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THE SHADOW LINE

Afterword by Robert Hampson

THE GOOD READER

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MA BIBLIOTHÈQUE

What was from the first the most permanent and the most intimate part of me, the lever whose incessant movements controlled all the rest, was my belief in the philosophic richness and beauty of the book I was reading, and my desire to appropriate these to myself, whatever the book might be.

Marcel Proust

I COULD NO LONGER TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PLAIN AND shadow. The wide eyes of a young girl looked at me. In one hand she held a rosary, in the other a cloth. "I'm the new captain," I said quietly. "Send for the mate." I sat on the ground, cross legged. The plain stretched around me, a measureless flatland of sand and stones interspersed with basins of various sizes and depths, and without roads or shelters. In the distance a shadow wiped out the ground as it passed. I looked at the sun, and then examined the earth under my seat for any sign of reflection. No luck — we were stranded here until the plain's echoes began to sound freely again. I inspected the soles of my shoes and studied the harness of my bundle for wear and tear. We had a long march ahead of us, and it would not do to start out with our equipment in a state of deterioration. When the mate arrived he sat down beside me. His long, red beard struck me as pugnacious, but I greeted him with perfect friendliness.^[1] There was something reluctant and at the same time alarming in his bearing. His face appeared pale, meagre, even haggard, and his green eyes remained glued to

1. But I showed nothing of it as I rose leisurely (it had to be leisurely) and greeted him with perfect friendliness.

There was something reluctant and at the same time attentive in his bearing. His name was Burns. We left the cabin and went round the ship together. His face in the full light of day appeared very pale, meagre, even haggard. Somehow I had a delicacy as to looking too often at him; his eyes, on the contrary, remained fairly glued on my face. They were greenish and had an expectant expression. He answered all my questions readily enough, but my ear seemed to catch a tone of unwillingness.

my face. Almost against my will I assumed a moody gravity: "I see you have kept things in very good order, mate." In answer he only blinked at me. What on earth did he mean? I fell back on a question which had been in my thoughts for a long time — the most natural question on the lips of anyone travelling through the plain: "I suppose we're here, eh?" Now a question like this might have been answered normally, either in accents of apologetic sorrow or with a visibly suppressed pride.^[2] But the mate found another way, a way of his own which had, at all events the merit of saving his breath. He only frowned. I waited while a shadow rolled across the horizon, blotting out everything in its path. "What's the matter?" I asked. "Can't you tell me anything

2. Now a question like this might have been answered normally, either in accents of apologetic sorrow or with a visibly suppressed pride, in a "I don't want to boast, but you shall see" sort of tone. There are sailors, too, who would have been roughly outspoken: "Lazy brute," or openly delighted: "She's a flyer." Two ways, if four manners.

But Mr. Burns found another way, a way of his own which had, at all events, the merit of saving his breath, if no other.

Again he did not say anything. He only frowned. And it was an angry frown. I waited. Nothing more came.

"What's the matter? ... Can't you tell after being nearly two years in the ship?" I addressed him sharply.

He looked as startled for a moment as though he had discovered my presence only that very moment. But this passed off almost at once. He put on an air of indifference. But I suppose he thought it better to say something. He said that a ship needed, just like a man, the chance to show the best she could do, and that this ship had never had a chance since he had been on board of her. Not that he could remember. The last captain. . . . He paused.

after being so long on the plain?" He put on an air of indifference and stared at his feet. I asked where the late captain had been buried. "A wadi in the plain edging onto a salt flat," he said, "A sandy grave."^[3] But he did not stop at that though, indeed, he may have wished to. He addressed himself to his feet, so that to me he had the appearance of a man talking in solitude. He told me that the late captain had been about sixty-five iron gray, hard-faced, obstinate, and uncommunicative, and that he used to keep everyone loafing around for inscrutable reasons. "Sometimes he would look out through the plain at night," he said, "And he would raise a flag or shoot off a flare God only knows why or wherefore then play on the violin for hours till daybreak perhaps."^[4] In fact, the late captain spent most of his time day or night playing the violin. That was when the fit took him. It came to this, that the mate had mustered his courage one day and remonstrated earnestly with the captain. Neither he nor anyone else could get a wink of sleep in their watches over the plain for the noise. And how could they be expected to keep awake while on duty? The answer of that stern man was that if he and the other

3. A roomy grave; a sufficient answer. But the mate, overcoming visibly something within him something like a curious reluctance to believe in my advent (as an irrevocable fact, at any rate), did not stop at that though, indeed, he may have wished to do so.

4. He was a peculiar man of sixty-five about iron gray, hard-faced, obstinate, and uncommunicative. He used to keep the ship loafing at sea for inscrutable reasons. Would come on deck at night sometimes, take some sail off her, God only knows why or wherefore, then go below, shut himself up in his cabin, and play on the violin for hours

crew members didn't like the noise, they were welcome to pack up their bundles and leave. When this alternative was offered they happened to be miles into the plain, and they didn't know where to go. The mate at this point looked at me with an air of curiosity. I began to think that my predecessor was a remarkably peculiar old man. But I had to hear stranger things yet. The late captain took them deeper into the plain, all the while playing on his violin or, at any rate, making a continuous noise on it. When he appeared in front of the crew he would not speak and not always answer when spoken to. It was obvious that he was ill in some mysterious manner, and beginning to break up. As the days went by the sounds of the violin became less and less loud, till at last only a feeble scratching would meet the mate's ear. One afternoon in perfect desperation the mate made such a scene, tearing his hair and shouting such horrid imprecations that he cowed the contemptuous

till daybreak perhaps. In fact, he spent most of his time day or night playing the violin. That was when the fit took him. Very loud, too.

It came to this, that Mr. Burns mustered his courage one day and remonstrated earnestly with the captain. Neither he nor the second mate could get a wink of sleep in their watches below for the noise... And how could they be expected to keep awake while on duty? He pleaded. The answer of that stern man was that if he and the second mate didn't like the noise, they were welcome to pack up their traps and walk over the side. When this alternative was offered the ship happened to be six hundred miles from the nearest land.

Mr. Burns at this point looked at me with an air of curiosity. I began to think that my predecessor was a remarkably peculiar old man.

spirit of the sick man. The water-bottles were low and they had not gained five miles across the plain in a fortnight. It was like fighting desperately toward destruction. So the mate took over guiding the crew. He set them on a new course, approached the captain, composed, but resolute. "I've set another route," he said. The old man gave him a look of savage spite, and said: "If I had my wish, none of you would ever return. And I hope you won't." His head was not gone then, the mate assured me excitedly, "He meant every word of it. Such was practically his last speech." No connected sentence passed the late captain's lips afterward. That night he used the last of his strength to bury his violin in the plain. No one had actually seen him in the act, but after the late captain had died, the mate couldn't find the thing anywhere. The empty case was very much in evidence, but the violin was clearly not to be found.^[5] And where else could it have gone to but into the plain? "Buried his violin in the plain!" I exclaimed. "He did," cried the mate. "And it's my belief he would have tried to take the whole of us down with him if it had been in human power. He never meant us to have another round of echoes again. He had made up his mind to cut adrift from everything. That's what it was. He didn't care for his crew, or for rebirth, or for making a passage or anything. He meant us to have gone wandering about the plain till he lost us

5. "The empty case was very much in evidence, but the fiddle was clearly not in the ship. And where else could it have gone to but overboard?"

"Threw his violin overboard!" I exclaimed.

"He did," cried Mr. Burns excitedly. "And it's my belief he would have tried to take the ship down with him if it had been in human power. He never meant her to see home again."

all.” He told me how the crew had mustered around their sick captain’s sleeping mat to say good bye. I imagined that strange ceremony: the bare-headed crew members crowding shyly around, uncomfortable rather than moved, shirts open on sunburnt necks and shoulders, weather-beaten faces, and all staring at their captain with the same grave and expectant expression. After waiting a moment, the mate motioned for the crew to leave, but he detained the two eldest women to stay with the sick man while he fetched his sextant and took the sun. It was getting toward noon and he was anxious to obtain a good observation. When he returned he found the women gone, and the late captain lying easy on his mat. He had died while the mate was taking his observation. As near noon as possible. The mate sighed, and looked like a man who had escaped great danger. I might have tried to press him further if I had not been busy with my own sensations. I was now the person in command. My actions could not be like those of any other member of the crew. In that community I stood in a class all by myself. I was brought there to guide by an agency as remote from the people and as inscrutable almost to them as the Grace of God. And like a member of a dynasty, feeling a semi-mystical bond with those who had already finished their task, I was profoundly shocked by my immediate predecessor. That man had been in all essentials but his age just such another man as me. Yet the end of his guidance was a complete act of treason, the betrayal of an imperative tradition. It appeared that even in the plain someone could become the victim of evil spirits. I felt on my face the breath of the unknown powers that shape our destinies.[6] Later that day we were visited by the doctor of the plain. A doctor is humane by definition.

