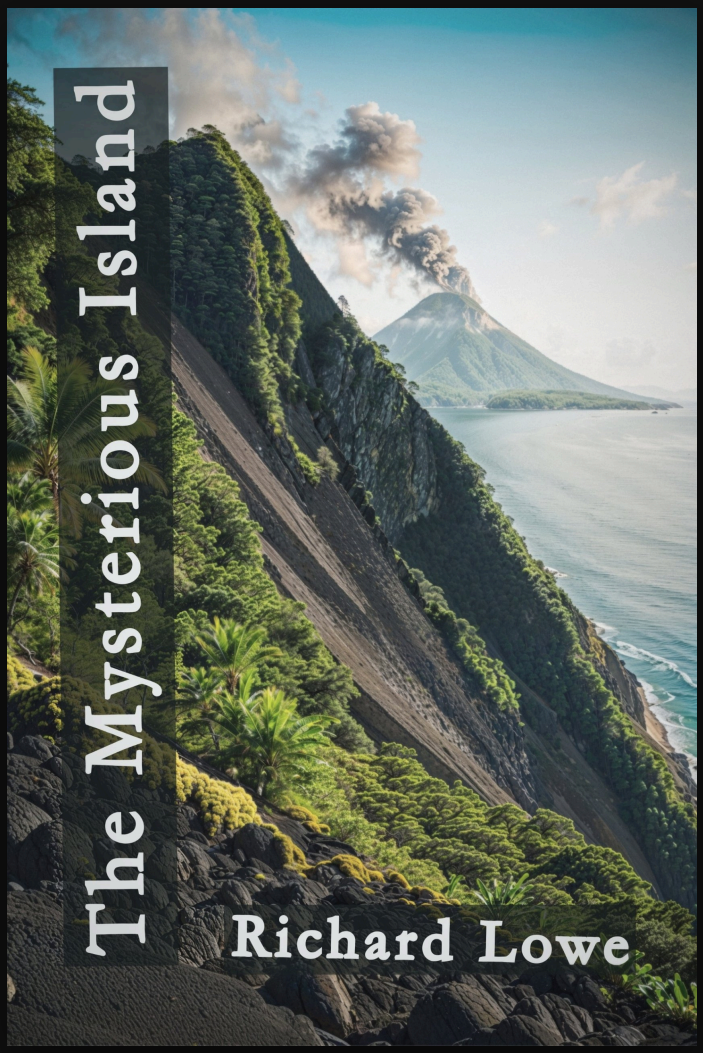
A FREE COMPANION TO THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND

Ballast

Ten months after the balloon came down, Pencroft takes the boat he built around Lincoln Island and finds out what she will stand, and what he will.



RICHARD LOWE

Ballast

"They were gone three days and came back with a complete survey of the coastline from the water and the news that the island was, from the sea, more beautiful than it appeared from within." From the private record of Gideon Spilett, Lincoln Island, January 1866.

Harding gave his instructions at the waterline, with the boat already afloat behind Pencroft and the flood tide making up the estuary.

"Both channels sounded," he said, and tore three leaves from the back of his notebook for Herbert. "Depth at the narrows, and the set of the current if you can judge it. Herbert will keep the chart."

Herbert took the leaves in both hands.

Pencroft had known which way the wind sat since before first light. He had lain on his pallet in Granite House and listened to it working in the upper rock, east and steady. He had been down at the estuary an hour ahead of everyone with the ballast stowed and the sail bent on, and now he said, "Aye."

"The north coast first, while the wind holds in the east," Harding said. "Neb will go with you."

Pencroft looked at the boat. She lay with her bow to the current, fifteen feet of island timber, her mast stayed with the cordage the winter had made out of plant fiber, her sail of island cloth furled along its gaff. Herbert had held the other end of a plank now and then, when Pencroft let him, and nobody else had laid a hand on her.

"Three's a crowd in a boat that size," he said.

"Three is a crew," Harding said. "I would rather you did not go outside the reef, but if you do, you will want the hands."

He said it in the same voice as the rest of it. Pencroft knew that voice. It was the one Harding used when he had already worked out that a man would do as he liked, and wanted it on the record that he had been told.

Neb stood at the water's edge with the clay water jar against his hip. He had not asked to come. He was looking at the boat with his whole attention, as he looked at a field or a fire, and Pencroft had the uneasy sense of being read over his own shoulder.

Top had followed Neb down from Granite House. The dog waded into the shallows to his elbows, stopped, and looked back.

"Not you," Neb said.

Top sat down in the water and stayed there.

Vásquez had sent a bundle of dried fish and figs tied up in a square of cloth. It was knotted with a knot Pencroft did not know. Herbert carried it aboard as if it held eggs.

"She says to bring back the cloth," he said. "And the jar. She was particular about the jar."

"She's particular about everything," Pencroft said.

"Yes," Herbert said, pleased, as though Pencroft had paid her a compliment.

Spilett stood on the bank above the tide line with his notebook open. He was always standing somewhere with his notebook open. Pencroft had stopped minding it in the second month and started minding it again in the winter.

