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A CHOLERA FIGHT.

[A horrible story of the sea by W. Clark Russell, taken from the San Francisco Examiner.]



HE Justitia was a smart little bark of 395 tons. I had viewed her with something of admiration as she lay in midstream in the Hooghly—somewhere off the Coolie Bazaar, I think it was. There was steam then coming to Calcutta, though not as steam now is. Very little of it was in any sense palatial, and some of the very best of it was to be as promptly distanced under given conditions of weather by the clippers, clouded with studding sails and flying kites to the starry buttons of their skysail masts, heads, as the six-knot ocean tramp of today is to be outrun by the four-masted Leviathan thrashing through it to windward with the yards fore and aft.

—representing in those days a large Birmingham firm of dealers in the fall industries—had wished to make my way from Calcutta to Cape Town. I saw the Justitia and took a fancy to her; I admired the long, low, piratic run of her hull, as she lay with straining hawspeeps on the rushing stream of the Hooghly; upon which, as you watched, there might go by in the space of an hour some half-score at least of dead natives made ghostly canoes of by huge birds, erect upon the corpses, burying their beaks as they sailed along.

I found out that the Justitia was one of the smartest of the Thames and East India traders of that time, memorable on one occasion for having reeled off a clean seven-teen knots by the log under a main topgallant sail, set over a single reefed topsail. I called upon the agents, was told that the Justitia was not a passenger ship, but that I could hire a cabin for the run to Cape Town if I chose; a sum in rupees, trifling compared with the cost of transit by steam, was named. I went on board, found the captain walking up and down under the awning, and agreeably killed an hour in a chat with as amiable seaman as ever it was my good fortune to meet.

We sailed in the middle of July. Nothing worth talking about happened during our run down the Bay of Bengal. The crew foremost were all of them Englishmen; there were twelve, counting the cook and steward. The captain was a man named Cayzer; the only mate of the vessel was one William Perkins. The boatswain, a rough, short, hairy, immensely strong man, acted as second mate and kept a lookout when Perkins was below. But he was entirely ignorant of navigation and owned to me that he read with difficulty words of one syllable and could not write.

I was the only passenger. My name, I may as well say here, is Thomas Barron. Our run to the south Ceylon parallels was slow and disappointing. The monsoon was light and treacherous, sometimes dying out in a sort of laughing, mocking gust till the whole ocean was a sheet calm surface, as though the dependable trade wind was never again to blow.

"Oh, yes," said Captain Cayzer to me, "we're used to the unexpected hereabouts. Monsoon or no monsoon, I'll tell you what, you're always safe in standing by for an Irishman's hurricane down here."

"And what sort of breeze is that?" I asked.

"An up and down calm," said he; as hard to know where it begins as to guess where it'll end."

However, thanks to the frequent trade puffs and other winds, which tasted not like the monsoon, we crawled through those

latitudes which Ceylon spans, and tethed within a few degrees of the equator. In this part of the waters we were to be thankful for even the most trifling donation of catspaw, or for the equally small and short-lived mercy of the gust of the electric cloud. I forgot how many days we were out from Calcutta; the matter is of no moment. I left my cabin one morning some hour after the sun had risen, by which time the decks had been washed down, and were already dry, with a salt sparkle as of bright white sand on the face of the planks, so roasting was it. I went into the head to get a bath under the pump there. I feel in memory as I write the exquisite sensation of that luxury of brilliant brine, cold as snow, melting through me from head to foot to the nimble plying of the pump brake by a seaman whom I regularly employed for this job.

It was a true tropic morning. The sea, of a pale lilac, flowed in a long drawn, gentle heave of swell into the southwest; the sea went working to its distant reaches and floated into a dim blending of liquid air and water, so that you couldn't tell where the sky ended; a weak, hot wind blew over the taffrail, but it was without weight. The courses swung to the swell without response to the breathings of the air, and on high the light cotton white royals were scarcely curved by the delicate passage of the draught.

Yet the bark had steerage way. When I looked through the grating at her meteled forefoot I saw the ripples plentiful as harp-strings threading aft, and while I dried myself I watched the slow approach of a piece of timber hoary with barnacles and venerable with long hairs of seaweed, amid and around which a thousand little fishes were sporting, many colored as though a rainbow had been shivered.

I returned to my cabin, dressed and stepped on the quarter deck, where I found some men spreading the awning, and the captain, in a white straw hat, viewing an object out upon the water through a telescope and talking to the boatswain, who stood alongside.

"What do you see?" I asked.

"Something that resembles a raft," answered the captain.

The thing he looked at was about a mile distant, some three points on the starboard bow. On pointing the telescope I distinctly made out the fabric of a raft, fitted with a short mast, to which, midway, a parcel was attached. A portion of the raft was covered by a white sheet of cloth, whence dangled a short length of something chocolate-colored, indistinguishable even with the glass, lifting and sinking as the raft rose and fell upon the flowing heave of the sea.

