

THE GREAT BRITISH

POST OFFICE

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THE
LOSS OF THE KENT
EAST-INDIAMAN.

The Kent, Captain Henry Cobb, a fine new ship of 1350 tons, bound to Bengal and China, left the Downs on the 19th February, with 20 officers, 344 soldiers, 43 women, and 66 children, belonging to the 31st regiment: with 20 private passengers, and a crew, (including officers) of 148 men, on board.

With a fine fresh breeze from the north-east, the stately Kent, in bearing down the Channel, speedily passed many a well-known spot on the coast, dear to our remembrance; and on the evening of the 23d we took our last view of happy England, and entered the wide Atlantic, without the expectation of again seeing land till we reached the shores of India.

With slight interruptions of bad weather we continued to make way until the night of Monday the 28th, when we were arrested in lat. 47° 30' long. 10° by a violent gale from the south-west, which gradually increased during the whole of the following morning. The activity of the officers and seamen of the

Kent appeared to keep ample pace with that of the gale. Our large sails were speedily taken in, or closely reefed; and about 10 o'clock on the morning of the 1st of March, after having struck our top-gallent yards, we were lying to, under a triple reefed main top-sail only, with our dead lights in, and with the whole watch of soldiers attached to the life lines, that were run along the deck for this purpose.

The rolling of the ship which was vastly increased by a dead weight of some hundred tons of shot and shells that formed a part of its lading, became so great about half-past eleven or twelve o'clock, that our main chains were thrown by every lurch considerably under water; and the best cleated articles of furniture in the cabins and the cuddy were dashed about with so much noise and violence as to excite the liveliest apprehensions of individual danger.

It was a little before this period that one of the officers of the ship, with the well meant intention of ascertaining that all was fast below, descended with two of the sailors into the hold, where they carried with them, for safety, a light in the patent lantern; and seeing that the lamp burned dimly, the officer took the precaution to hand it up to the orlop deck to be trimmed. Having afterwards discovered one of the spirit casks to be adrift, he sent the sailors for some billets of wood to secure it; but the ship in their absence having made a heavy lurch, the officer unfortunately dropped the light; and letting go his hold of

the cask in his eagerness to recover the lantern, it suddenly stove, and the spirits communicating with the lamp, the whole place was instantly in a blaze.

I know not what steps were then taken ; but having received the alarming information that the ship was on fire in the after hold, I hastened to the hatchway, whence smoke was slowly ascending, and where Capt. Cobb and other officers were giving orders, which were promptly obeyed by the seamen and troops, who used every exertion by means of the pumps, buckets of water, wet sails, hammocks &c. to extinguish the flames. Finding, however, that the devouring element was rapidly spreading, and that volumes of smoke were issuing from all the four hatchways, Captain Cobb, with ability and decision of character that seemed to increase with the imminence of the danger, resorted to the only alternative now left him, of ordering the lower ports to be opened, for the free admission of the watery element.

These instructions were speedily executed by the united efforts of the troops and seamen ; but not before some of the sick soldiers, and one woman, and several children, unable to gain the upper deck, had perished. So dense and oppressive was the smoke, that it was with the utmost difficulty we could remain long enough below to fulfil Captain Cobb's wishes ; which were no sooner accomplished, then the sea rushed in with extraordinary force, carrying away in its resistless progress to the hold, the largest chests, bulk-heads, &c.

The upper deck was covered with between six and seven hundred human beings, many of whom, from previous sea-sickness, were forced on the first alarm to flee from below in a state of absolute nakedness, and were now running about in quest of husbands, children, or parents. While some were standing in silent resignation, or in stupid insensibility to their impending fate, others were yielding themselves up to the most frantic despair. Some on their knees were earnestly imploring, with significant gesticulations and in noisy supplications, the mercy of him, whose arm, they exclaimed, was at length outstretched to smite them; others were to be seen hastily crossing themselves, and performing the various external acts required by their peculiar persuasion, while a number of the older and stout-hearted soldiers and sailors, sullenly took their seats directly over the magazine, hoping, as they stated, that by means of the explosion which they every instant expected a speedier termination might thereby be put to their sufferings.

While we thus lay in a state of physical inertia, but with all our mental faculties in rapid and painful activity,—with the waves lashing furiously against the side of our devoted ship, as if in anger with the hostile element for not more speedily performing its office of destruction,—the binnacle, by one of those heavy lurches which was driving every thing moveable from side to side of the vessel, was suddenly wrenched from its fastenings, and all the apparatus of the compass

dashed to pieces upon the deck : on which one of the young mates, emphatically regarding it for a moment, cried out with the emotion so natural to a sailor under such circumstances, "What! is the Kent's compass really gone?" leaving the bystanders to form, from that omen, their own conclusions. Mr Thomson, the 4th mate, sent a man to the fore-top, rather with the ardent wish, than the expectation, that some friendly sail might be discovered on the face of the waters. The sailor, on mounting, threw his eyes round the horizon for a moment,---a moment of unutterable suspense,---and waving his hat exclaimed, "A sail on the lee bow!" The joyful announcement was received with deep-felt thanksgiving; and with three cheers upon deck. Our flags of distress were instantly hoisted, and our minute guns fired; and we bore down under our three top-sails and fore-sail upon the stranger, which afterwards proved to be the Cambria, a small brig of 200 tons burden---Cook---bound to Vera Cruz having on board 20 or 30 Cornish miners, and others, agents of the Anglo-Mexican Company.