But that man was so in reality. [7] He looked after the crew's health, which generally was poor, and trembling, as it were, on the verge of a break-up. Yes, the crew ailed. And yet, I had never seen such a steady company. The doctor remarked that I seemed to have a most respectable lot of crew. Care was taken to expose them as little as possible to the whims of the plain its random interruptions and capricious shadows, its unpredictable lacunae and moments of unforeseen oblivion. Sometimes the shadows

6. That man had been in all essentials but his age just such another man as myself. Yet the end of his life was a complete act of treason, the betrayal of a tradition which seemed to me as imperative as any guide on earth could be. It appeared that even at sea a man could become the victim of evil spirits. I felt on my face the breath of unknown powers that shape our destinies.

Not to let the silence last too long I asked Mr. Burns if he had written to his captain's wife. He shook his head. He had written to nobody.

In a moment he became sombre. He never thought of writing. It took him all his time to watch incessantly the loading of the ship by a rascally Chinese stevedore. In this Mr. Burns gave me the first glimpse of the real chief mate's soul which dwelt uneasily in his body.

He mused, then hastened on with gloomy force.

"Yes! The captain died as near noon as possible. I looked through his papers in the afternoon. I read the service over him at sunset and then I stuck the ship's head north and brought her in here. I brought her in."

7. It was the only humane speech I used to hear at that time. And it came from a doctor, appropriately enough. A doctor is humane by definition. But that man was so in reality. His speech was not professional. I was not ill. But other people were, and that was the reason of his visiting the ship.

arrived as big blocks of nothing, following long periods of relatively normal experience. Normal, that is, for the plain. Other times they came in quick succession staccato blanks firing through our consciousness. We could sometimes see them lurking or shunting around in the distance, but they arrived unexpectedly, and left without warning, leaving us to resume our journey in mid-thought, mid-action. The crew were employed with light chores

He was the doctor of our Legation and, of course, of the Consulate, too. He looked after the ship's health, which generally was poor, and trembling, as it were, on the verge of a break-up. Yes. The men ailed. And thus time was not only money, but life as well.

I had never seen such a steady ship's company. As the doctor remarked to me: "You seem to have a most respectable lot of seamen." Not only were they consistently sober, but they did not even want to go ashore. Care was taken to expose them as little as possible to the sun. They were employed on light work under the awnings. And the humane doctor commended me.

"Your arrangements appear to me to be very judicious, my dear Captain."

It is difficult to express how much that pronouncement comforted me. The doctor's round, full face framed in a light-coloured whisker was the perfection of a dignified amenity. He was the only human being in the world who seemed to take the slightest interest in me. He would generally sit in the cabin for half an hour or so at every visit.

I said to him one day:

"I suppose the only thing now is to take care of them as you are doing till I can get the ship to sea?"

He inclined his head, shutting his eyes under the large spectacles, and murmured:

"The sea . . . undoubtedly."

to keep them busy when we were not on the move. "Your arrangements appear judicious," said the doctor.[8] It is difficult to express how much that pronouncement comforted me. His face, framed by round spectacles, was the perfection of dignified amenity. I said to him one day: "I suppose the only thing now is to take care of them as you are doing till I can get through the plain?" He inclined his head, shutting his eyes under his large spectacles, and murmured: "The plain ... undoubtedly." The first of our crew to be knocked over by illness was the steward. He died

8. The first member of the crew fairly knocked over was the steward — the first man to whom I had spoken on board. He was taken ashore (with choleric symptoms) and died there at the end of a week. Then, while I was still under the startling impression of this first home-thrust of the climate, Mr. Burns gave up and went to bed in a raging fever without saying a word to anybody.

I believe he had partly fretted himself into that illness; the climate did the rest with the swiftness of an invisible monster ambushed in the air, in the water, in the mud of the river-bank. Mr. Burns was a predestined victim.

I discovered him lying on his back, glaring sullenly and radiating heat on one like a small furnace. He would hardly answer my questions, and only grumbled, "Couldn't a man take an afternoon off duty with a bad headache — for once?"

That evening, as I sat in the saloon after dinner, I could hear him muttering continuously in his room. Ransome, who was clearing the table, said to me:

"I am afraid, sir, I won't be able to give the mate all the attention he's likely to need. I will have to be forward in the galley a great part of my time."

Ransome was the cook. The mate had pointed him out to me the first day, standing on the deck, his arms crossed on his broad chest, gazing on the river.

at the end of a week. Then, while I was still under the startling impression of this first home-thrust of the disease, the mate gave up and went to his sleeping mat in a raging fever without saying a word to anybody.[9] I believe he had partly fretted himself into illness; the journey did the rest with the swiftness of an invisible monster. He was a predestined victim. I discovered him lying on his back, glaring sullenly and radiating heat like a small furnace. He would hardly answer my questions, and only grumbled. That evening after dinner I could hear him muttering, and our cook said to me: "I am afraid I won't be able to give the mate all the attention he's likely to need. I will have to cook a great part of my time." The cook stood on some gravel with his arms crossed on his broad chest. Even at a distance his well-proportioned figure made him noticeable.[10] The mate had told me that the cook was the best crewman on the plain. I expressed my surprise that in his early prime he should sign on as cook. "It's his heart," the mate had said. "There's something wrong with it. He mustn't exert himself too much or he may die of a heart attack." The cook was the only crew member whom the illness had not touched

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10. Even at a distance his well-proportioned figure,

perhaps because, carrying a deadly enemy in his breast, he watched all of his feelings and movements so closely. When one was in the secret this concentration was apparent in his manner. After the steward had died, the cook volunteered to do the double work. "I can do it all right, as long as I go about it quietly," he had assured me. But obviously he couldn't be expected to take up sick-nursing in addition to his other duties. The next day the doctor ordered the sick mate to rest on his sleeping mat. He received me there as if I had come either to gloat over an enemy or else to curry favour with a deeply wronged person. I treated him with as much kindness as I could muster. One day, suddenly, a surge of downright panic burst through the mate's illness. He managed to sit up, but only for a moment, and when he fell back I really thought that he would die there and then. The effort had exhausted him. He closed his eyes, but went on rambling in a low voice: "He'll have you, too, that late captain." He blinked his glazed eyes vacantly. "Mate," I cried, very much discomposed, "What

something thoroughly sailor-like in his poise, made him noticeable. On nearer view the intelligent, quiet eyes, a well-bred face, the disciplined independence of his manner made up an attractive personality. When, in addition, Mr. Burns told me that he was the best seaman in the ship, I expressed my surprise that in his earliest prime and of such appearance he should sign on as cook on board a ship.

"It's his heart," Mr. Burns had said. "There's something wrong with it. He mustn't exert himself too much or he may drop dead suddenly." And he was the only one the climate had not touched perhaps because, carrying a deadly enemy in his breast, he had schooled himself into a systematic control of feelings and movements.

on earth are you talking about?" He seemed to come to himself, though he was too weak to speak clearly. We could see shadows moving randomly along the skyline, blanking out sections of the plain as they passed. The doctor waited for me beside our medicine chest. Finding that I was not around, he had inspected our supply of drugs, bandages, and so on. Everything was complete and in order. I thanked him; I had just been thinking of asking him to do that very thing. When I spoke to him about the mate, he sat down by my side, and, laying his hand on my knee, begged me to think what it was I was exposing myself to. I had before me a long passage through the plain, beginning with intricate navigation through uncertain reflections and unplanned shadows, ending probably with a lot of bad weather. Could I run the risk of having to go through it single-handed, without a mate? Directing his spectacles at me like two lamps, the doctor searched the genuineness of my resolution. He opened his lips as if to argue further, but shut them again without saying anything. I had a vision so vivid of the poor mate in his exhaustion, helplessness, and anguish, that it moved me more than the reality I had come away from only an hour before. The doctor rose in his dignified simplicity and gave me a warm but solemn handshake, and then wandered off to attend to the other crew members. Later that day I watched him lope off with his leather medical bag swung over one shoulder and his tattered bedroll strapped to his back, until he disappeared behind a sand dune. If only we could travel like that, without reflections to set our direction and pace. Doctors were of course immune to the plain's randomized reflections and shadows, and were free to wander at will. About midday we rested in the heat. Watching the crew, I detected some of

the languor of the last few weeks. The first reflection would blow that away. Now the calm was complete. I was glad to catch a few smiles on those faces at which I had hardly had time to have a good look. I felt myself familiar with them and yet a little strange, like a long-lost wanderer among his kin. The cook flitted continually to and fro between his pots and pans. It was a pleasure to look at him. The man positively had grace. He alone of all the crew had not had a day's illness.^[11] But with the knowledge of that uneasy heart within his breast I could detect the concentration he put into the natural agility of his movements. It was as though he had something very fragile or very explosive to carry about his person and was all the time aware of it. I had occasion to address him once or twice. He answered me in his pleasant, quiet voice and with a faint, slightly wistful smile. After sunset ^[12] I took our position with my sextant. The darkness had risen around us like a mysterious emanation.^[13] Not a sound. We might have been a planet flying vertiginously on its appointed path in a space of infinite silence. I stood as if my sense of balance were leaving me for good. A crew member coughed, breaking the spell. I told him to report at once the slightest sign of an echo. I looked in on the mate. The man wasted away under his sheets, asserting himself by opening his eyes and even moving them in my direction. "Dead calm,

