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**A CHOLERA FIGHT**

(Continued.)

The moon rose about 10' that night. She came up hot, distorted, with a sullen face of belted vapor, but was soon clear of the dewy thickness over the horizon and showering a pure greenish silver upon the sea. She made the night lovely and cool; her reflection sparkled in the dew along the rails, and her beam whitened out the canvas into the tender softness of wreath of cloud motionless upon the summit of some dark heap of mountain. I looked for the raft and saw it plainly, and it is not in language to express how the sight of that frail cradle of death deepened the universal silence and expanded the prodigious distances defined by the stars, and accentuated the tremendous spirit of loneliness that slept like a presence in that wide region of sea and air.

There had not been a stir of wind all day; not the faintest breathing of breeze had tarnished the sea down to the hour of midnight, when, feeling weary, I withdrew to my cabin. I slept well, spite of the heat and the cockroaches, and rose at 7. I found the steward in the cabin. His face wore a look of concern, and on seeing me he instantly exclaimed:

"The captain seems very ill, sir. Might you know anything of physio? Neither Mr. Perkins or me can make out what's the matter."

"I know nothing of physio," I answered, "but I'll look in on him."

I stepped to his door, knocked and entered. Captain Cayzer lay in a bunk under a middling sized porthole; the cabin was full of the morning light. I started and stood at gaze, scarce crediting my sight, so shocked and astonished was I by the dreadful change which had happened in the night in the poor man's appearance. His face was blue, and I remarked a cadaverous sinking in of the eyeballs; the lips were livid, the hands likewise blue, but strangely wrinkled like a washerwoman's. On seeing me he had asked, in a husky, whispering voice for a drink of water. I handed him a full panikin, which he drained feverishly, and then began to moan and cry out, making some weak, miserable efforts to rub first one arm, then the other, then his legs.

The steward stood in the doorway. I turned to him sensible that my face was ashen, and asked some question. I then said: "Where is Mr. Perkins?"

He was on deck. I bade the steward attend to the captain and passed through the hatch to the quarter deck, where I found the mate.

"Do you know that the captain is very ill?" said I.

"Do I know it, sir? Why, yes. I've been sitting by him chafing his limbs and giving him water to drink, and attending to him in other ways. What is it, d'ye know, sir?"

"Cholera!" said I.

"Oh, my God, I hope not!" he exclaimed. "How could it be cholera? How could cholera come aboard?"

"A friend of mine died of cholera at Rangoon when I was there," said I. "I recognize the looks and will swear to the symptoms."

"But how could it have come aboard?" he exclaimed in a voice low but agitated.

My eyes, as he asked the question, were upon the raft. I started and cried, "Is that thing still there?"

"Ay," said the mate, "we haven't budged a foot all night."

The suspicion rushed upon me while I looked at the raft, and run my eyes over

the bright hot morning sky and the burnished surface of sea, sheeting into dimness in the mists junction of heaven and water.

"I shouldn't be surprised," said I, "to discover that we brought the cholera aboard with us yesterday from the dead man's raft yonder."

"How is cholera to be caught in that fashion?" exclaimed Mr. Perkins, pale and a bit wild in his way of staring at me.

"We may have brought the poison aboard in the parcel of books."

"Is cholera to be caught so?"

"Undoubtedly. The disease may be propagated by human intercourse. Why not then by books which have been handled by cholera poisoned people?"

"No man among us is safe, then, now?" cried the mate.

"I'm no doctor," said I; "but I know this, that poisons such as scarlet fever, glanders and so on may retain their properties in a dormant state for years. I've heard tell of scores of instances of cholera being propagated through articles of dress. Depend upon it," said I, "that we brought the poison aboard with us yesterday from the accursed death raft yonder."

"Aren't the books in the Captain's cabin?" said the mate.

"Are they?"

"He took them below yesterday, sir."

"The sooner they're overboard the better," I exclaimed, and returned to the cabin.

I went to the captain and found the steward rubbing him. The disease appeared to be doing its work with horrible rapidity; the eyes were deeply sunk and red; every feature had grown sharp and pinched as after a long, wasting illness; the complexion was thick and muddy. Those who have watched beside cholera know that terrific changes may take place in a few minutes. I cast my eyes about for the parcel of books, and, spying it, took a stick from a corner of the berth, hooked up the parcel, and, passing it through the open porthole, shook it overboard.