That was the week of the business over the pulley. He had caught the correspondent watching him across the main chamber for three days and writing nothing at all.

That had been worse than the writing.

Pencroft put both hands on the gunwale. They were steady this morning. He had looked at them first thing, before he looked at anything else, the same as every morning since the balloon.

"Get in, then," he said.

* * *

The Bonadventure came over the estuary bar with a lift under her that Pencroft felt in his heels before he felt it anywhere else.

Ten months he had been ashore, ten months of granite and sand and the plank floors of Granite House, of looking at the sea from above it like a man looking at a house he used to live in. Now the water came up under her and took her weight. The tiller woke in his hand, and the whole boat leaned to the east wind and began to talk to him through the wood.

He kept his mouth shut. He did not trust what his voice would do.

In the bow Herbert said, "Oh." Then he said, "She's going, Pencroft, look, she's going," as if there had been a doubt in the matter.

"She's a boat," Pencroft said. "It's what they're for."

Inside the reef the water lay green over the sand and dark over the weed beds. It was so clear in the shallows that the boat's shadow ran along the bottom beside them like a fish keeping pace. The reef stood off half a mile to seaward, and the swell broke on it in a long white line with a sound like breathing in the next room.

He gave Neb the mainsheet because there was nobody else to give it to. Herbert had the foresail, and Herbert's attention would be on the birds by the time they cleared the first point. A boat's main wants a man who is watching it.

He showed Neb how the sheet ran through the block on the after thwart. He showed him how to take a turn on the cleat and hold the tail so it would run free when it had to. Then he pointed up at the forward edge of the sail.

"The luff," he said. "If I bring her too close to the wind that edge goes slack and shivers, like a horse twitching flies, and then ye ease the sheet."

Neb looked at the luff. He did not say anything. He watched it as Herbert watched a bird he had not seen before, without blinking much.

Pencroft brought her up a point to show him, and the cloth along the edge trembled. Before Pencroft had his mouth open Neb had eased the sheet a hand's width. The trembling stopped, and the boat gathered herself and went on.

"Aye," Pencroft said. "Like that, hard and quiet."

He brought her up again a mile on, without warning, and Neb eased before the cloth had finished its first shiver. Pencroft bore away and let her run off the wind a little. Neb hauled in a foot of sheet and the sail went hard and quiet without a word from anyone.

"Ease her," Pencroft said anyway. "Mind now, ease her."

Neb's hands had already done it. He gave no sign that he had heard. Pencroft heard himself say it again at the next point, and the one after, and kept on saying it.

They worked north along the east coast through the forenoon. Herbert drew the coastline on Harding's leaves with the stub of pencil from his own notebook: the cliffs, the mouth of the Mercy behind them, a gully where a stream came down white through the ferns. Between drawings he named the birds.

He named them to nobody in particular. He wrote them in the margin when he had a name and drew them when he did not.

"That's a frigatebird," he said. "Nothing else flies like that, as though it's hung on a wire. Pencroft, have you seen them in the Atlantic?"

"No."

"I don't think they go into the Atlantic much," Herbert said. "I'd have to look it up."

He laughed, because there was nothing on the island to look anything up in. Then he wrote it down anyway.

The northern channel opened off the northeast point a little after noon. Pencroft knew it from the cliff, where he had stood and looked at it a dozen times since March, a break in the white line with dark water in it. From the boat it was a different animal.

The swell came through the gap in long smooth hills and spent itself across the lagoon. The boat rose to each one and slid down its back. Herbert stopped talking.

Pencroft took the lead line out from under the thwart. He had made it in December, a stone the size of a big man's fist bored through with Harding's drill, and thirty fathoms of fiber line knotted once at every fathom and twice at every fifth. He had packed the hollow in the stone's foot with seal tallow so it would bring up the bottom.

"Herbert. Write what I call."

He swung the lead forward and let it go and felt it strike. He gathered in the line hand over hand, counting knots, and read the depth by the wet when it came up straight under him. "Four," he called, and Herbert wrote it.

They went in on the channel slowly with the sail eased and the line going every few lengths. Four fathoms at the inner end. Six.

Seven at the narrows, with sand and broken shell in the tallow. The current set hard to the west across the mouth, so the boat crabbed sideways while he held her straight. Neb kept the sheet and his eyes on the luff and did not have to be told.

At the outer edge of the narrows Pencroft let her lie a minute, hove to, with the reef breaking white a stone's throw on either hand.

Through the gap there was nothing. The Pacific went out in a long blue slope to the edge of the world, with the swell coming in off it from the southwest and a whole ocean of fetch behind the swell. There was no mark on it anywhere.

He had been looking at it for ten months from the cliff. This was not the same. From here it was not a view, it was a road.

Tahiti lay somewhere over there. Twelve hundred miles, Harding said.

"How far could she go?" Herbert said. He was looking at the same thing.

Pencroft put the tiller over and let the sail fill and brought her back into the lagoon.

"Farther than you'd want to be in her," he said.

