yes,” agreed Cecile, eagerly.

He laughed, gruffly. “The decision is not mine,” he said, firmly. “The city council will have to approve any deviation from our planned course.” Seeing our disappointment with this remark, he smiled slightly. “Don’t be too worried—it is quite likely that there will be sufficient members who feel the way you do that this is a mystery worth looking into.”

That was encouraging, at least. We were in the tower of the observatory in Milliard City, and had a splendid view from here—or, at least, we would have had, if it had been daytime. In the darkness of the night, we have a magnificent view of the Milky Way and the stars of the Southern Hemisphere, but could see nothing nearer to our island than the stars. “Isn’t there a danger that we will pass it in the night?”

“I may not be able to make the decision to investigate on my own,” the Commodore replied, “but I can order the engines to be slowed, so that we will not have to backtrack if the council decides to take Standard Island closer to investigate.”

That was moderately reassuring. But I expressed my worries as I escorted Mademoiselle Cecile to her lodgings. We were both most intrigued by the idea of an unknown island. But Cecile was more optimistic than I.

“Whoever discovers a new island and marks its position will have the right to name it,” she pointed out. “And do you think there is not one millionaire on this island of ours who would not pay a small fortune for the honor of naming a new island in his own honor?”

Ah, she knew how to make me laugh! But how true it was, as we discovered the following morning. The council had approved our slight change of course to take a look at our mysterious companion in these seas, and the Commodore had executed their orders with alacrity. Then the two factions had returned to arguing about which of them would have the honor of naming the island. That would keep them happy for at least the rest of the day, if not the week.

Meanwhile, the Commodore was preparing one of the electric launches to take a small team to investigate the island. Both Cecile and I begged to be a part of the expedition, but the Commodore shook his head firmly. “There may be natives on the island,” he said. “If so, we do not know their nature. Some of the islanders in these seas were cannibals until relatively recently, so we cannot take any chances. Colonel Stewart has appointed a band of his trained militia to be the first men ashore. Whether the council will allow any further exploration will depend entirely on their report.” Then his severe face softened slightly. “If that is favorable, though, I promise you that you will be allowed to accompany the next expedition.”

My dear friend and I were only slightly mollified by this assurance, because there was as yet no guarantee that there would ever be a second visit. Still, there was nothing we could do about the matter—though the idea of sneaking aboard the launch was broached by Cecile. I pointed out that there was nowhere for us to remain hidden even if we should somehow manage to slip aboard unobserved. Resigning ourselves to the reality of the situation, we resolved to remain in the observatory tower and to survey our approach to this hitherto unknown island.

We had expected to be able to utilize one of the telescopes to monitor our approach, but that proved impossible. Despite the fact that the skies were mostly clear and cloudless, as we approached the island conditions changed rapidly. The clouds closed in and a sea mist arose. Before we had even sighted the

first glimpse of our target, it was impossible to see more than a few hundred yards. Commodore Simcoe, cautious as ever, slowed the engines and we were virtually simply drifting in to where the island was located. As sometimes happens in such conditions, though visibility was reduced to almost nothing, sounds appeared to be amplified. We could hear the mournful howl of the siren as the electric launch set off from the Larboard Harbor, though the virtually silent electrical engines were too faint to discern.

Standard Island came to a halt, as the engines were shut down, save for the occasional move necessary to keep us safely stationed offshore. The fog was thick and oppressive, and there was nothing to be seen. It was even impossible to be certain that there was even an island out there. The air was still, and the only sounds we could now hear were those of the daily activities accompanying life in Milliard City. Even though the fog crept across our streets, our wealthy inhabitants kept up their accustomed activities.

The long wait was almost physically painful. Both Cecile and I concentrated on hearing anything out of the ordinary—to see anything was physically impossible—but we were terribly frustrated. To be so close to a mystery and to be unable to take a step forward to solve it! What was the island like? Was it inhabited? Were there strange wild animals, and strange wild men? We knew that there was little likelihood of danger from wild animals, as no Pacific Island had any savage creatures larger or more vicious than some wild pigs. But the nature of human beings was unpredictable. How large was the island? Was it a lone point in the midst of a sea, or merely the first of a chain of similar islands? My delightful companion and I discussed such points for hours, but it was all sheer speculation, as we had no information for a firm foundation.

After what seemed to be an endless wait, the Commodore sent one of his men to alert us both that the launch was returning to its berth in Larboard Harbor, and that he expected an initial report shortly. His compliments, and would we care to join him to share in the intelligence thus to be provided? Would we! Wild horses (which did not, of course, exist!) would have failed to keep us out. Our messenger was hard-pressed to stay ahead of us as we rushed to the Commodore's reception room.

He looked worried, which was certainly not a good sign, and greeted us rather gruffly. "The launch has docked," he reported. "There were three men injured, one of them severely. He has been rushed to the medical officer."

"What happened?" I demanded.

"The lieutenant in charge is on his way here with his report," the Commodore replied. "Naturally, he wished to be sure his men were being treated properly before coming here. I expect him momentarily." And, indeed, it wasn't more than three minutes before the officer himself appeared and saluted the Commodore.