The captain followed my movements with a languid rolling of his eyes, but spoke not, though he groaned often and frequently cried out. I could not in the least imagine what was proper to be done. His was the most important life on board the ship, and yet I could only look on and helplessly watch him expire.

He lived till the evening, and seldom spoke save to call upon God to release him. I had found an opportunity to tell him that he was ill of the cholera, and explained how it happened that the horrible distemper was on board, for I was absolutely sure we had brought it with us in that parcel of books; but his anguish was so keen, his death so close to him, that I cannot be sure he understood me. He died shortly after 7 o'clock, and I have since learned that that time is one of the critical hours in cholera.

When the captain was dead I went to the mate and advised him to cast the body overboard at once. He called to some of the hands. They brought the body out just as the poor fellow had died, and, securing a weight to the feet, they lifted the corpse over the rail and dropped it. No burial service was read. We were all too panic stricken for reverence. We got rid of the body quickly, the men handling the case as though they felt the death in it stealing into them through their fingers—hoping and praying that with it the cholera would go. It was almost dark when this hurried funeral was ended. I stood beside the mate looking round the sea for the shadow of wind in any quarter. The boatswain, who had been one of the men that handled the body, came up to us.

"Ain't there nothing to be done with the corpse out there?" he exclaimed, pointing with a square hand to the raft. "The men are agreed that there'd better be no wind whilst that there dead blackie keeps afloat. And ain't he enough to make a disease of the atmosphere itself from horizon to horizon?"

I waited for the mate to answer. He said, gloomily: "I'm of the poor captain's mind. You'll need to make something fast to the body to sink it. Who's to handle it? I'll ask no man to do what I wouldn't do myself, and rat me if I'd do that!"

"We brought the poison aboard by visiting the raft, ho'sun!" said I. "Best leave the thing alone. The corpse cannot corrupt the air, as you suppose, though the imagination's nigh as bad as the reality," said I, spitting.

"If there's any of them game to sink the shing may they do it," said the boatswain, "for if there's a breeze of wind to come while it's there—"

"Chaw!" said the mate. "But try 'em, if you will. They may take the boat when the moon's up, should there come no wind first."

An hour later the steward told me that two of the sailors were seized with cramps and convulsions. After this no more was said about taking the boat and sinking the body. The mate went into the fore-castle. On his return he begged me to go and look at the men.

"Better make sure that it's cholera with them too, sir," said he. "You know the signs;" and folding his arms, he leaned against the bulwarks in a posture of profound dejection.

I went forward and descended the fore-castle, and found myself in a small cave. The heat was overpowering. There was no air to pass through the little hatch; the place was dimly lighted by an evil smelling lamp hanging upon a beam; but, poor as the illumination was, I could see by it, and when I looked at the two men and spoke to them I saw how it was, and came away sick at heart and half dead with the hot, foul air of the fore-castle, and in deepest distress of mind, moreover, though perceiving that the two men had formed a part of the crew of the boat when we visited the raft.

One died at 6 o'clock next morning and the other at noon, but before this second man was dead three others had been attacked and one of them was the mate. And still never a breath of air stirred the silver surface of the sea.

The mate was a strong man, and his fear of death made the conflict dreadful to behold. I was paralyzed at first by the suddenness of the thing and the tremendous character of our calamity, and, never doubting that I must speedily prove a victim as being one who had gone in the boat, I cast myself down upon the sofa in the cabin and there sat, watching for the first signal of pain, sometimes praying, or striving to pray, and seeking hard to accustom my mind to the fate I regarded as inevitable. But a keen and biting sense of my cowardice came to my rescue. I sprang to my feet and went to the mate's berth, and nursed him till he died, which was shortly

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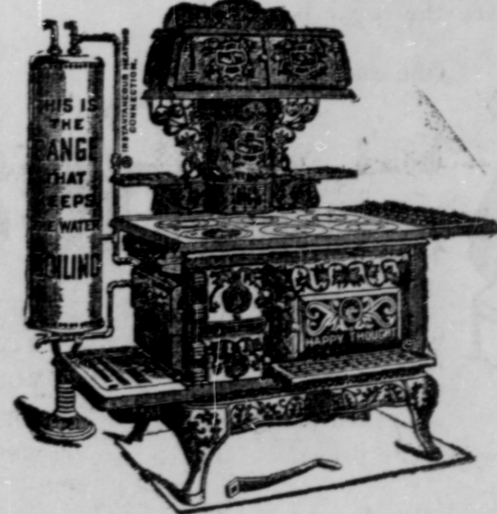
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