* * *

They put in for the night on the northern beach, a long curve of pale sand under low dunes with the reef close offshore. Pencroft brought her in on the last of the light. They hauled her above the wrack line on rollers of driftwood, all three of them on the gunwales, with Herbert slipping in the wet sand and laughing.

Her keel cut a groove behind her as straight as a rule.

Herbert built the fire, because he liked to. Neb went along the tide line and came back with an armful of driftwood and, in the fold of his shirt, a dozen of the black-shelled mussels Vásquez had shown them in the first week. He set them in the edge of the coals without being asked.

They opened one by one with small wet sounds.

They ate the mussels and Vásquez's fish, and Herbert talked. He talked about the frigatebird and about the terns he had counted on the northern reef in the afternoon, near three hundred, and about whether the island's seals were the same seals as the ones off the Cape. Pencroft let it run past him like water.

The seals were out on the reef now, black shapes on the black rock, barking at intervals. Pencroft had taken two of them on that reef in April. He had hit the first one with a club and it had looked at him with an old man's eyes while it died.

"You're not listening," Herbert said.

"I'm listening."

"What did I say, then?"

"Seals," Pencroft said.

Herbert threw a stick at him, and missed, and lay back on the sand with his hands under his head. He was asleep inside a quarter of an hour, halfway through a sentence about the Cape.

Pencroft took the first watch. There was nothing on the island to watch for, so far as anyone had seen. But he had stood watches for thirty years and he did not know how to sleep on a beach without one.

Neb sat a while on the far side of the fire, his arms on his knees. He had not said twenty words since the estuary. Pencroft had sailed with men like that and generally found them the best kind, and he could not have said why it sat wrong with him tonight.

Then Neb lay down with his back to the fire and was still.

The tide came up the sand toward the boat and stopped short and went back. Pencroft fed the fire and listened to the reef. Once a bird he did not know went over in the dark, calling, and he looked up after it from habit as if he could have seen it.

He woke Neb at the middle of the night and lay down where Neb had been. The sand was warm from him.

At first light his hands were bad.

He saw it before he was properly awake. He was lying on his side looking at them on the sand in front of his face, and the fingers were going in a fine fast tremble like the luff of a pinched sail. It was not as bad as the first weeks, but it was bad enough.

He got up and walked down to the water and knelt and put them in to the wrist. The sea was cold at that hour, colder than it looked. He held them there and looked at the reef and counted, as he had counted in April when they were a great deal worse than this.

Somewhere past three hundred they began to quiet.

When he stood up Neb was at the fire with his back to the sea. He had the fire built up and a mussel open on a flat stone. He did not turn around, and when Pencroft came up the beach he held out the stone without looking at him.

Pencroft took it. He ate standing.

Neither of them said anything about it, then or later.

* * *

They rounded the northwest point in the forenoon and the island changed its face.

On the west the cliffs came straight down into deep water with no beach at all, granite and dark basalt stacked like courses of brick. The swell went in against the foot of them and came back in a slow white boil. Herbert craned up at the cliff top and said a man could drop a stone from there and count to three before it hit.

Then he tried it with his eyes, counting under his breath.

The wind was bending round the island now. They had it on the quarter, then astern, and the boat ran easy with the sail out and Neb tending it as if he had been doing it all his life. Pencroft sat back against the transom with the tiller under his arm and watched him.

Neb was good. He had the eye, and the hands to go with the eye, and he did not fuss or show off. He had learned in a day and a half what Pencroft had seen ship's boys take a season to learn.

Pencroft looked at this plain fact a while. He did not like it, and he could not have told anyone why.

He thought about the boat in December, sitting finished on her blocks above the estuary. He had sat with her alone an evening. Nobody had come down, and he had not wanted anybody to.

Every brick in Granite House had gone through Harding's head before it went through Pencroft's hands. Every pulley and pipe and hinge had too. He did not grudge it, because the man was a marvel and they would all have been dead by June without him.

But the boat had come out of Pencroft's own head. The lines of her, the scantlings, the set of her mast were thirty years of looking at small boats. When Harding had walked her length in December with his hands behind his back and said the lines were sound, Pencroft had felt his own jaw go tight.

He watched Neb's hands on the sheet.

“Ye're pinching her,” he said.

Neb looked up at the luff. It was hard and quiet.

He looked at Pencroft and eased a little anyway. The boat lost a quarter of a knot she had not needed to lose, and Pencroft said nothing.

The south end of the reef came up in the early afternoon, and the second channel with it.

It lay off the southwest of the island, narrower than the northern one and dog-legged. From the cliff top it showed only as a dark stain in the white. Pencroft hove to inside and studied it.

The swell was bigger here, more of it coming straight up from the south. The breakers either side of the gap stood up tall and green before they fell.

“The Colonel said he'd rather we didn't,” Herbert said.

“The Colonel said he'd rather.” Pencroft took the lead line out. “We sound it from inside first.”

They sounded it from inside. Five fathoms, then six, then eight at the elbow with rock in the tallow, rough and gray, and Herbert wrote it all.

