

Trenery's command to her ocean grave. Darkness, painful by contrast with the lurid flames, fell over the glassy sea. The stars looked down sorrowfully upon one more ocean tragedy.

Suddenly the voice of Able-seaman Laverty came out of the darkness:—

"Cap'n, sorr, can I be havin' a dhrink o' water? Me throat is surely parched wi' smoke."

The captain brushed some moisture from his eyes, and once more took up his ceaseless battle with circumstance:—

"Water? Ah, water. . . Mr. Driscoll, you'd better see to it. . . We must be very careful. Perhaps a small sup all round—after all that smoke and fire. . ."

Driscoll muttered an assent, and groped in the bottom of the boat, and in doing so came in contact with the cook, who was crouching there. He gave the cook a vicious kick and hissed at him:

"Get out o' that! Get forrard, you black swine—right in the nose of her—and stay there."

"Muttering, the cook went forward to the bows. Driscoll found the two water-breakers, flung in anyhow in the panic. As he laid his hand upon them, his heart missed a couple of beats, and all the blood in his body seemed to pause. He remembered—too late! While the boat was being painted out, he had ordered the breakers to be emptied of fresh water—which had got foul—and to be filled with salt water, to keep them tight under the tropic sun.

"We've no fresh water!" cried Driscoll, in a voice of agony. "No water. . . ! Only—salt! God Almighty. . . !"

Captain Trenery swallowed hard. "We must hope for rain and a passing ship," he said, trying to speak steadily. He sought to bring a note of confidence into his voice—but failed miserably.

It was the evening of the third day after the catastrophe, but an eternity of suffering had passed, and except for the three notches which the nigger cook had cut upon a thwart at each sunset, time had ceased to exist.

It had gone hardly with the occupants of the boat. By day the sun had blazed pitilessly down upon them from a cloudless sky, so that they almost felt the moisture, life itself, being dragged from them slowly and painfully. A dead calm had fallen upon the face of the sea, so that it seemed like a crucible of molten metal, radiating waves of shimmering heat. By night, the dew had fallen upon them, and, at first, they had licked the timbers of the boat, and sucked their clothes in their attempts to assuage the pangs of thirst. But after the second day, lips and tongues refused to perform their offices.

From the first, the whites had huddled together in the stern-sheets of the boat. There was no wind to sail, no land within rowing distance. There was nothing to do but wait.

The nigger had perched himself in the bows, as far from the others as possible, for the captain had been the first to collapse and Driscoll had taken charge.

So the whites rigged up a sort of awning for themselves with the otherwise useless sail, but with the sea like a mirror and the

sun almost vertical at noon, it was of little use.

At first the cook, by signs and gestures, and little scraps of almost unintelligible English, had tried to reason with his ship-mates. More than once he had tried to join them in the after-end of the boat, but they had repulsed him with curses at first, and when articulate speech failed them, with snarls and blows which grew feebler and feebler.

What did the sun matter to a perishing nigger? The smell of him was bad enough at the best of times. . . .

So he had perched himself on the casing of the forward air-tank, where he sat cross-legged, with arms folded, like some heathen Joss upon a pedestal, and watched. God knows from what generations of savage ancestors he had inherited his powers of endurance, his capacity to suffer! But at the end of that third terrible day, he alone was in full possession of all his faculties.

In various attitudes and stages of collapse the other survivors lay about the stern-sheets.

Mr. Driscoll, whose last conscious words had been a curse hurled at a nigger who didn't need water to keep his animal body and soul together, lay face downwards in the bottom of the boat, heedless of the salt water which swashed mournfully over the clinker-built planks as the boat rocked. The captain lay, face upwards in the stern, breathing still, but inert. "Cockney" sprawled sideways, with his head hanging over the gunwale and nodding oddly as the boat rose and fell in the send of the oily swell.

All that day he had been muttering and grimacing at his image reflected in the sea. At nightfall both his incoherent muttering and his grimacings had ceased. The carpenter, a grim, shrivelled old Swede, sat huddled up against the tank-casings. He was conscious still, but incapable of movement or speech. Of all that sorry crew, Laverty alone had rivalled the nigger in powers of endurance, but he, also, was far spent. Still, he sat there in the stern, glaring with implacable enmity at the black man who had outstayed him, and the other white men, in the dreadful combat with exhaustion and death.

In the bows the nigger sat immobile, conserving his strength; watching, with hooded eyes, the man who had done more than all the rest to make his life in the Longada a foretaste of wrath to come; casting, now and then, a quick glance round the darkling sea. He rose unsteadily to his feet, then suddenly pointed with his arm towards the horizon where it was still flushed with the afterglow of the sun which had that moment set. With an effort, Laverty turned his head, but from his sitting posture he could see nothing but sky and sea.

With a supreme effort of will Laverty struggled to his feet, and stood swaying dangerously on the after-thwart. Then he saw, above the horizon's sharp rim, the sails of a ship, shimmering with the colors of the sunset. The ship was, perhaps, only four miles distant, yet the gulf which separated her from the boat was as wide, in effect, as if she had been a star.

Night was falling, rushing up from the sea. By morning that ship might well have "ghosted," on the flap of her sails, out of sight; or, even if she happened to close, and sight the boat at dawn, she would find—only a perishing nigger, and some white men who had died of thirst. All this flashed through Laverty's mind as he stood looking over the impassable gulf which separated him and his dying companions from salvation. He burst into terrible laughter which tore his swollen throat. . . .

The nigger began to make his way aft, dragging himself painfully over the intervening thwarts. As he came he made signs as of a man drinking, tried to utter some words in an unknown tongue. Panic seized Laverty; his mind, already wandering in strange whorls, saw menace in the approach of the black man he had used so ill. He made a feeble gesture to the cook to stand back, to stay in his own part of the boat. But the cook still came on, and in his eyes there was a ravenous look.

Laverty croaked out some gibberish about a spring of fresh water which he saw bubbling up alongside the boat. It was only the eddy caused by some big fish breaking surface: a shark, perhaps. Several had been waiting patiently. Once more Laverty laughed, clutching his throat as he did so. Then he tipped over sideways into the water.

So, at last, the nigger reached the stern-sheets of the boat, and there was none to say him nay. He stepped over the prostrate form of Mr. Driscoll. He bent down and fumbled with the button which closed the door of the stern-sheet locker.

Uttering a whistling sound which was only half human, he flung himself down upon his stomach, thrust his arm into the locker, and dragged forth a curious object. It was the big, square kettle from the Longada's galley, and it was full to the brim with fresh water.

He thrust the sooty spout between his cracked lips. . . . Then he turned his attention to the captain and the carpenter.

At dawn the following morning, the mate of the British barque, Sierra Sanada, homeward bound, sighted a ship's life-boat. Had it not been for the fact that the boat's sail was hoisted and waving like a flag, the mate might never have seen her.

Investigation proved her to contain the survivors of the ship Longada. The survivors were three in number: the captain, the carpenter, and a nigger of sorts who seemed little the worse for the terrible ordeal which he had been through. There were two dead men in the boat.

Asked, later, how it came about that men had perished of thirst, and yet there had been water in the boat when she was picked up, the ex-captain of the Longada—still in an exhausted state—could only shake his head in the direction of the nigger who had refused to leave his side since the rescue.

Kindly, but searchingly, the master of the Sierra Sanada questioned the black man. But the man had very little English, and it was—the master said—impossible to fathom what was in his mind.

A. H. Fitzgerald

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