11. He alone of all the crew had not had a day's illness in port.

12. After sunset I came out on deck again to meet only a still void. The thin, featureless crust of the coast could not be distinguished. The darkness had risen around the ship like a mysterious emanation from the dumb and lonely

mate," I said. In an unexpectedly distinct voice he began a rambling speech. Its tone was very strange, not as if affected by his illness, but as if of a different nature altogether. It sounded unearthly. As to the matter, I seemed to make out that it was the fault of the "old man" — the late captain — lying dead out here in the plain with some evil intention. I laid my hand on his forehead. It was cool. He was light-headed only from extreme weakness. He sighed and I left him to his immobility. I tried to seek relief in a few hours' sleep, but almost before I closed my eyes a member of the crew came to report a slight reflection. "Enough to get under way with," he said. And it was no more than just enough. But by the time I got up I could hardly feel an echo. We seemed to stand as motionless as thirsty mud. It was impossible to distinguish land from air in this part of the plain. The very stars seemed weary of waiting for daybreak. The day came at last with a mother-of-pearl sheen at its zenith, such as I had never seen before in the

waters. I leaned on the rail and turned my ear to the shadows of the night. Not a sound. My command might have been a planet flying vertiginously on its appointed path in a space of infinite silence. I clung to the rail as if my sense of balance were leaving me for good. How absurd. I failed nervously.

13. After sunset I came out on deck again to meet only a still void. The thin, featureless crust of the coast could not be distinguished. The darkness had risen around the ship like a mysterious emanation from the dumb and lonely waters. I leaned on the rail and turned my ear to the shadows of the night. Not a sound. My command might have been a planet flying vertiginously on its appointed path in a space of infinite silence.

plain, unglowing, almost gray, with a strange reminder of high latitudes. Presently the cook brought me a cup of coffee. After I had drunk it I looked ahead, but in the still streak of very pale orange light I saw nothing. A shadow passed through us and we blanked out for some indeterminate period of time. I wandered over to the mate, who was now laid out on a stretcher, but I hesitated to speak to him till he moved his eyes. He tried to speak, but I heard no sound till I put my ear down, and caught the peevish comment: "This is crawling. No luck." I left him to whatever thoughts or fancies haunted his awful immobility. Later that morning, when relieved by another member of the crew, I threw myself on my mat and for some three hours or so I really found oblivion. It was so perfect that on waking up I wondered where I was. I beheld an unruffled, sun-smitten horizon. The horizon of a day without echoes. I could see the cook preparing dinner. He turned his head, and I asked: "What is it now?" Not expecting in the least the answer I got. It was given with that sort of contained serenity which was characteristic of the man. He told me that two of our crew members had been taken bad with fever in the night. One of them was burning and the other was shivering, but he thought that it was pretty much the same thing. I asked him if there were any reflections near us. "Can hardly say that," he said. That was it. Two crew members. One burning, one shivering. I felt a distinct reluctance to go and look at them. What was the good? Poison is poison. Fever is fever. I unpacked the portable medicine chest to prepare two doses for the ailing crew, full of faith as a man opens a miraculous shrine. The upper part was inhabited by a collection of bottles, all square-shouldered and as like each other as peas.

Under that orderly array there were two drawers, stuffed as full of things as one could imagine—paper packages, bandages, cardboard boxes. The lower of the two, in one of its compartments, contained our provision of medicine. There were five bottles, all round and all of a size. One was about a third full. The other four remained still wrapped up in paper and sealed. But I did not expect to see an envelope lying on top of them. A square envelope, belonging, in fact, to our stationery. It lay so that I could see it was not sealed, and on picking it up and turning it over I perceived that it was addressed to me.^[14] It contained a yellowed sheet of notepaper. I unfolded it with a queer sense of dealing with the uncanny, but without any excitement as people meet and do extraordinary things in a dream. “My dear Captain,” it began, but I ran to the signature. The writer was the doctor. In a large, hurried, but legible hand the good man

14. It lay so that I could see it was not closed down, and on picking it up and turning it over I perceived that it was addressed to myself. It contained a half-sheet of notepaper, which I unfolded with a queer sense of dealing with the uncanny, but without any excitement as people meet and do extraordinary things in a dream.

“My dear Captain,” it began, but I ran to the signature. The writer was the doctor. The date was that of the day on which, returning from my visit to Mr. Burns in the hospital, I had found the excellent doctor waiting for me in the cabin; and when he told me that he had been putting in time inspecting the medicine chest for me. How bizarre! While expecting me to come in at any moment he had been amusing himself by writing me a letter, and then as I came in had hastened to stuff it into the medicine-chest drawer. A rather incredible proceeding. I turned to the text in wonder. In a large, hurried, but legible hand the good,

had warned me not to put my trust in a full recovery of health for the mate. "I didn't want to add to your worries by discouraging your hopes," he wrote. "I am afraid that, medically speaking, the end of your troubles is not yet." In short, he expected me to have to fight an epidemic. Fortunately I had a good provision of medicine. I should put my trust in that, and administer it steadily, and the crew's health would certainly improve. I crumpled up the letter and rammed it into my pocket. The cook carried off two big doses to the ailing crew. As to myself, I went instead to see the mate, and to give him the news. It was impossible to say the effect it had on him. At first I thought that he was speechless. His head lay sunk in the pillow. He moved his lips enough, however, to assure me that he was getting much stronger; a statement shockingly untrue on the face of it. That afternoon I took my watch as a matter of course. [15]

sympathetic man for some reason, either of kindness or more likely impelled by the irresistible desire to express his opinion, with which he didn't want to damp my hopes before, was warning me not to put my trust in the beneficial effects of a change from land to sea. "I didn't want to add to your worries by discouraging your hopes," he wrote. "I am afraid that, medically speaking, the end of your troubles is not yet." In short, he expected me to have to fight a probable return of tropical illness. Fortunately I had a good provision of quinine. I should put my trust in that, and administer it steadily, when the ship's health would certainly improve.

15. That afternoon I took my watch as a matter of course. A great over-heated stillness enveloped the ship and seemed to hold her motionless in a flaming ambience composed in two shades of blue. Faint, hot puffs eddied nervelessly from her sails. And yet she moved. She must

A great over-heated stillness enveloped us and seemed to hold us motionless in a flaming ambience, composed in two shades of grey. Faint puffs of air drifted overhead, and we were overtaken by a shadow. In the evening, under the crude glare of his lamp, the mate seemed to have come more to the surface of his bedding. But it was not comforting in the least to hear him mutter crazily about the late captain, that old man buried in the plain, right in our way. "Are you still thinking of your late captain, mate?" I said. "I imagine the dead feel no animosity against us." He breathed out feebly. I told him not to talk, and lay my hand on his cool forehead. His words proved to me that this atrocious absurdity was rooted in the man himself and not in the disease, which, apparently, had emptied him of every power, mental and physical, except that one fixed idea. I avoided giving him any opening for conversation for the next few days and merely threw him a hasty, cheery word when passing his stretcher. Two more days passed. We had advanced a little way a very little way into the larger space of the plain. I did not know what to expect, but whatever I expected I did not expect to be beset by so many random delays.

have. For, as the sun was setting, we had drawn abreast of Cape Liant and dropped it behind us: an ominous retreating shadow in the last gleams of twilight.

In the evening, under the crude glare of his lamp, Mr. Burns seemed to have come more to the surface of his bedding. It was as if a depressing hand had been lifted off him. He answered my few words by a comparatively long, connected speech. He asserted himself strongly. If he escaped being smothered by this stagnant heat, he said, he was confident that in a very few days he would be able to come up on deck and help me. While he was speaking

But neither did I expect to find myself bound hand and foot to hopelessness. Not that the evil spell held us always motionless. Glimpses of passing reflections in the distance turned our steps here and there. And there were other sights, too, fitful and deceitful. They raised our hopes only to dash them into the bitterest disappointment, with every promise of advance ending in lost ground, expiring in sighs, dying into dumb stillness in which the reflections had it all their own way. We seemed to be at the centre of a fatal pause. And it seemed impossible to get away. More than once I would take our bearings in the fast-ebbing

I trembled lest this effort of energy should leave him lifeless before my eyes. But I cannot deny that there was something comforting in his willingness. I made a suitable reply, but pointed out to him that the only thing that could really help us was wind—a fair wind.

He rolled his head impatiently on the pillow. And it was not comforting in the least to hear him begin to mutter crazily about the late captain, that old man buried in latitude 8 d 20', right in our way—ambushed at the entrance of the Gulf.