Then they were at the outer end, and the ocean was there in front of them again. Pencroft looked at it and felt the same pull in his chest he had felt at the northern channel. It was like a line made fast to his breastbone and paid out over the edge of the world.

“Ready about,” he said. “We'll take her outside a mile and no more. I want to see what she does in a real sea.”

Neb looked at him. Then he looked at the swell. Then he took up the slack in the sheet and waited.

“If she lies over so the water starts in over the lee side,” Pencroft said, “ye let that sheet run, all of it, and ye don't wait for me to say it. By the time I say it, it's late.”

“Not wait,” Neb said.

"Not wait."

* * *

Outside the reef the Pacific took hold of them.

The swell lifted the Bonadventure the height of a house and set her down in a valley where there was nothing to see but water on every side. Then it lifted her again. At the top of each one the whole island stood up astern, the cliffs and the green and the cloud on the peak, and then it was gone.

Herbert held the gunwale with both hands. His face had gone white and then red and settled somewhere between, and he was grinning.

Pencroft was grinning too. He felt it on his face and could not stop it.

She went better than he had any right to expect from fifteen feet of green timber and island cloth, lifting her bow to every sea and shouldering the spray off to leeward. He had her on the wind with the swell on the bow, and the tiller in his hand was light and alive. For half an hour he did not think about anything at all.

Then he saw the line on the water.

It came up from the southwest, a dark ruffle across the blue with the sky going gray over it. He knew what it was. He had seen ten thousand of them.

There would be rain in it, and a hard gust in front of the rain. The right thing was to bear away now, ease everything, and run back for the channel before it reached them.

He held his course.

He knew it as he did it. He sat with the tiller under his arm and watched the squall come down on them and held her where she was. He had built her, and he wanted to know what she would do when it blew, and the wanting was a hunger in him that had nothing to do with sense.

"Pencroft," Herbert said.

The gust hit.

It laid her over in one movement, the sail booming full, the lee gunwale going down to the water and under. The sea came in green over the side. Pencroft felt the ballast shift under his feet, the stones grinding down to leeward in the bilge, and the boat went on over past where she should have stopped.

He shoved the tiller down to bring her head up. He was late. His hand on the wood knew he was late.

Neb let the sheet go.

He let it all go, the whole tail of it running out through the block with a hiss. The boom swung wide and the sail went out over the water flogging like a gun. The Bonadventure came upright with a jerk.

She came up half full of sea, wallowing, the water sluicing from side to side across the bottom boards. Then the rain came down on them all at once in a gray roar.

"I didnae say…" Pencroft shouted.

He stopped.

Neb was on his knees at the thwart with the end of the sheet in his fist. He looked up at Pencroft through the rain. The water was running off his face, and his face had nothing in it at all.

"You said not to wait," he said.

Pencroft stared at him. The boat rolled heavily and the water in her went with the roll.

"Aye," he said. "I did."

"Bail," he said to Herbert, louder. Herbert was already doing it with the clay bowl that had held the figs, throwing the sea back over the side as fast as his arms would go.

Pencroft took the sheet back from Neb and hauled the boom in a little, enough to give her steerage. He put her before it. She ran, heavy and low, with the swell coming up under her stern.

His hands on the tiller were shaking with the kind of shake that comes after, nothing to do with the morning, and he kept them clamped on the wood so that nobody would see.

* * *

The squall went through in a quarter of an hour. It left the sea gray and confused behind it, and the boat a mile to leeward of where he wanted her. He brought her back up to the channel mouth in the thin light after the rain.

The breakers either side stood up worse than before. The tide had turned while they were outside. The water in the gap was pouring out against them, heaped and broken, and the line of the dog-leg was gone under the white.

Pencroft knew how the channel lay from the soundings. He did not know it well enough to take her through that by memory, not with the boat low and logy and the ballast shifted.

He looked at Neb. Neb was looking at the channel.

"Can ye see the water?" Pencroft said. "Where it's dark?"

Neb watched the gap for the space of three seas. "Yes."

"Go forward and show me with your arm where it's dark," Pencroft said. "I'll steer on your arm, and Herbert takes the sheet."

Neb went forward. He stood in the bow with one hand on the forestay and the other arm out, braced against the pitch of the boat. Pencroft put her at the gap.

The first breaker went by on the right hand so close he could have spat on it. Neb's arm moved left, and Pencroft followed it, and the boat slid into the slot of dark water between two walls of white. The sea came up astern of her and lifted her and threw her forward.

Neb's arm swung right, hard, and held. Pencroft put the tiller over and felt her answer, slow, slow, and then come round. Rock went past under the keel close enough that he saw the weed on it waving.

Then the arm dropped and the water ahead was green, and they were inside.

Nobody said anything for a while. Herbert sat with the sheet in his lap and his mouth open. Neb stayed where he was in the bow, one hand still on the forestay, looking forward.

Pencroft's teeth were clenched hard enough to ache. He unclenched them.

"There's a beach," Neb said, pointing along the shore to the east without turning round. "Black."

* * *

The southern coast was not like the rest of the island.