"This ocean," said the captain, taking the glass from me, "is a big volume of tragic stories, and the artist who illustrates the book does it in that fashion," and he nodded in the direction of the raft.

"What do you make of it, boatswain?" I asked.

"It looks to me," he answered in his strong harsh, deep voice, "like a religious job—one of them rafts the Burmah coolies float away their dead on. I never see one afore, but I've heard tell of such things."

We sneaked stealthily toward the raft.

It was seven bells—half-past 7—and the sailors ate their breakfast on the forecabin, that they might view the strange contrivance. The mate, Dr. Perkins, came on deck to relieve the boatswain, and after inspecting the raft through the telescope gave it as his opinion that it was a Malay floating bier—"a Mussulman trick of ocean burial, anyhow," said he. "There should be a jar of water aboard the raft and cakes and fruit for the corpse to regale on if he ha'n't been dead long."

The steward announced breakfast. The captain told him to hold it back awhile. He was as curious as I to get a close view of the queer object, with its white cloth mast and parcel of chocolate colored fragment half in and half out like a barge's lee-board, and he bade the man at the helm put the wheel over by a spoke or two, but the wind was nearly gone, the barr scarcely responded to the motion of her rudder, the threadlike lines at the cutwater had faded, and a roasting, oppressive calm was upon the water, whitening it out into a tingling sheen of quicksilver with a fiery shaft of blinding dazzle, solitary and splendid, working with the swell like some monstrous serpent of light under the sun.

The raft was about six cables' lengths off when the bark came to a dead stand, with a soft, universal bellowing in of her canvas from royal to course, as though, like something sentient, she delivered one fatal sigh before the swoon of the calm seized her. But now we were near enough to resolve the floating thing with the naked eye into details. It was a raft formed of bamboo canes. A mast about six feet long was erected upon it; the dark thing over the edge proved a human leg, and when the fabric lifted with the swell and raised the leg clear we saw that the foot had been eaten away by fish, a number of which were swimming about the raft, sending little flashes of foam over the pale surface as they darted along with their back or dorsal fin exposed. They were all little fish; I saw no sharks. The body to which the leg belonged was covered by a white cloth. The captain called my attention to the parcel attached to the mast, and said that it possibly contained the food which the Malays leave beside their dead after burial.

"But let's go to breakfast now, Mr. Barron," said he, with a slow, reproachful, impatient look round the breathless scene of ocean. "If there's any amusement to be got out of that thing yonder there's a precious long, quiet day before us, I fear, for the entertainment."

We breakfasted, and in due course returned on deck. The slewing of the bark had caused the raft to shift its bearings, otherwise its distance remained as it was when we went below.

"Mr. Perkins," said the captain, "lower a boat and bring aboard that parcel from the raft's jurnmast, and likewise take a peep at the figure under the cloth and report its sex and what it looks like."

I asked leave to go in the boat, and when she was lowered, with three men in her, I followed Mr. Perkins and we rowed over to the raft. All about the frail bamboo contrivance the water was beautiful with the colors and movements of innumerable fish. As we approached we were greeted by an evil smell. The raft seemed to have been afloat for a considerable period; its submerged portion was green with marine adhesions or growths. The fellow in the bows of the boat, manœuvring with the boathook, cleverly snicked the parcel from the jurnmast and handed it along to the mate, who put it beside him without opening it, for that was to be the captain's privilege.

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"Off with that cloth," said Mr. Perkins, "and then back water a bit out of this."

The bowman jerked the cloth clear of the raft with his boathook; the white sheet floated like a snowflake upon the water for a few breaths, then slowly sank. The body exposed was stark naked and tawny. It was a male. I saw nothing revolting in the thing; it would have been otherwise perhaps had it been white. The hair was long and black, the nose aquiline, the mouth puckered into the aspect of a hair lip, the gleam of a few white teeth painted a ghastly contemptuous grin upon the dead face.

The only shocking part was the footless leg. "Shall I hook him overboard, sir?" said the bowman.

"No; let him take his ease as he lies," answered the mate, and with that we returned to the bark.

We climbed over the side, the boat was hoisted to the davits, and Mr. Perkins took the parcel out of the stern sheets and handed it to the Captain. The cover was a kind of fine canvas, very neatly stitched with white thread. Captain Cayzer ripped through the stitching with his knife, and exposed a couple of books bound in some kind of skin or parchment. They were probably the Koran, but the characters none of us knew. The Captain turned them about for a bit, and I stood by looking at them. He then replaced them in their canvas cover and put them down upon the skylight, and by and by, on his leaving the deck, he took them below to his cabin.

(To be Continued.)

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