“Are you still thinking of your late captain, Mr. Burns?” I said. “I imagine the dead feel no animosity against the living. They care nothing for them.”

“You don’t know that one,” he breathed out feebly.

“No. I didn’t know him, and he didn’t know me. And so he can’t have any grievance against me, anyway.”

“Yes. But there’s all the rest of us on board,” he insisted.

I felt the inexpugnable strength of common sense being insidiously menaced by this gruesome, by this insane, delusion. And I said:

“You mustn’t talk so much. You will tire yourself.”

“And there is the ship herself,” he persisted in a whisper.

“Now, not a word more,” I said, stepping in and laying

twilight, thinking that it was for the last time. Vain hope. [16] A night of fitful echoes would undo the gains of temporary favour, and the rising sun would make the plain look more barren, inhospitable, and grim than ever. "It's like being bewitched, upon my word," I said once to the mate, from my usual position beside his stretcher. He was sitting up, propped against his pack, progressing toward the world of the conscious. He nodded his frail and bony head in a wisely mysterious assent, and murmured something about the late captain's body standing in our way and causing us to stop and start without reason, leaving us stranded in a kind of mental blankness. "Oh, yes, I know what you mean," I said. "But you cannot expect me to believe that a dead person has the power to put out of joint the reflections of this part of the plain. Though indeed it seems to have gone utterly wrong. The reflections have got broken up into small pieces. We cannot depend upon them for five minutes together." The mate muttered that he would get up soon and see what could be done. Whether he meant this for a promise to grapple with supernatural evil I couldn't tell. At any rate, it wasn't the kind of assistance

my hand on his cool forehead. It proved to me that this atrocious absurdity was rooted in the man himself and not in the disease, which, apparently, had emptied him of every power, mental and physical, except that one fixed idea.

I avoided giving Mr. Burns any opening for conversation for the next few days. I merely used to throw him a hasty, cheery word when passing his door. I believe that if he had had the strength he would have called out after me more than once. But he hadn't the strength.

16. Vain hope.

I needed. On the other hand, I had been awake practically night and day so as to take advantage of every chance to get us a little more towards our goal. The mate, I could see, was extremely weak, and not quite rid of his delusion, which to me appeared but a symptom of his disease.[17] In any case, the hopefulness of an invalid was not to be discouraged. "You will be most welcome back with us," I said. "If you go on improving at this rate you'll be presently one of the healthiest people amongst us." This pleased him, but his extreme emaciation converted his self-satisfied smile into a ghastly exhibition of long teeth. "Aren't the crew improving?" He asked. I answered him only with a vague gesture. The fact was that disease played with us as

17. The mate, I could see, was extremely weak yet, and not quite rid of his delusion, which to me appeared but a symptom of his disease. At all events, the hopefulness of an invalid was not to be discouraged. I said:

"You will be most welcome there, I am sure, Mr. Burns. If you go on improving at this rate you'll be presently one of the healthiest men in the ship."

This pleased him, but his extreme emaciation converted his self-satisfied smile into a ghastly exhibition of long teeth under the red moustache.

"Aren't the fellows improving, sir?" he asked soberly, with an extremely sensible expression of anxiety on his face.

I answered him only with a vague gesture and went away from the door. The fact was that disease played with us capriciously very much as the winds did. It would go from one man to another with a lighter or heavier touch, which always left its mark behind, staggering some, knocking others over for a time, leaving this one, returning to another, so that all of them had now an invalidish aspect and a hunted, apprehensive look in their eyes; while Ransome and I, the only two completely untouched, went amongst

capriciously as the echoes and shadows. The illness would go from one crew member to another with a lighter or heavier touch, which always left its mark behind, staggering some, knocking others over for a time, leaving this one, returning to another, so that all of them had now an invalid's aspect and a hunted, apprehensive look in their eyes, while the cook and I, the only two completely untouched, went amongst them distributing the medicine. It was a double fight. The adverse echoes held us in front and the disease pressed on our rear, while we were continually subjected to the arbitrary waves and pauses of the shadows. I must say that the crew were very good. The constant toil of watching out for reflections they faced willingly. But all the spring was out of their limbs, and as I looked at them I could not keep from my mind the dreadful impression that they were moving in poisoned air. The mate had advanced so far as not only to be able to sit up, but even to draw up his legs. Clapping them with bony arms, like a skeleton, he emitted

them assiduously distributing quinine. It was a double fight. The adverse weather held us in front and the disease pressed on our rear. I must say that the men were very good. The constant toil of trimming yards they faced willingly. But all spring was out of their limbs, and as I looked at them from the poop I could not keep from my mind the dreadful impression that they were moving in poisoned air.

Down below, in his cabin, Mr. Burns had advanced so far as not only to be able to sit up, but even to draw up his legs. Clapping them with bony arms, like an animated skeleton, he emitted deep, impatient sighs.

"The great thing to do, sir," he would tell me on every occasion, when I gave him the chance, "the great thing is to get the ship past 8 d 20' of latitude. Once she's past that we're all right."

deep, impatient sighs. “The great thing,” he would tell me on every occasion, when I gave him the chance, “the great thing is to get us past the late captain’s grave. Once we’re past that we’ll be all right.” At first I used only to smile at him, though, God knows, I had not much heart left for smiles. But at last I lost my patience. “Oh, yes. The grave.” Then with severity: “Don’t you think, mate, it’s about time you dropped all that nonsense?” He rolled at me his deep-sunken eyes in a glance of invincible obstinacy. But for the rest he only muttered, just loud enough for me to hear, something about “Not surprised ... Find ... Play us some beastly trick yet” The sun had risen like an evil attendant in the distance. During the night we had wandered all around the compass, to what I fear must have been for the most part imaginary puffs of reflection. Then just about sunrise we got for an hour an inexplicable, steady echo, right in our teeth. There was no sense in it. It fitted neither with the season of the year nor with the experience of crew members as recorded in books, nor with the aspect of the sky. Only purposeful malevolence could account for it. It sent us travelling at a great pace away from our present course. Then, all at once, as if disdainingly to carry farther the sorry jest, the reflection dropped out completely. I lay down on my mat, not because I meant to take some rest, but simply because I couldn’t bear to look at the plain anymore. The cook arrived to give me an informal health report. “There are a good many of them middling bad this morning,” he said in a calm tone. “But only two actually who cannot walk.” I fully believed that our medicine was of very great use indeed. I believed in it. I pinned my faith to it. It would save the crew, break the spell by its healing virtue, make the lack of reflections but a passing worry

and, like a magic powder working against some mysterious malice, secure us against the evil powers of calms and pestilence. I looked upon it as more precious than gold, and unlike gold, of which there never seems to be enough, we had a sufficient store of it. I went to get some medicine with the purpose of weighing out doses. Stretching my hand with the feeling of a man reaching for an unfailing panacea, I took up a fresh bottle and unrolled the wrapper, noticing as I did so that the ends, both top and bottom, had come unsealed. There was the wrapper, the bottle, and the white powder inside. Some sort of powder. But it wasn't our medicine. One look at it was enough. I let the bottle smash on a flat rock underfoot. The stuff, whatever it was, felt gritty under the sole of my shoe. I snatched up the next bottle and then the next. One after another they fell, breaking at my feet, not because I threw them down in dismay, but because they slipped through my fingers as if this disclosure were too much for my strength. I came away from the medicine chest stunned, as if something heavy had dropped on my head. The cook, with a skillet in his hand, stared open-mouthed. I don't think that I looked wild. It is quite possible that I appeared to be in a hurry. I was certainly off my balance, a prey to impulse, for I ran over to the mate. The wildness of his aspect checked my mental disorder. He was sitting up on his stretcher with his head drooping a little sideways with complacency. He flourished, in his trembling hand, on the end of a forearm no thicker than a walking-stick, a shining pair of scissors which he tried before my very eyes to jab at his throat. "Stop!" I yelled. "Heavens! What are you doing?" But I was mistaken, for he was simply overtaxing his returning strength in a shaky attempt to clip off the thick growth of his

beard. A large towel was spread over his lap, and a shower of stiff hairs, like bits of copper wire, was descending on it at every snip of the scissors. He turned his face to me, grotesque beyond the fantasies of mad dreams, one cheek all bushy as if with a swollen flame, the other denuded and sunken, with the untouched beard asserting itself, lonely and fierce. And while he stared at me with the gaping scissors in his fingers, I shouted my discovery at him: "There's no medicine!" I heard the clatter of the scissors escaping from his hand and noted the perilous heave of his whole person over the edge of the stretcher after them. The dust of the plain filled my eyes. It was gorgeous and barren, monotonous and without hope under the empty curve of the sky.[18] The very ground seemed to hang motionless and slack. For a long time I faced an empty sky, steeped in an infinity of silence, through which the sunshine poured and flowed for some mysterious purpose.