A tongue of old lava came down from the high ground here and ran out into the sea in a long black apron. It was cracked into plates and slabs like a dried riverbed, with nothing on it but a gray crust of lichen. At its eastern edge it broke off into a small cove of black sand and black shingle.

Nobody had been to it. It was too far from Granite House to walk for anything useful, and nothing about it promised to be useful.

They brought the Bonadventure into the cove and ran her up on the shingle. The stones rolled and clicked under her keel.

Pencroft had the ballast out of her before he did anything else. He passed the stones up over the side to Neb one by one, round gray beach stones from the strand below the Chimneys. They had been the nearest to hand when he loaded her, and they were as light for their size as bread.

Three of them had cracked through from grinding against each other in the bilge. He threw those away up the beach.

He picked up a stone off the shingle to chock the keel, and stopped.

It was dark, near black, close-grained and smooth-faced. It was no bigger than the gray stone he had thrown away, and it weighed as much as two of them. He hefted it and passed it from one hand to the other and stood there with it like a man who has found a coin in the road.

"That's what she wanted," he said.

Neb took it from him and weighed it the same way. He turned it over twice. Then he looked at the beach, black from end to end, and up at the lava field behind with the evening coming down over it.

He gave Pencroft back the stone and walked out onto the lava.

He walked a good way out, picking his footing on the plates, and then he stopped and stood still. After a time he crouched and put the flat of his hand on the rock. He stayed that way.

Pencroft watched him from the boat with the dark stone in his hand. Then he turned away and began laying out the boat's gear to dry. It was not a thing that needed watching.

Herbert had the leaves of Harding's chart spread on a slab with stones on the corners. They had come through drier than anyone had a right to hope, wrapped in oilcloth inside his shirt. He was drawing the second channel from memory with his tongue between his teeth, the dog-leg and the soundings and a small careful arrow for the set of the current.

"Will you tell the Colonel?" he said. "About outside."

"I'll tell him she wants different ballast."

Herbert thought about this. He drew another arrow.

"That's true," he said.

"Aye," Pencroft said. "It is."

* * *

They made a fire of driftwood against a slab of lava that held the heat and gave it back. The wood was gray and salt-dried and burned with a blue edge to the flame. Herbert ate, and finished the chart, and lay down beside it to look at it by firelight.

He was asleep with the pencil in his hand before the first stars were properly out. Pencroft took the pencil out of his fingers and put it in his own pocket so it would not be lost.

There was no moon yet. The reef was a pale line out in the dark to the south, and past it nothing, and past that, thirty-five miles off, the small island Harding had named Tabor. Pencroft had said on the day of the survey that a man could live on it, and he did not know now why he had said it.

Neb sat on the other side of the fire with his back against the lava. He had come in off the field at dark and eaten and said nothing.

"You held her too long," he said.

Pencroft put a stick on the fire. "Aye."

"You saw it coming."

"I saw it."

Neb waited. He was good at waiting. Pencroft had watched him wait for Harding outside doorways and at the edge of fields and on the cliff path with a load on his back, and he had never once seen him fidget at it.

"I wanted to know what she'd do," Pencroft said. "A man builds a thing, and he wants to know what it'll stand."

“Now you know.”

“Now I know she'll drown three men if the fool at the tiller lets her.”

Neb said nothing to that. The fire popped and threw a spark up into the dark and they both watched it go out.

“Ye did right,” Pencroft said, and it came out rough. “With the sheet.”

“You told me.”

“I told ye. Plenty of men are told.”

Neb looked at him across the fire. It was a long look and Pencroft could make nothing of it.

They sat. The swell worked on the shingle down the beach with a long drawn sound, stones dragging back with the water and tumbling forward again. Pencroft had heard that sound on a hundred beaches.

He had heard it once outside a window over a harbor street. He had lain awake in a narrow bed in a house where the lamp was always lit in the front room, and a woman kept a slate behind the bar with a man's name chalked on it and a column of marks under the name.

He sat up straighter.

“I knew a house once,” he said. “In a port I used to put into.”

He stopped there. The fire burned. Across from him Neb did not move and did not ask.

Pencroft looked at the fire. He had the dark stone from the beach beside him on the lava. He put his hand on it, and it was cool and heavy and did not care about anything.

“Old business,” he said.

“Old business keeps,” Neb said.

Pencroft looked up at him. There was no smile on Neb's face, and no question, and no pity either. He said it as a man tells you where the wind is.

“Aye,” Pencroft said. “It does that.”

Neb turned his head.

He did it slowly, as Top turned his head toward a sound none of the rest of them had heard. He was looking south, out past the reef. Pencroft looked where he was looking.

There was a light on the water.

It was far out, beyond the reef, low down. It was pale, nearly white, with a blue in it like moonlight on a blade, and nothing like the yellow of a lantern or a ship's riding light.

It lay under the surface, a long pale smudge with the dark sea moving over it.

It moved. It went slowly west along the line of the reef, steady, as nothing moves at sea that is driven by wind. Pencroft watched it with his breath held.