The man was in rather poor shape himself, for which he apologized, assuring Simcoe that the only reason he hadn't changed into a fresh uniform was that he felt his report was too urgent. He had clearly been through some shock and strain, as his clothing was quite filthy, and he himself was scratched badly in places. He had a thick bandage on his right arm that showed leakage from blood, but he assured us, when we expressed concern, that he would go for medical treatment as soon as he had alerted us.

The island, it seemed, was inhabited by a native species, but these natives were not the cause of his injuries. "We did not see their village at the first," he explained. "Due to the fog, we had bypassed it. We settled the launch close to a beach and a group of us went ashore. On land, the mist is far thinner, though it seemed to gather and pool in places. But we could see fairly clearly. We had landed beside a tangle of jungle, and in the distance we could see smoke. That informed us that there were people living there, but some miles from where we had landed. We decided to trek through the jungle so that we could observe them more closely.

"The shoreline near us consisted mostly of steep cliffs; anything larger than our launch would not have been able to make landfall. But there were pathways to the top of the cliffs, and so we climbed, leaving a small party to watch over the launch. And there we found..." He shuddered slightly. "Monsters. It is the only word that describes them: monsters!"

"Can you be more specific, lieutenant?" the Commodore asked.

The poor man groped for words. "They were like gigantic lizards, sir—crawling, and some standing upright. And all of them seeking victims to devour. They came after us as soon as we reached the heights

of the cliffs. We used our rifles, but most of them barely seemed to notice the shots. I... ordered an immediate retreat, but they were so fast... Two of my men were badly injured, so I and two others kept up defensive fire while the mauled men were evacuated. Fortunately, those creatures are not adept at climbing, and couldn't follow us down the cliff-face. We were able to retreat, though most of us were injured to one degree or another." He shivered again at the memory. "We were fortunate that no one was killed." He looked earnestly from the Commodore to Cecile and myself. "There was no other choice to be made. For God's sake, sir—if you are a reasoning, caring man—do not let anyone else land in that hellish place. We should leave, now, and forget we ever found this accursed island."

The man had reached the limits of his strength and nerve. Sympathetically, Simcoe said: "Thank you for your report, lieutenant. I will be certain to pass it along to the council—along with your recommendation. Now, go and rest." The man nodded and half-stumbled his way out of the Commodore's office. Simcoe turned to face Cecile and myself. "What do you make of that?"

"A brave man who has reached his limits," I replied promptly.

"But... monsters?"

Cecile frowned. "On the surface, it sounds difficult to believe," she opined. "But, clearly, those men were faced with something that they could not understand, nor cope with. Their injuries are frightful, though there is hope that they will all survive. Clearly, they met with something extraordinary." Then, in a softer voice, "Lizards..."

"You have an idea?" I asked her. I had become accustomed to her thinking processes and saw the signs that something had occurred to her.

"A wild and fantastic one, yes," she confessed. "This island is remote, and has been cut off from contact for who knows how long. In Australia, a similar state of isolation has resulted, as you know, in creatures that are quite unique to the island. Where in the rest of the world mammals evolved to mastery, in the Antipodes their place was taken by marsupials."

"You suggest that in this case of our mysterious island, that isolation has led reptiles to a state of dominance?" I asked her.

"Why not?" she argued. "It has happened before, in the age of the dinosaurs. Once such monsters ruled the entire world—is it so hard to believe that they might come rule a single, remote and isolated island?"

"Rule—or rule again," the Commodore muttered. "Perhaps here their dominion has never run out."

Cecile inclined her head. "Of course, I am merely speculating," she pointed out. "To be absolutely certain, I should have to see these creatures for myself."

"No!" both the Commodore and myself exclaimed immediately. I deferred to his authority, and he continued: "You have seen what such creatures have done to a well-armed party of professional soldiers. I would never agree to your risking your life for so little gain."

"The advancement of science is never a little gain," she argued. "If dinosaurs—or dinosaur-like creatures—exist here, then this would be an immensely significant moment for science. While I thank you both for your concern for my welfare, my life is insignificant when faced with such a possible advance!"

Fond as I was of her, I could not help but believe she had temporarily taken leave of her senses. "It hardly matters how little value you place on your life—a valuation I would vehemently disagree with, incidentally!—it is pointless to speculate. Once the council receives the report from the shore party, they will undoubtedly follow the lieutenant's recommendation and forbid anyone else from landing upon this island."

Needless to say, I could hardly have been more wrong. The Commodore presented his report to the council and, after some highly vocal discussion, they ordered him to prepare another party to take a second launch to the island!

I couldn't believe this, but Simcoe reluctantly confirmed it. "There is to be another expedition."

"But whyever would they agree to undertake such a foolish venture?" I cried.

"Because they are sporting gentlemen," the Commodore answered. "The Tankerdons and the Coverleys alike have hunted the most dangerous species on Earth. The prospect of going after species that have been unclaimed by any other hunters was more than they could bear to pass up."

“Did you not tell them that the weapons of the landing party were virtually useless against the monsters that inhabit the island?”