18. The sparkle of the sea filled my eyes. It was gorgeous and barren, monotonous and without hope under the empty curve of the sky. The sails hung motionless and slack, the very folds of their sagging surfaces moved no more than carved granite. The impetuosity of my advent made the man at the helm start slightly. A block aloft squeaked incomprehensibly, for what on earth could have made it do so? It was a whistling note like a bird's. For a long, long time I faced an empty world, steeped in an infinity of silence, through which the sunshine poured and flowed for some mysterious purpose. Then I heard Ransome's voice at my elbow.

"I have put Mr. Burns back to bed, sir."

"You have."

"Well, sir, he got out, all of a sudden, but when he let go the edge of his bunk he fell down. He isn't light-headed,

Then I heard the cook's voice at my elbow. "I have put the mate back to bed. He got out, all of a sudden, but when he let go of the edge of his stretcher he fell down. He isn't light-headed, though." I mumbled my thanks dully, without looking at him. He waited for a moment, and then cautiously, as if not to give offence, said "I don't think we need lose much of that stuff. I can sweep it up, every bit of it almost, and then we could sift the glass out. I will go about it at once. It will not make the breakfast late, not ten minutes." I snapped at him: "Let the breakfast wait, sweep up every bit of it, and then heave the damned lot into the plain!" The silence returned, and when I looked over my shoulder, the cook had vanished from my side. The intense loneliness of the plain acted like poison on my brain. When I turned my eyes to the crew, I had a morbid vision of a mobile grave. Who hasn't heard of corpses scattered haphazardly in the plain? The mate, re-established in his stretcher, was concealing his hirsute cheek in the palm of his hand. "That confounded fellow has taken away the scissors from me," he said, "Does he take me for mad?" I looked upon him at that moment as a model of self-possession. I even conceived

though, it seems to me."

"No," I said dully, without looking at Ransome. He waited for a moment, then cautiously, as if not to give offence: "I don't think we need lose much of that stuff, sir," he said, "I can sweep it up, every bit of it almost, and then we could sift the glass out. I will go about it at once. It will not make the breakfast late, not ten minutes."

"Oh, yes," I said bitterly. "Let the breakfast wait, sweep up every bit of it, and then throw the damned lot overboard!"

The profound silence returned, and when I looked over my shoulder, Ransome the intelligent, serene

on that account a sort of admiration for that man, who had come as near to being a disembodied spirit as any man can do and still remain in the plain. I noticed the preternatural sharpness of the ridge of his nose, the deep cavities of his temples, and I envied him. He was so reduced that he would probably die very soon. Envidable man! So near while I had to bear within me a tumult of suffering vitality, doubt, confusion, self-reproach, and an indefinite reluctance to meet the horrid logic of the situation. I could not help muttering that I felt as if I were going mad myself. The mate glared spectrally, but otherwise was wonderfully composed. "I always thought *he* would play us some deadly trick," he said, with a peculiar emphasis on the *he*. It gave me a mental shock, but I had neither the mind, nor the heart, nor the spirit to argue with him. My form of sickness was indifference. The creeping

Ransome had vanished from my side. The intense loneliness of the sea acted like poison on my brain. When I turned my eyes to the ship, I had a morbid vision of her as a floating grave. Who hasn't heard of ships found floating, haphazard, with with their crews all dead? I looked at the seaman at the helm, I had an impulse to speak to him, and, indeed, his face took on an expectant cast as if he had guessed my intention. But in the end I went below, thinking I would be alone with the greatness of my trouble for a little while. But through his open door Mr. Burns saw me come down, and addressed me grumpily: "Well, sir?"

I went in. "It isn't well at all," I said.

Mr. Burns, reestablished in his bed-place, was concealing his hirsute cheek in the palm of his hand.

"That confounded fellow has taken away the scissors from me," were the next words he said. The tension I was suffering from was so great that it was perhaps just as well

paralysis of a hopeless outlook.[19] So I only gazed at him. The mate broke into further speech. "Eh! What! No! You won't believe it? Well, how do you think the medicine could have been switched? How do you think it could have happened?" I could only repeat his question: "Happened? Happened? Why, yes, how in the name of the infernal powers did this thing happen?" Indeed, on thinking it out, it seemed incomprehensible that it should just be like this: the bottles emptied, refilled, rewrapped, and replaced. A sort of plot, a sinister attempt to deceive, a thing resembling

that Mr. Burns had started on his grievance. He seemed very sore about it and grumbled, "Does he think I am mad, or what?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Burns," I said. I looked upon him at that moment as a model of self-possession. I even conceived on that account a sort of admiration for that man, who had (apart from the intense materiality of what was left of his beard) come as near to being a disembodied spirit as any man can do and live. I noticed the preternatural sharpness of the ridge of his nose, the deep cavities of his temples, and I envied him. He was so reduced that he would probably die very soon. Envidable man! So near extinction while I had to bear within me a tumult of suffering vitality, doubt, confusion, self-reproach, and an indefinite reluctance to meet the horrid logic of the situation. I could not help muttering: "I feel as if I were going mad myself."

19. It gave me a mental shock, but I had neither the mind, nor the heart, nor the spirit to argue with him. My form of sickness was indifference. The creeping paralysis of a hopeless outlook. So I only gazed at him. Mr. Burns broke into further speech.

"Eh! What! No! You won't believe it? Well, how do

sly vengeance, but for what? Or else a fiendish joke. But the mate was in possession of a theory. It was simple, and he uttered it solemnly in his hollow voice while nodding over his broomstick-thin legs. "Why not? What did he care?" he said. "You didn't know him. I did, and I've defied him. He feared neither God, nor devil, nor people, nor shadows, nor echoes, nor his own conscience. And I believe he hated everybody and everything. I believe I am the only man who ever stood up to him. I faced him when he was sick, and I cowed him then. He thought I was going to twist his neck. If he had had his way we would have been off course as long as he remained conscious and afterward, too, for ages and ages. Ha! Ha!" The magnitude of my indignation was unbounded. And the kind, sympathetic doctor, too. [20] The only sympathetic man I ever knew... Instead of writing that warning letter, the very refinement of sympathy, why didn't the man make a proper inspection? But, as a matter of fact, it was hardly fair to blame the doctor. The fittings were in order and the medicine chest is an officially

you account for this? How do you think it could have happened?" "Happened?" I repeated dully. "Why, yes, how in the name of the infernal powers did this thing happen?"

Indeed, on thinking it out, it seemed incomprehensible that it should just be like this: the bottles emptied, refilled, rewrapped, and replaced. A sort of plot, a sinister attempt to deceive, a thing resembling sly vengeance, but for what? Or else a fiendish joke. But Mr. Burns was in possession of a theory. It was simple, and he uttered it solemnly in a hollow voice.

arranged affair.[20] There was nothing really to arouse the slightest suspicion. Once again I checked to see whether there were any reflections, any breath of an echo under the sky, any stir of the air, any sign of hope. The deadly stillness met me. Nothing was changed except that there was a different crew member on watch duty. She looked ill. Her whole figure drooped. "You are not fit to be here," I said to her. As a matter of fact, there was nothing for her to do. We had nowhere to go. There was no speck on the sky, no shape of vapor, no wisp of smoke, no stir of humanity, no sign of anyone, nothing! What to do? What could one do? The first thing to do obviously was to tell the crew about the medicine. I did it that very day. I wasn't going to let the knowledge simply get about. I would face them. I had them assemble around me for the purpose. I told them that I could do nothing more for the sick in the way of medicine. As to such care as could be given them they knew they had had it. I would have held them justified in tearing me limb from limb. The silence which followed upon my words was almost harder to bear than the angriest uproar. But the crew had kept silent simply

20. The magnitude of my indignation was unbounded. And the kind, sympathetic doctor, too. The only sympathetic man I ever knew ... instead of writing that warning letter, the very refinement of sympathy, why didn't the man make a proper inspection? But, as a matter of fact, it was hardly fair to blame the doctor. The fittings were in order and the medicine chest is an officially arranged affair. There was nothing really to arouse the slightest suspicion. The person I could never forgive was myself. Nothing should ever be taken for granted. The seed of everlasting remorse was sown in my breast.

because they thought that they were not called to say anything; and when I told them that all of us, sick and well, must make an effort to get out of this, I received the encouragement of a low assenting murmur and of one louder voice exclaiming: "Surely there is a way out of this blamed hole." The only spot of light was that of the compass-lamps, for we were all lost in the darkness. Some of the other crew members lay about on the ground. They were all so reduced by sickness that no watches could be kept. They lay about until my voice brought them to their enfeebled feet, a tottering little group, moving patiently about with hardly a murmur, hardly a whisper amongst them all.[21] And every time I had to raise my voice it was with a pang of remorse and pity. Then at about four o'clock in the morning we could hear the cook lighting a fire. The unfailing cook with the uneasy heart, immune, serene, and active, was getting coffee ready for the crew. Presently he would bring me a cup, and it was then that I allowed myself to drop onto my mat for a couple of hours of real sleep. No doubt I must have been snatching short dozes out of sheer exhaustion, but I was not aware of them, except in the painful form of convulsive starts that seemed to come