He did not know what he was looking at. Every part of thirty years at sea told him there was no such thing.

Then it went out all at once, like a door shut on a lit room, and the sea was dark from one end to the other.

They sat a while without speaking. The swell dragged at the shingle.

“That's no ship,” Pencroft said.

“No.”

“Ye've seen it before.”

Neb did not answer at once. “I've seen the chest,” he said.

Pencroft thought about the chest on the beach in March, above the tide line, with its lock that was not locked. The rope. The medicine, and the clothes in sizes that nearly fit.

"Aye," he said. "So have I."

He looked at Herbert, asleep by the chart with his mouth open and his hand curled where the pencil had been. The boy would want it in his book. He would want it in his book and in Harding's ear and in the correspondent's notebook by noon tomorrow, with drawings.

"We'll no wake him," Pencroft said.

Neb looked at the boy, and at the dark water, and at Pencroft.

"No," he said.

* * *

In the morning they ballasted her with the black stone.

It took them till the sun was well up. They chose each stone by hand, close-grained and flat-sided so it would lie. Pencroft laid them himself along the keel, low and even, and chocked them with wedges of driftwood so nothing could roll.

Neb carried. Herbert carried too, for a while, and then went off along the tide line after a crab he did not know and came back with it in his hat.

The boat sat lower when they launched her, and stiffer. When the breeze came off the land and filled the sail she stood up to it like a man setting his feet.

Pencroft felt it through the tiller. He did not say anything.

They ran east along the south coast in the morning sun, and then north up the east side of the lagoon toward home. The wind had come round fair. Neb worked the sail, and Pencroft did not tell him to ease her, and the boat went quietly through green water with the reef white on her right hand.

Halfway up the east side Herbert stood up in the bow and turned round, holding the forestay, and looked back at the island.

From here, a mile out in the lagoon, it was all there at once. The peak with its cloud. The forest going up the slopes in every shade of green there was.

The cliffs, the white thread of the Mercy coming down, the black of the lava far to the south where they had slept. All of it was ringed by the reef. The water inside the reef was a color Pencroft had no name for, a green with light in it.

"You can see the whole of it," Herbert said. "The whole of it at once."

He said it as if he were telling them a secret. Then he sat down and was quiet for nearly a mile, the longest he had held his tongue since they left the estuary.

They came up under the cliff south of the Chimneys in the early afternoon, close in, and Pencroft looked up at Granite House. The windows they had cut in the first months were dark squares in the granite face, thirty feet up. At the southernmost of them, the one that looked out over the open sea, a figure stood with folded arms.

Herbert saw her and waved, both arms over his head. The boat rocked.

"Sit down," Pencroft said.

The figure in the window did not wave back. It stayed where it was until they were past, and when Pencroft looked back over his shoulder it was still there.

Top was in the shallows at the estuary mouth, up to his elbows, as if he had not moved in three days. He went past Pencroft and past Herbert to Neb and pressed against his legs. He stood there wet and shivering with his tail going.

“Aye,” Pencroft said to the dog. “We're back.”

* * *

Harding came down to the estuary while they were still making her fast, and Spilett behind him with the notebook.

Herbert met them on the bank with the chart. He had a great deal to say and he said most of it before he reached them: the soundings, the set of the current, the seals and the terns and the frigatebird, the black beach in the south.

“And you can see the whole of it at once, from the water,” he said. “With the peak and the reef and the color of the water inside the reef, it's quite something.”

He looked at Spilett to make sure that went down.

Harding took the chart and studied it.

He ran his finger along the dog-leg of the second channel and stopped at the elbow. “Eight fathoms,” he said. “Rock.”

“Aye,” Pencroft said.

Harding looked at the boat. He looked at the dark stone along her keel, and the wedges, and the tide mark of salt along her bottom boards where the sea had stood in her. Pencroft watched him look.

“You went outside,” Harding said.

“We did.”

“And?”

“Hull's sound,” Pencroft said. “Foresail rigging wants adjusting, and she'll do better on open water with different ballast.”

He tipped his head at the black stone.

Harding looked at him a moment longer. Then he folded the chart and put it in his coat.

“Good,” he said, and went back up the bank.

Spilett stayed. He had been writing while Harding talked and he went on writing after. Then he looked up.

“And Neb?”

Pencroft looked along the bank. Neb was walking up toward the cliff path with the clay jar under one arm and Vásquez's cloth folded square in his other hand, and Top at his heel. He did not look back.

“He worked the sail,” Pencroft said.

Spilett wrote. “Under your instruction,” he said. He said it as the end of his own sentence, and he was already writing it.

Pencroft opened his mouth. He thought of the sheet running out hissing through the block, and the boat coming upright under him with the sea in her. He thought of an arm held out straight in the bow against a wall of white water.

“Aye,” he said. “Under instruction.”

He watched the correspondent write it down.

* * *

In the evening he went back to the estuary to see to the foresail.

The light was going long and gold across the water, and the boat lay at her mooring with her bow to the ebb. He waded out and climbed in over the transom. He sat on the thwart and began to take out the old splice in the halyard where it had chafed.