“I did. They pooh-poohed the issue, saying that they had elephant guns that would stop any creature that this world, this hellish place, might have bred. They actually appeared to find the thought that the creatures are almost impossible to kill to be a challenge, and an irresistible one at that.”

“Then they are foolish, and may well be going to their deaths.”

“They relish the thought.”

“Then they are not foolish—they are insane!”

The Commodore sighed. “I cannot disagree with your assessment.”

I glanced around, and saw that he and I were alone in his office. “Where is Mademoiselle DuBois?” I had been expecting her to comment, but she was nowhere to be seen. I discovered why a short while later, as I came across her hurrying down the street back to the observatory, her eyes gleaming and a broad smile upon her lovely face.

“My dear Roger,” she said, clasping my hands in her own. “You have heard the news?”

“That Standard Island is governed by madmen? Yes.”

She came to a halt, and regarded me with uncertainty. “You do not approve of this second visit to the island?”

“The party in the first one was mauled and barely escaped with their lives,” I pointed out. “To risk further lives unnecessarily is foolish.”

“I am to go with them,” she said simply.

“You!” I stared at her in total shock. After a moment, I was able to regain use of my voice. “Surely you cannot intend to go blasting away at the creatures on this island!”

“Of course not!” she replied, indignantly. “How could you think such a thing of me? I go along to study them for science.”

“But... you risk your life to do so!”

“Many people before me have done the same; can I do less?”

I stared at her in shock and horror. The thought of my dear, sweet, gentle Cecile on this island from the maws of Hell shook me to my core. “I forbid it!” I said—boldly and foolishly.

She scowled at me ferociously. “And who are you to forbid me anything?”

“One who values your life more than he values his own,” I admitted.

That sufficed to melt the fierce frown upon her brows. “Dear Roger,” she said, softly, her eyes sparkling. Then she pulled herself together. “But you cannot and will not forbid me this.”

“In which case, I shall accompany you,” I resolved. “If you perish, I shall perish with you.”

“Oh, Roger, I am certain that neither of us will perish. We shall have several of the greatest game hunters in the world for our protection.”

I confess, that thought did not reassure me as much as it seemed to do her. We had no assurances that their rifles—however effective they might be against elephants—could even penetrate the hides of the monsters of the island. But my dear Cecile was totally committed to what she saw as her duty to science, and I was committed to what I saw as my duty to her. But I was more than half convinced that both of us would end up as healthy servings on a monster’s feast.

If anything, our mighty Nimrods were even more convinced of their abilities than Cecile was. Commodore Simcoe wished above all that he could accompany us on the second launch, but he reluctantly acquiesced to the view that he was engaged as the captain and navigator of Standard Island, and therefore had to remain behind. In his place, Colonel Stewart, as head of the militia, would be in strict command. Even the wealthiest of hunters had to agree to follow his instructions, and to abandon the hunt if he decided it was too dangerous.

The Commodore took me aside before we departed. “Have you ever used a firearm before?” he asked me. I confessed that I had never even held one. “Then there is no point in giving you an elephant gun,” he decided. “You would be more dangerous to yourself and your companions with one.” He handed me an automatic pistol. “This is likely to be ineffective against any larger creature, but it could prove useful in limited circumstances. Try not to shoot yourself in the foot with it.”

I thanked him—more for his friendship and concern than for the gun—and reluctantly clambered aboard the launch. Cecile was ready and waiting, her eyes sparkling with excitement. Our contingency of hunters was already aboard and eager to be off, all of them carrying or wearing their massive weapons, and speaking eagerly to one another of their hopes and prayers for what they termed *Sport* and I considered to be immense folly. I could not (and still cannot) see why there is anything appealing about chasing and slaughtering animals that wish only to be left alone to live their lives.

The fog that had enshrouded the island earlier still clung to the sea about us. Visibility was low. The motors of the electric launch were virtually soundless, so our trip reminded me of the myths of the Island of the Dead. I almost expected strains of Rachmaninoff's icy music to accompany us. The hunters were huddled together, discussing the merits of their portable cannons, but as we progressed, even their voices softened and finally died out altogether. The only person immune to the chilling mood was Cecile, who seemed to be caught up in a feverish expectation of her forthcoming service to Science.

We could hear the lapping and soft crashing of waves upon a shore before we could discern anything in the gloom. Even though it was the forenoon, we could not make out the sun—merely a section of the fog that seemed lighter than the rest. We all strained our eyes and nerves as we attempted to catch a glimpse of something—anything!—in that all-encompassing mist. And then one of the sailors gave a cry and pointed. I could barely make out the spume on a wave as it fell on some as-yet unseen strand. And then the fogs seemed to part, falling away around us, and at last the island was visible.

Well, a portion of it, at the least. There was a short, rocky beach that led to an immense mass of a cliff that stretched in both directions as far as we could see. There appeared to be no path to ascend to the far-off summit, but a couple of the sailors had been on the first launch, and they were certain that there was a narrow pathway that wound up the cliff-face, and it only needed to be rediscovered. Though I furtively prayed that it should elude us, one of them gave a cry and pointed. As we drew closer, I could see that there did indeed appear to be a trail that led up that rocky wall. We might be able to ascend after all.