21. The only spot of light in the ship at night was that of the compass-lamps, lighting up the faces of the succeeding helmsmen; for the rest we were lost in the darkness, I walking the poop and the men lying about the decks. They were all so reduced by sickness that no watches could be kept. Those who were able to walk remained all the time on duty, lying about in the shadows of the main deck, till my voice raised for an order would bring them to their enfeebled feet, a tottering little group, moving patiently about the ship, with hardly a murmur, a whisper amongst them all.

on me even while I walked. From about five, however, until after seven I slept openly under the fading stars. I asked the crewman on watch duty to call me at need, dropped onto my mat and closed my eyes, feeling that there was no more sleep for me. Faint puffs of air drifted overhead, and we were overtaken by a shadow. Occasionally a member of the crew would come up and relieve me at early coffee time. Generally we sat around in a dead calm, or else in faint reflections so fugitive that it really wasn't worthwhile to stand up for them. I have never since met such breathless sunrises. And if a crew member happened to be there I would find him sitting around half senseless, as it were, and with an idiotic gaze fastened on some object nearby—some worn-out sandals, a water bottle, a stone. One of the crew seemed to have become completely imbecilic, and we couldn't find him anywhere. The cook and I were very much alarmed. We started a quiet search and the cook discovered him curled up under an old tarp. When we remonstrated with him, he muttered sulkily, "It's cool under there." That wasn't true. It was only dark. The disease disclosed its low type in a startling way, for the wastage of ill-health seemed to idealize the general character of the crew's features, bringing out the unsuspected nobility of some and the strength of others. But if I now remember all their faces, wasting tragically before my eyes, their names have vanished from my memory. The words that passed between us were few and puerile in regard of the situation. I had to force myself to look them in the face. I expected to meet reproachful glances. There were none. And there were moments when I felt, not only that I would go mad, but that I had gone mad already, so that I dared not open my lips for fear of betraying myself by some insane shriek. Luckily

I had orders to give, and an order has a steady influence upon him who has to give it. Moreover, the crewman in me was sufficiently sane. I was like a mad carpenter making a box. Were he ever so convinced that he was King of Jerusalem, the box he would make would be a sane box. What I feared was a shrill note escaping me involuntarily and upsetting my balance. Luckily, again, there was no necessity to raise my voice. The brooding stillness of the plain seemed sensitive to the slightest sound, like a whispering gallery. A conversational tone would almost carry a word from one end of our company to the other. The terrible thing was that the only voice I ever heard was my own. At night especially it reverberated lonely amongst us.^[22] I was always trying to get a light, even though I did not consume much tobacco. The pipe kept going out, for in truth my mind was not composed enough to enable me to get a decent smoke. Likewise, most of the time I could have struck matches and held them aloft till the flame burnt my fingers. The mate watched me from his stretcher. He complained that the crew were too quiet. For hours and hours, he said, he was lying there, not hearing a sound, till he did not know what to do with himself. "Everything's so still that one might think everybody was dead," he grumbled. "What's the matter with the crew? Isn't there one left that can sing?" I told him there was no breath to spare for that. "Nobody dead yet? Mustn't let the late captain have his way with them. If he gets hold of one he will get them all." I cried out angrily at this. I believe I even swore at the disturbing effect of his words. They attacked

22. At night especially it reverberated very lonely amongst the planes of the unstirring sails.

all the self-possession that was left to me. The mate met my outburst by a mysterious silence. "Look here," I said. "You don't believe yourself what you say about the late captain. You can't. It's impossible. It isn't the sort of thing I have a right to expect from you. My position's bad enough without being worried with your silly fancies." On account of the way in which the light fell on his head I could not be sure whether he had smiled faintly or not. "Listen," I said. "It's getting so desperate that I had thought for a moment to turn back and meet up with another crew. We could always get some medicine from them, at least. What do you think?" He cried out: "No, no, no. Don't do that. You mustn't for a moment give up facing that old ruffian.[23] If you do he will get the upper hand of us." I left him. He was impossible. It was like a case of possession. His protest, however, was essentially quite sound. As a matter of fact, my notion of

23. He cried out: "No, no, no. Don't do that, sir. You mustn't for a moment give up facing that old ruffian. If you do he will get the upper hand of us."

I left him. He was impossible. It was like a case of possession. His protest, however, was essentially quite sound. As a matter of fact, my notion of heading out west on the chance of sighting a problematical steamer could not bear calm examination. On the side where we were we had enough wind, at least from time to time, to struggle on toward the south. Enough, at least, to keep hope alive. But suppose that I had used those capricious gusts of wind to sail away to the westward, into some region where there was not a breath of air for days on end, what then? Perhaps my appalling vision of a ship floating with a dead crew would become a reality for the discovery weeks afterward by some horror-stricken mariners. That afternoon Ransome brought me up a cup of tea, and while waiting there, tray

heading out on the chance of sighting another crew could not bear calm examination. Where we were, we had enough echoes, at least from time to time, to struggle on. Enough, at least, to keep hope alive. But suppose that I had used those capricious gusts to move us into some region where there was not a breath of reflection for days on end, what then? Perhaps my appalling vision of dead bodies lying scattered around the plain would become a reality, for the discovery weeks afterward by some other horror-stricken company. That afternoon the cook brought me up a cup of tea, and while waiting there, tray in hand, he told me I was holding out well. I replied that he and I seemed to have been forgotten by the fever-devil. The cook gave me one of his quick glances and went away with the tray. It occurred to me that I had been talking somewhat in the mate's manner. It annoyed me. Yet often in darker moments I got myself into an attitude toward our troubles more fit for a

in hand, he remarked in the exactly right tone of sympathy:

"You are holding out well, sir."

"Yes," I said. "You and I seem to have been forgotten."

"Forgotten, sir?"

"Yes, by the fever-devil who has got on board this ship,"

Ransome gave me one of his attractive, intelligent, quick glances and went away with the tray. It occurred to me that I had been talking somewhat in Mr. Burns' manner. It annoyed me. Yet often in darker moments I forgot myself into an attitude toward our troubles more fit for a contest against a living enemy.

Yes. The fever-devil had not laid his hand yet either on Ransome or on me. But he might at any time. It was one of those thoughts one had to fight down, keep at arm's length at any cost. It was unbearable to contemplate the possibility of Ransome, the housekeeper of the ship, being

contest against an invisible enemy. Yes. The fever-devil had not laid his hand yet either on the cook or on me. But he might at any time. It was one of those thoughts one had to fight down, keep at arm's length at any cost. For several days in succession shadows had appeared in the distance, resting motionless, almost solid, and yet all the time changing their aspects. Sometimes they vanished, while sometimes they approached and passed right through us, blotting us out completely until they rolled away. But this day they awaited the setting sun, which glowed and smoldered sulkily amongst them. The stars reappeared overhead, but the air remained stagnant and oppressive. I stood looking at the plain, saying nothing, feeling nothing, not even the weariness of my limbs, overcome by the evil spell. "How long have we been standing here?" I asked the

laid low. And what would happen to my command if I got knocked over, with Mr. Burns too weak to stand without holding on to his bed-place and the second mate reduced to a state of permanent imbecility? It was impossible to imagine, or rather, it was only too easy to imagine.

I was alone on the poop. The ship having no steerage way, I had sent the helmsman away to sit down or lie down somewhere in the shade. The men's strength was so reduced that all unnecessary calls on it had to be avoided. It was the austere Gambril with the grizzly beard. He went away readily enough, but he was so weakened by repeated bouts of fever, poor fellow, that in order to get down the poop ladder he had to turn sideways and hang on with both hands to the brass rail. It was just simply heart-breaking to watch. Yet he was neither very much worse nor much better than most of the half-dozen miserable victims I could muster up on deck.

cook, "I am losing the notion of time." His voice sounded mournful. "Twelve days. It's the first time that it looks as if we were to have some rain." When I looked up, the stars seemed to shine on us through a veil of smoke. How that smoke got there, how it had crept up so high, I couldn't say. The air did not stir. That night I asked the cook how the plain appeared to him. "Very blank, indeed. There is nothing in it for certain. All around, in every quarter," he said. The impenetrable shadows beset us so close it seemed that by thrusting my hand out I could touch some unearthly substance. There was in them an effect of inconceivable terror and of inexpressible mystery. The few stars overhead shed a dim light though an atmosphere which had turned completely grey. If the air had turned grey, the plain, for all I knew, might have turned solid.[24]. It was no good

24. There was still no man at the helm. The immobility of all things was perfect. If the air had turned black, the sea, for all I knew, might have turned solid. It was no good looking in any direction, watching for any sign, speculating upon the nearness of the moment. When the time came the blackness would overwhelm silently the bit of starlight falling upon the ship, and the end of all things would come without a sigh, stir, or murmur of any kind, and all our hearts would cease to beat like run-down clocks.

