

# THE WRECK OF THE MASCOT

By FREDERIC VAN KENNELER DEY.  
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THE large fore and aft sails of a three-masted schooner swung lazily to starboard, half filled with wind, and the graceful craft glided from the harbor of Batavia, in the island of Java, toward the sea. She was the schooner Mascot, British, Liverpool, Captain Loomis, laden with coffee, and had cleared for Philadelphia, with commission to touch at Samoa and at Buenos Ayres en route. On board were two men who for months had been awaiting an opportunity to ship aboard a seaworthy vessel of any description, for the bark that had brought them to that far corner of the world, one as master and the other as mate, had been destroyed by fire while lying in the harbor, and with it had been burned everything they possessed.

Batavia had not been a pleasant place in which to loiter during those blistering midsummer days. The humidity plagued rarely violently. Men and women natives, nearly all, to be sure—dropped dead in the streets all about without warning. Business was at a standstill. Ships bound in observed the warning signals and scudded seaward again without dropping anchor, and it had seemed as if the two sailors were fated to remain there always until the Mascot poked her nose through the morning mists one day in August and came to anchor off the Kraaitind, a meaningless name for a detached wharf which lies about 20 fathoms off the western extremity of the harbor. With the schooner came hope, and the two men lost no time in boarding her and finding that she was short-handed. They were readily accepted by the bluff and hearty master, one as mate and the other as able seaman.

"Afraid of the plague?" shouted Captain Loomis when, before leaving the wharf, they warned him of the danger which threatened all who anchored in the harbor of Batavia. "God bless you, lads, it is everywhere this voyage. It's the lubberly plague that has made me short-handed. Both my mates and two of my men have gone under and been shotted home, but I reckon the rest of us are drop-proof. Come aboard, come aboard, lads; if you want to sign articles, I'm your man. Are you Englishmen?"

"No, sir; Americans," replied one of them. "That is, my friend here is really a Norwegian, Thorngesen by name. I was master and his mate of the bark Schuykill of Philadelphia, burned in this harbor eight weeks ago. My name is Craddock."

"And you wish to ship with me, eh?"

"That we do, sir."

The arrangement was speedily concluded. Craddock became first mate of the schooner, and the gigantic Norwegian gladly accepted a place in the forecastle. The Mascot had arrived from Sumatra (where one of her crew had contracted the plague) in ballast, and her captain was determined as soon as he could take on a cargo of coffee to slip his cable and be off. Fate willed, however, that he should clear in due form of law, and so the day came when the schooner put to sea. Her course was laid through the tortuous sea of Java, toward the Torres strait, and thence across the Coral sea, between the New Hebrides and the Santa Cruz islands, to Samoa.

For a week all went well. Then, without warning, that terrible palsy which precedes the relentless stroke of the plague seized the captain in its awful grasp, and in two hours he was a corpse. During the succeeding night a sailor perished in the forecastle; another followed at midday, and still another ere the sun had set again, and on the seventh day after the death of the captain Craddock and Thorngesen found themselves adrift and alone on all who had sailed out of the harbor of Batavia aboard the schooner Mascot 14 days ago.

They were at that time about 80 miles to the eastward of Torres strait, for the schooner was slow, and she had been several times becalmed. They consulted long and earnestly regarding the best course to pursue now that they were alone aboard a vessel much too bulky for two men to handle in anything more than a lazy breeze. To turn back was out of the question, since what little wind there was in those latitudes at that season of the year was always contrary, and besides, they had experienced quite enough of Batavia. It was possible that they might make an Australian port if they could succeed in crossing the Coral sea and striking the northern arm of the south equatorial drift which makes to the southward on either side of the southern Australia current, by which, for several hundred miles, it is divided in twain. On the other hand, if they could succeed in crossing the Coral sea without accident they would be much nearer Samoa, and—well, they tossed a coin and decided upon the original destination.

Neither had experienced any symptoms of the plague, and both believed themselves exempt. They, however, took the precaution to thoroughly fumigate the schooner in the hope that they might speak some craft which would afford them assistance.

They passed through Torres strait and out upon the Coral sea, and for days and days they floated along in a dead calm—days which lengthened into weeks until they almost ceased to keep note of the flight of time nor bothered themselves with the customary nautical observations at a time when latitude and longitude could change only by so small a fraction that it became a seemingly useless task. Time enough to take their bearings when there was breeze enough to render them valuable, they thought. But they forgot or they did not know the influence of the counter currents, influenced by sudden and fierce tempests and by submarine convulsions which abound in that region.

Experienced sailors both, everything on board was prepared for emergencies. Axes were lashed within easy reach of the binnacle, where they might be seized upon and used at a moment's notice should one of those

sudden tempests descend upon them unawares. Even the mast balyards were unfastened and led to the deck, and the stayforesail and the two jibs were furled and hoisted aloft, despite the intense heat, they fastened the hatches for rough weather and so had everything in readiness for a hurricane.

"We ought to be long into Liverpool, where the Liverpool Crank," said the confident Norwegian, one evening when they were sweeping their pipes on the after deck. "There was not a breath of air stirring and had not been for weeks, and already they were more than three weeks out from Batavia."

"We cannot take her three fathoms without wind," replied Craddock testily.