The fiber was good. The splice had been hurried. He had done it by lantern the night before they sailed, and he had known it was hurried when he did it.

He heard someone in the water and looked up. Neb was wading out to the boat with his trousers rolled.

He did not ask if he could come aboard. He stood in the water at the gunwale with his hands on it and looked at the halyard in Pencroft's lap.

Pencroft looked at him. Then he moved along the thwart.

Neb climbed in and sat. Pencroft took the halyard end and opened the lay with his fingers, the three strands coming apart. He showed him how to tuck them, over one and under one, against the lay, and how to roll each tuck under the heel of the hand to set it.

He did it slowly. He finished the splice and pulled on it to show it would hold. Then he took it out again, strand by strand, and held the end out across the thwart.

Neb took it. He opened the lay as he had been shown, slower than Pencroft and not hurrying. He tucked the first strand, and the second, and the third, and rolled each one under his palm.

When he was done he held it out.

Pencroft took it and went over every tuck. He put his weight on it. It was a good splice.

“Again,” he said.

Neb took it back and began to open it. The boat moved on her mooring with the ebb, and the dark stone sat low and even along her keel. Pencroft watched his hands and did not tell him that the first one had been good enough to hold.

The Castaways

The company of Lincoln Island as the private record first introduces them, in March 1865.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Gideon Spilett	Correspondent for the New York Herald, twenty years in the trade, seventeen engagements of the late war. He keeps two records of the island: the one he publishes and the one he does not. He tells you plainly that he is not a trustworthy narrator.
Cyrus Harding	Union colonel of sappers, about forty-five, held in Richmond on his parole. An engineer who makes fire from two watch glasses and a little water, and who has always done the calculation.
Pencroft	A broad Scottish sailor of about fifty who handles the balloon and later builds the Bonadventure. Says “Aye,” “No” and “That'll hold.” Keeps his own counsel and watches the sea each evening.
Herbert Brown	Pencroft's young charge, about eighteen when the balloon comes down. A naturalist's eye in a body that goes everywhere at speed, and the one who finds most things on the island first.
Neb	Nebuchadnezzar, Harding's man for some years, about thirty. Born in Cameroon. Quiet in a way he has built, the first to move and the last to stop, and the one who knows what the ground needs.
Magdalena Vásquez	A widow from the territory of New Mexico, about thirty-five, who fought the land courts over her husband's grant. Knows plants, fire, weather and wounds. Keeps a creased photograph in the inside pocket of her coat.
Top	Harding's dog, large, of mixed breeding, with a nose that works on its own. He does not bark unnecessarily and he chooses his own company.
Joop	A large orangutan from the fig trees of the upper forest, brought home by Herbert over three days of figs and patience. He likes Neb best.
Tom Ayrton	A name on a message in a bottle, two years after the landing.

Someone else left a chest of tools on the beach on the seventh day, above the tide line, with a lock that was not locked. The castaways do not know who.

Lincoln Island in Words

A map of the island, from Harding's survey and the private record.

By Harding's meridian observation on the fourth day the island lies at about thirty-four degrees fifty-seven minutes south, one hundred and fifty degrees thirty minutes west, with an error of perhaps thirty miles for want of a chronometer. That puts it some twelve hundred miles from Tahiti, eighteen hundred from New Zealand and four thousand five hundred from the Americas, well outside any regular shipping lane. It is roughly oval, about twelve miles in its longest dimension, and volcanic, with deep black soil.

PLACE	WHERE	WHAT IT IS
The reef	All the way round, at varying distances from the shore	Encircles the island and makes passage hard without local knowledge. It is broken in two places where channels run through to the open sea.
The northern channel	The northern break in the reef	One of the two ways in from the open sea.
The landing beach	Below the granite cliffs on the east	A wide curve of gray sand where the balloon came down on March 23, 1865.
The hollow	Half a mile inland of the beach	A dry hollow under a granite overhang where Neb found Harding the next day, unconscious and dry. Nobody can say how he got there.
The Chimneys	The cliff base above the beach	Granite cavities joined by passages, with a natural chimney that keeps the air moving. The first shelter. Pencroft named it.
Granite House	In the cliff south of the Chimneys	A cavern about sixty feet by thirty with three side chambers, entered by rope and pulley through windows cut thirty feet up. Amethyst crystals grow in a cavity in the far left corner.
The small bay	South of the Chimneys	Where a bull sea lion went for Top in the second week.
The tidal pool	Southern end of the beach	Large and full of shellfish. Vásquez's first harvest.
The Mercy	From Grant Lake down to the sea; mouth about two miles north of the Chimneys	Clear, cold, full of fish. Pencroft built the Bonadventure in its estuary.
Grant Lake	The upper plateau	Source of the Mercy, named for the General. Fine timber stands above it.
The upper forest	Above the lake	Fig trees, and Joop. Herbert saw disturbance in the undergrowth here at about the height of a man.
Mount Franklin	The center of the island	A volcanic peak of perhaps four thousand feet, its top often in cloud. It showed no sign of activity on the first survey.
The fumaroles	Above the lake	Where Harding collected acid for the nitroglycerin, at some risk.
The eastern rock face	Above the eastern bank of the Mercy	Iron ore, and nitrate formations Harding marked on the first survey.