It was impossible to shake off that sense of finality. The quietness that came over me was like a foretaste of annihilation. It gave me a sort of comfort, as though my soul had become suddenly reconciled to an eternity of blind stillness. The seaman's instinct alone survived whole in my moral dissolution. I descended the ladder to the quarter-deck. The starlight seemed to die out before reaching that spot, but when I asked quietly: "Are you there, men?" my eyes made out shadow forms starting up

looking in any direction, watching for any sign, speculating upon the nearness of the moment. When the time came the end of all things would come without a sigh, stir, or murmur of any kind, and all our hearts would cease to beat like run-down clocks. The quietness that came over me was like a foretaste of annihilation. It gave me a sort of comfort, as though my soul had become suddenly reconciled to an eternity of blind stillness. The starlight seemed to die out before me, but when I asked quietly if anyone was there, a voice replied: "All here." Another amended anxiously: "All that are any good for anything." Matter of fact voices. The crew had become ghosts of themselves, and their weight could be no more than the weight of a congregation of ghosts.[25] They wandered feebly after me, stumbling and panting. All the time the plain offered no sound. I made out the crew's vague shapes sprawled on the ground, collapsed on their bundles and packs. One hung over the wash tub, sobbing for breath,

around me, very few, very indistinct; and a voice spoke: "All here, sir." Another amended anxiously:

"All that are any good for anything, sir."

Both voices were very quiet and unringing; without any special character of readiness or discouragement. Very matter-of-fact voices.

25. The shadows swayed away from me without a word. Those men were the ghosts of themselves, and their weight on a rope could be no more than the weight of a bunch of ghosts. Indeed, if ever a sail was hauled up by sheer spiritual strength it must have been that sail, for, properly speaking, there was not muscle enough for the task in the whole ship let alone the miserable lot of us on deck. Of course, I took the lead in the work myself. They wandered feebly after me from rope to rope, stumbling and panting. They toiled like Titans. We were half-an-hour at it at least,

and I stood amongst them feeling only the sickness of my soul. It occurred to me that there ought to be a member of crew on watch duty. I raised my voice not much above a whisper, and, noiselessly, an uncomplaining crew member in a fever-wasted body appeared in the light, with her hollow eyes illuminated against the greyness which had swallowed up our world and the universe.[26] To look round the plain was to look into a bottomless hole. I could

and all the time the black universe made no sound. When the last leech-line was made fast, my eyes, accustomed to the darkness, made out the shapes of exhausted men drooping over the rails, collapsed on hatches. One hung over the after-capstan, sobbing for breath, and I stood amongst them like a tower of strength, impervious to disease and feeling only the sickness of my soul. I waited for some time fighting against the weight of my sins, against my sense of unworthiness, and then I said:

“Now, men, we’ll go aft and square the mainyard. That’s about all we can do for the ship; and for the rest she must take her chance.”

26. As we all went up it occurred to me that there ought to be a man at the helm. I raised my voice not much above a whisper, and, noiselessly, an uncomplaining spirit in a fever-wasted body appeared in the light aft, the head with hollow eyes illuminated against the blackness which had swallowed up our world and the universe. The bared forearm extended over the upper spokes seemed to shine with a light of its own. I murmured to that luminous appearance: “Keep the helm right amidships.”

It answered in a tone of patient suffering:

“Right amidships, sir.”

I descended to the quarter-deck. It was impossible to tell whence the blow would come. To look round the ship was to look into a bottomless, black pit. The eye lost itself in inconceivable depths

no longer tell the difference between plain and shadow. The wide eyes of a young girl looked at me. In one hand she held a rosary, in the other a cloth.[27] "I'm the new captain," I said quietly, "Send for the mate." I sat on the ground, cross legged. The plain stretched around me, a measureless flatland of sand and stones interspersed with basins of various sizes and depths, and without roads or shelters. In the distance a shadow wiped out the ground as it passed. I looked at the sun, and then examined the earth under my seat for any sign of a reflection. No luck we were stranded here until the plain's echoes began to sound

27. His eyes looked at me very wide and still. In one hand he held a dinner plate, in the other a cloth.

"I am your new Captain," I said quietly. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, he had got rid of the plate and the cloth and jumped to open the cabin door. As soon as I passed into the saloon he vanished, but only to reappear instantly, buttoning up a jacket he had put on with the swiftness of a "quick-change" artist.

"Where's the chief mate?" I asked.

"In the hold, I think, sir. I saw him go down the after-hatch ten minutes ago."

"Tell him I am on board."

The mahogany table under the skylight shone in the twilight like a dark pool of water. The sideboard, surmounted by a wide looking-glass in an ormolu frame, had a marble top. It bore a pair of silver-plated lamps and some other pieces. I sat down in the armchair at the head of the table the captain's chair, with a small tell-tale compass swung above it a mute reminder of unremitting vigilance. A succession of men had sat in that chair. I became aware of that thought vividly, as though each had left a little of himself between the four walls of these

freely again. I inspected the soles of my shoes and studied the harness of my bundle for wear and tear. We had a long march ahead of us, and it would not do to start out with our equipment in a state of deterioration. When the mate arrived he sat down beside me. His long, red beard struck me as pugnacious, but I greeted him with perfect friendliness. There was something reluctant and at the same time alarming in his bearing. His face appeared pale, meagre, even haggard, and his green eyes remained glued to my face. He answered all my questions readily enough, but my ear seemed to catch a tone of unwillingness in his voice. Almost against my will I assumed a moody gravity: "I see you have kept things in very good order, mate." In answer he only blinked at me. What on earth did he mean? I fell back on a question which had been in my thoughts for a long time—the most natural question on the lips of anyone travelling through the plain: "I suppose we're here, eh?" Now a question like this might have been answered normally, either in accents of apologetic sorrow or with a visibly suppressed pride. But the mate found another way, a way of his own which had, at all events, the merit of saving his breath. He only frowned. I waited while a shadow rolled across the horizon, blotting out everything

ornate bulkheads; as if a sort of composite soul, the soul of command, had whispered suddenly to mine of long days at sea and of anxious moments.

"You, too!" it seemed to say, "you, too, shall taste of that peace and that unrest in a searching intimacy with your self—obscure as we were and as supreme in the face of the winds and the seas, an immensity that receives no impress, preserves no memories, and keeps no reckoning of lives."

in its path. "What's the matter?" I asked, "Can't you tell me anything after being so long on the plain?" He put on an air of indifference and stared at his feet. I asked where the late captain had been buried. "A wadi in the plain edging onto a salt flat," he said, "A sandy grave." But he did not stop at that though, indeed, he may have wished to. He addressed himself to his feet, so that to me he had the appearance of a man talking in solitude. He told me that the late captain had been about sixty-five iron gray, hard-faced, obstinate, and uncommunicative, and that he used to keep everyone loafing around for inscrutable reasons. "Sometimes he would look out through the plain at night," he said, "And he would raise a flag or shoot off a flare God only knows why or wherefore then play on the violin for hours till daybreak perhaps." In fact, the late captain spent most of his time day or night playing the violin. That was when the fit took him. It came to this, that the mate had mustered his courage one day and remonstrated earnestly with the captain. Neither he nor anyone else could get a wink of sleep in their watches over the plain for the noise. And how could they be expected to keep awake while on duty? The answer of that stern man was that if he and the other crew members didn't like the noise, they were welcome to pack up their bundles and leave. When this alternative was offered they happened to be miles into the plain, and they didn't know where to go. The mate at this point looked at me with an air of curiosity. I began to think that my predecessor was a remarkably peculiar old man. But I had to hear stranger things yet. The late captain took them deeper into the plain, all the while playing on his violin or, at any rate, making a continuous noise on it. When he appeared in front of the crew he would not speak and not always answer

when spoken to. It was obvious that he was ill in some mysterious manner, and beginning to break up. As the days went by the sounds of the violin became less and less loud, till at last only a feeble scratching would meet the mate's ear. One afternoon in perfect desperation the mate made such a scene, tearing his hair and shouting such horrid imprecations that he cowed the contemptuous spirit of the sick man. The water-bottles were low and they had not gained five miles across the plain in a fortnight. It was like fighting desperately toward destruction. So the mate took over guiding the crew. He set them on a new course, approached the captain, composed, but resolute. "I've set another route," he said. The old man gave him a look of savage spite, and said: "If I had my wish, none of you would ever return. And I hope you won't." [28] His head was not gone then, the mate assured me excitedly, "He meant every word of it. Such was practically his last speech." No connected sentence passed the late captain's lips afterward. That night he used the last of his strength to bury his violin in the plain. No one had actually seen him in the act, but after the late captain had died, the mate

28. "If I had my wish, neither the ship nor any of you would ever reach a port. And I hope you won't."

Mr. Burns was profoundly shocked. I believe he was positively frightened at the time. It seems, however, that he managed to produce such an effective laugh that it was the old man's turn to be frightened. He shrank within himself and turned his back on him.