"But that will come after awhile," laughed Thorngesen.

"Aye, that it will—too much of it. It does come, I fear, Ralph. The devil has been in this voyage from the start. During all the 29 years that we have shipped together, we have never had such an experience as this one. It all comes of our giving up steam and taking to wind jamming again, because we thought that we could make a fortune with the Schuykill and quit the sea. The sea will never permit us to quit her, Ralph; mind that. We are under a life contract to her. The burning of the bark proved that."

Thorngesen laughed aloud.

"In the doldrums, eh, Crad? Cheer up, mate; we're together, anyhow. We have plenty to eat and drink, a place to sleep, the weather is warm, and—I say, Craddock, when did you take an observation?"

"I don't remember. A week or more ago. It is on the log."

"We have drifted some since then."

"Naturally. I'll take another tomorrow."

"Well, it's your watch on deck, and I'll turn in."

The Norwegian nodded and, whistling gaily, for nothing seemed capable of dampening his spirits, went below.

At midnight Craddock called him and took his trick in the cabin.

The Norwegian nodded at his post. He threw himself upon a coil of rope near the wheel, yawning sleepily and with one last glance at the starlit sky closed his eyes in slumber. He had done it night after night. What use was there in keeping watch over the deserted sea where never a sail nor a puff of wind was evident?

Two hours later away off toward the southeast, seemingly out of the sea, appeared a cloud. It rose and spread and grew, becoming denser and blacker as it soared toward the zenith, driving onward in the direction of the becalmed schooner with frightful rapidity, muttering ominously like a huge beast charging upon suddenly discovered prey.

With a rush and a roar it descended. The schooner heeled over on her beam end. The Norwegian was flung like a shuttle into the sea, scuttled, strangled, bleeding, senseless. There came a snapping and then a crashing like the booming of heavy guns, and the three masts, one after another, went by the boards. Huge seas which had leaped up out of the ocean at the call of the tempest came tumbling and pounding and beating over the ill-fated craft, tearing away the wreckage by a fortunate circumstance and thus permitting the hull to half right itself.

Then out through the confused mass of ropes and spars and stays and shrouds leaped Craddock. He seized an axe and felt his way through the intense darkness from place to place.

"Afraid of the plague?" shouted Captain Loomis.

striking here, cutting there, with every stroke releasing the vessel of part of the weight she was dragging and which threatened to accomplish her utter destruction. At last in one of the vivid flashes of lightning he discovered his friend wedged in between the broken binnacle and the port rail. By exerting almost superhuman effort he succeeded in dragging him aft, and there, after lashing himself and the Norwegian at the wheel, he seized the spokes and slowly but surely shifted the rudder until the schooner flew dead before the wind, traveling with frightful velocity, a dismantled, useless thing, with the wind howling over her and the boiling, seething water drenching her from end to end.

A blacker night there never was. It was as though blindness had descended upon the world, and Craddock set his teeth, clung to the wheel and hoped against hope that in the maddened rush of the disabled vessel no rocky reef might loom up out of the night to check her in her wild career.

Later—and the time seemed interminable to Craddock—he heard the voice of his friend calling to him out of the darkness. Consciousness had returned to him. He was not dead, and presently they stood side by side at the wheel, four hands grasping the spokes, for it was more than two hands could do to hold them steady. Conversation was impossible, for the roaring of the tempest annihilated every other sound. The battered hatches kept the water out of the schooner's hold; otherwise she would have filled at the first onslaught of the wind. By and by Thorngesen leaned nearer to Craddock and, placing his lips close against his friend's ear, shouted:

"Schooner Jonah, Captain Craddock, with a cargo of fools, cleared from Batavia bound for ladies, eh, Crad? And well!"

The Norwegian never completed that

sentence. There was a grinding crash, followed by a terrific shock, and the schooner seemed to leap out of the sea, up and over some obstacle, and impounded her way. The wheel and the posts to which the two men were lashed were torn from the deck and with their human impetuosity, as if forced against an invisible wall, they were hurled forward and backward in the midst of a mad, mad, mad dancing broken in a moment. Debris of small boats and general destruction. But the hull of the vessel held tenaciously together, and she was not scattered. The wind howled in unceasingly overhead; around loomed the tops of the main waters piled up higher as they dashed against unseen rocks, only to be hurled helplessly back again. But the mighty waves did not sweep over the schooner's deck. Only the spray and eddies of waves thrown by the wind reached her. The schooner, for the first time, had been driven bodily from her native element and dry upon a beach. A reef that was not more than 200 yards from her own bulk.

Craddock and the Norwegian were jammed beneath a mass of wreckage, comparatively unharmed, but unable for the time being to extricate themselves; and so, in momentary expectation of death, they remained until the wind and the sea subsided, and the sun came up out of the east as suddenly as though no havoc had been wrought since he last had seen them both at night.

There is no calumny like unto that which succeeds a storm, and in the south sea it is difficult at such a time to realize that the tempest has come and gone. Only the wide expanse of sea to the south and west with its long, unbroken, rolling swells and the corpse of the schooner lying full two fathoms out of reach of the summit of the highest wave of the restless water, mingled, broken, dripping, gave evidence of the terrible war of the elements that had raged around them.

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