The plateau fields	Above Granite House	Deep soil with the northern sun on it most of the day. Onions first. The single grain of wheat went in near the upper field, marked with a piece of white granite.
The basalt shelf	The lower interior, running east to west	Where Top stopped dead on the way back from the survey. Nothing was found.
The northern reef	Off the north coast	Seals. Pencroft took two there in the early months.
The northern beach	The north coast	A long open beach inside the reef.
The southern coast	Below the old lava flow	Dark-grained, close-textured stone. Too far from anything useful for anyone to walk there.
Tabor Island	About thirty-five miles south	A small dark island seen from the high ground on a clear day. Pencroft said someone could live on it.

A Timeline of the First Year

Dates from the private record. Day numbers count from the landing.

WHEN	WHAT
Early March 1865	A balloon is secured in Richmond, ostensibly for observation. Harding has kept it ready.
March 18, 1865	By evening, remaining in Richmond is no longer possible for several of the company.
Night of March 20	The storm takes the balloon and carries it south, then east, then everywhere.
March 23	After five days in the air the balloon comes down off an unknown island in the Pacific. Harding is missing. Neb swims for three hours.
March 24	Neb finds Harding half a mile inland, dry. Pencroft finds and names the Chimneys.
Day 3	Harding makes fire from two watch glasses and water.
Day 4	The survey of the interior. Harding takes the latitude and names the island, the river, the lake, the peak and Tabor Island.
Day 7	A chest of tools, weapons, seeds, clothes and medicine appears on the beach.
Day 12	The first brick.
End of week 4	Harding: “It will do. For now.”
After week 4	Herbert finds the cavern. Three weeks and two days later it is Granite House.
Soon after	Joop joins the company.

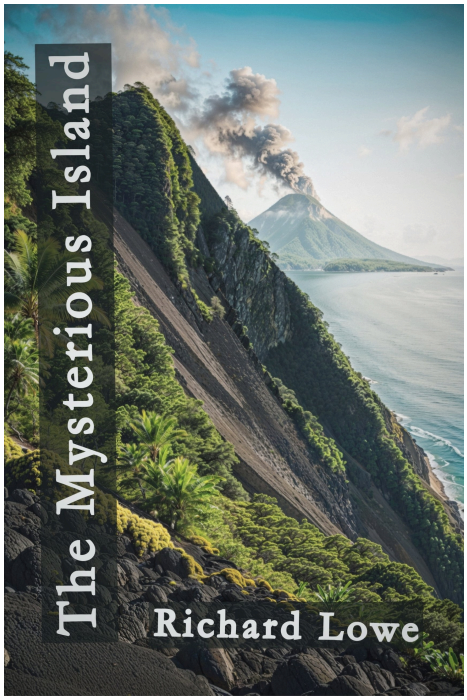
Second month in Granite House	Harding makes nitroglycerin in twenty-one days and clears the upper channel for a weir.
Mid-May to September	The first winter. In June, Neb loses a week's preserved meat, and Harding and Pencroft fall out over a second pulley.
September to October	Spring. Vásquez plants onions. Herbert finds a single grain of wheat in a jacket lining and plants it.
October to December	Pencroft builds the Bonadventure in the Mercy estuary.
December 1865	The first wheat harvest: thirty-eight grains.
January 1866	The Bonadventure's first voyage, three days around the island. This story.
October 1866	The second spring. Herbert falls in the interior. In the morning there is a package on the ledge.
Spring 1868	The New York Herald publishes Spilett's account of Lincoln Island.
1869	Spilett, in New York, decides to release the private record.

Words Aboard the Bonadventure

WORD	MEANING
Bonadventure	Pencroft's fifteen-foot single-masted sloop. Herbert says the name means good fortune. Pencroft says they could use some.
Ballast	Weight stowed low in a boat to keep her upright under sail.
Sheet	The line that controls a sail. To let it fly is to let it run out all at once and spill the wind.
Luff	The forward edge of a sail. It shivers when the boat is steered too close to the wind.
Lead line	A weighted line knotted at every fathom, dropped to find the depth. Tallow in the weight brings up a sample of the bottom.
Fathom	Six feet of depth.
Hove to	Lying nearly still with the sails set against each other.
The published account	Spilett's book for the Herald and its readers. It serves the story.
The private record	The notes Spilett kept alongside it. It serves the truth, and he released it in 1869.

Read the Novel

Pencroft told the correspondent that Neb worked the sail under instruction, and that is how it went into the record. The Mysterious Island is the record Gideon Spilett did not publish: the private account of six castaways, a dog and an orangutan on an island that is not as empty as it looks. Read what nearly three years on Lincoln Island cost each of them.



The Mysterious Island:
Being the True and Complete Account of the Castaways of Lincoln Island
The Adventures of Captain Nemo, book 3

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