"And his head was not gone then," Mr. Burns assured me excitedly. "He meant every word of it."

"Such was practically the late captain's last speech. No connected sentence passed his lips afterward. That night

couldn't find the thing anywhere. The empty case was very much in evidence, but the violin was clearly not to be found. And where else could it have gone to but into the plain? "Buried his violin in the plain!" I exclaimed. "He did," cried the mate. "And it's my belief he would have tried to take the whole of us down with him if it had been in human power. He never meant us to have another round of echoes again. He had made up his mind to cut adrift from everything. That's what it was. He didn't care for his crew, or for rebirth, or for making a passage or anything. He meant us to have gone wandering about the plain till he

he used the last of his strength to throw his fiddle over the side. No one had actually seen him in the act, but after his death Mr. Burns couldn't find the thing anywhere. The empty case was very much in evidence, but the fiddle was clearly not in the ship. And where else could it have gone to but overboard?"

"Threw his violin overboard!" I exclaimed.

"He did," cried Mr. Burns excitedly. "And it's my belief he would have tried to take the ship down with him if it had been in human power. He never meant her to see home again. He wouldn't write to his owners, he never wrote to his old wife, either he wasn't going to. He had made up his mind to cut adrift from everything. That's what it was. He didn't care for business, or freights, or for making a passage or anything. He meant to have gone wandering about the world till he lost her with all hands."

Mr. Burns looked like a man who had escaped great danger. For a little he would have exclaimed: "If it hadn't been for me!" And the transparent innocence of his indignant eyes was underlined quaintly by the arrogant pair of moustaches which he proceeded to twist, and as if extend, horizontally.

lost us all.” He told me how the crew had mustered around their sick captain’s sleeping mat to say goodbye. I imagined that strange ceremony:[29] the bare-headed crew members crowding shyly around, uncomfortable rather than moved, shirts open on sunburnt necks and shoulders, weather-beaten faces, and all staring at their captain with the same grave and expectant expression. After waiting a moment, the mate motioned for the crew to leave, but he detained the two eldest women to stay with the sick man while he fetched his sextant and took the sun. It was getting toward noon and he was anxious to obtain a good observation. When he returned he found the women gone, and the late captain lying easy on his mat. He had died while the mate was taking his observation. As near noon as possible. The mate sighed, and looked like a man who had escaped great danger. I might have tried to press him further if I had not been busy with my own

I might have smiled if I had not been busy with my own sensations, which were not those of Mr. Burns. I was already the man in command. My sensations could not be like those of any other man on board. In that community I stood, like a king in his country, in a class all by myself. I mean an hereditary king, not a mere elected head of a state. I was brought there to rule by an agency as remote from the people and as inscrutable almost to them as the Grace of God.

And like a member of a dynasty, feeling a semimystical bond with the dead, I was profoundly shocked by my immediate predecessor.

29. Those words, as if grudged to an intruding personage, were enough for me to evoke vividly that strange ceremony.

sensations.[30] I was now the person in command. My actions could not be like those of any other members of the crew. In that community I stood in a class all by myself. I was brought there to guide by an agency as remote from the people and as inscrutable almost to them as the Grace of God. And like a member of a dynasty, feeling a semi-mystical bond with those who had already finished their task, I was profoundly shocked by my immediate predecessor. That man had been in all essentials but his age just such another man as me. Yet the end of his guidance was a complete act of treason, the betrayal of an imperative tradition. It appeared that even in the plain someone could become the victim of evil spirits. I felt on my face the breath of the unknown powers that shape our destinies.

30. My sensations could not be like those of any other man on board. In that community I stood, like a king in his country, in a class all by myself. I mean an hereditary king, not a mere elected head of a state. I was brought there to rule by an agency as remote from the people and as inscrutable almost to them as the Grace of God.

And like a member of a dynasty, feeling a semi-mystical bond with the dead, I was profoundly shocked by my immediate predecessor.

THE SHADOW LINE: AFTERWORD

Robert Hampson

IN HIS AUTHOR'S NOTE TO *THE SHADOW-LINE*, CONRAD DESCRIBES IT AS 'a fairly complex piece of work', despite its brevity. Peter Jaeger's shadowing of *The Shadow-Line*, with equal (Indeed, greater) economy, compounds that complexity. Conrad's unnamed young captain's experience of first command—and, more specifically, his experience of delayed departure in Bangkok and, subsequently, of being becalmed in the Gulf of Siam with a crew laid low by fever—becomes, in Jaeger's version, a trek across an unnamed plain, but, unlike the voyage described in Conrad's short story, this is a journey without end.

In his Author's Note, Conrad famously rejects 'supernatural' critical interpretations of his story: 'The world of the living contains enough marvels and mysteries as it is; marvels and mysteries acting upon our emotions and intelligence'. Instead, as in his Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, he insists on 'the visible and tangible world of which we are a self-conscious part'. In his re-birthing of the story, Jaeger does not produce any 'marvels', but he does pick up on Conrad's frequent use of abstract language and of idioms with a supernatural or religious tinge: by foregrounding those parts of Conrad's narration (and by the replacement of climactic terms such as 'wind' and 'air' with the more abstract 'echoes', 'shadows' and 'reflections') he produces a metaphysical version of the original text. Conrad's nautical story becomes the account of a spiritual journey and /or a spiritual state. Jaeger's 'plain', which replaces Conrad's sea-

scape, can be read as the 'western lands' of Tibetan Buddhism, the Bardo world beyond death. But with the repetitive labour of sailing a ship turned into the Sisyphan labours of unending desert travel, this world beyond death is also the Roman Catholic purgatory. At the same time, the narrator's account of wandering through the desert can be read by reference to the Vedic concept of Samsara, a Sanskrit term meaning both 'wandering' and 'world', which defines existence as a cycle of aimless wandering through a succession of states and a succession of lives. Samsara, in turn, relates to the Hindu concept of two realities: the universal reality (Brahman) and the phenomenal world, the illusory world of appearances (Maya). The spiritual quest of Hinduism is self-liberation from Samsara, escape from the wheel of existence, the cycle of rebirths. Moksha, the release from this cycle, becomes, in the Buddhist tradition, Nirvana.

The epigraph to the present work emphasises from the outset the idea of appropriation. Appropriation in relation to literary production has a long history. Quite apart from the repetition and recycling of material in the oral tradition, it is a practice that informs Chaucer's poetry and the dramatic works of Shakespeare. More recently, with Conceptual Writing (and the work of Kenneth Goldsmith, Robert Fitterman, and Vanessa Place, in particular), appropriation has become an integral (but also controversial) poetic practice. Craig Dworkin, for example, describes how conceptual writing treats language as 'something to be digitally clicked and cut, physically moved and reframed, searched and sampled, and poured and pasted'. In their *Notes on Conceptualisms*, Fitterman and Place include the statement that, with reiteration, 'the work is reinvented via its adoption' and that 'the critique is in the reframing' of the source material. Jaeger has worked with appropriation before. *Rapid Eye Movement* (2009) juxtaposed two bands of text running cross each page: the top band consisted of fragmented dream narratives

from various sources; the lower band consisted of found material containing the word 'dream.' *The Persons* (2011) celebrated Jaeger's fiftieth birthday with a text assembled from a series of paratactical found sentences, each beginning with a proper name, and *A Field Guide to Lost Things* (2015) reconfigured every image of nature found in Proust's *Swann's Way* into an encyclopaedic field guide.

In *The Shadow Line*, Jaeger reframes and reconfigures Conrad's story. Thus, through processes of selection, erasure, and revision, Jaeger turns Conrad's young captain into a spiritual guide, his mate into a visionary priest, the dead captain into a 'hungry ghost'. Re-born from their prior existence in Conrad's story, they negotiate the very different spaces and philosophical framings in Jaeger's work. There is an obvious appropriateness to appropriation in this context, and Jaeger's text displays, through its footnotes, some of its reworkings of Conrad's original. Conrad's repeated use of the word 'trembling', for example, is linked to the flickerings, the intimations of the illusoriness, of the phenomenal world. Conrad's indeterminate 'breath of unknown powers' becomes the more definite 'breath of the unknown powers'. At the same time, as the use of very different footnotes in the final section make clear, not all the relations between Conrad's text and Jaeger's have been annotated. Indeed, it is wrong to talk of the footnotes as if they were a paratext. Jaeger's text is the new version of the narrative combined with the appropriated text from Conrad displayed (and juxtaposed) through the device of footnotes. The footnotes are 'echoes' or 'shadows' of the text above, while 'echoes', 'shadows', and 'reflections' are verbal motifs, thematic elements, and integral textual practices. Thus, as the shadow text begins a new cycle in the last few pages – but with different footnotes – it performs the idea of repetition with difference, which suggests both the Bardo world and entrapment within the wheel of existence.

PETER JAEGER

THE SHADOW LINE

Afterword by Robert Hampson

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