For ten or fifteen minutes we were left in doubt whether the brig perceived our signals, or perceiving them, was disposed to lend us any assistance. From the violence of the gale, it seems, that the reports of our guns was not heard; but the ascending volumes of smoke from our ship sufficiently announced the dreadful nature of our distress; and we had the satisfaction, after a short period of dark suspense, to see the brig hoist British colours, and crowd all sail to hasten to our relief.

Although it was impossible, and would have been improper, to repress the rising hopes that were pretty generally diffused amongst us by the unexpected sight of the Cambria, yet I confess, when I reflected on the long period our ship had been already burning—on the tremendous sea that was running—on the extreme smallness of the brig, and the immense number of human beings to be saved, I could only venture to hope that a few might be spared; but I durst not for a moment contemplate the possibility of my own preservation.

While Captain Cobb, Colonel Fearon, the Commanding Officer of the troops, and Major Macgregor of the 31st regiment, were consulting together, as the brig was approaching us, on the necessary preparations for getting out the boats, &c., one of the officers asked Major M. in what order it was intended the officers should move off; to which the other replied, "Of course in funeral order;" which injunction was instantly confirmed by Colonel Fearon, who said, "Most undoubtedly, the juniors first—but see that any man is cut down who presumes to enter the boats before the means of escape are offered to the women and children."

To prevent the rush to the boats, as they were being lowered, which, from certain symptoms of impatience manifested both by soldiers and sailors, there was no reason to fear; some of the military officers were stationed over them with drawn swords. But from the firm determination which these ex-

hibited, and the great subordination observed, with few exceptions, by the troops, this proper precaution was afterwards rendered unnecessary.

Arrangements having been considerably made by Captain Cobb for placing in the first boat, previous to letting it down, all the ladies, and as many of the soldiers' wives as it could safely contain, they hurriedly wrapt themselves up in whatever articles of clothing could be most conveniently found; and I think about two, or half-past two o'clock, a most mournful procession advanced from the after cabins to the starboard-cuddy port, outside of which the cutter was suspended. Scarcely a word was uttered---not a scream was heard---even the infants ceased to cry, as if conscious of the unspoken and unspeakable anguish that was at that instant rending the hearts of their parting parents---nor was the silence of voices in any way broken, except in one or two cases, where the ladies plaintively entreated permission to be left behind with their husbands. But on being assured that every moment's delay might occasion the sacrifice of a human life, they successively suffered themselves to be torn from the tender embrace, and with the fortitude which never fails to characterise and adorn their sex on occasions of overwhelming trial, were placed, without a murmur, in the boat, which was immediately lowered into a sea so tempestuous, as to leave us only "to hope against hope" that it should live in it for a single moment. Twice the cry was heard from those on the

chains that the boat was swamping, But he who enabled the Apostle Peter to walk on the face of the deep, and was graciously attending to the earnest but silent aspirations of those on board, had decreed its safety. The tackle, after considerable difficulty, was unhooked---the boat was dexterously cleared from the ship, and after a while was seen from the poop, battling with the billows;—now raised in its progress to the brig, like a speck on the summit, and then disappearing for several seconds, as if engulfed “in the horrid vale between them. The Cambria having prudently lain at some distance from the Kent, lest she should be involved in her explosion, or exposed to the fire from our guns which, being all shotted, afterwards went off as the flames successively reached them, the men had a considerable way to row; and the success of this first experiment seeming to be the measure of our future hopes, the movements of this precious boat—incalculably precious, without doubt to the agonized husbands and fathers immediately connected with it, — were watched with intense anxiety by all on board. In the course of twenty minutes, it was seen alongside the “ark of refuge;” and the first human being that happened to be admitted, out of the vast assemblage that ultimately found shelter there, was the infant son of of Major Macgregor, a child of only a few weeks old, who was caught from his mother’s arms, and lifted into the brig by Mr Thomson, the 4th mate, of the Kent.

I have been told by one abundantly capable

of judging, that the feeling of oppressive delight, gratitude, and praise, experienced by the married officers and soldiers, on being assured of the safety of their wives and children, so entirely abstracted their minds from their own situation, as to render them for a little while afterwards totally insensible either to the storm that beat upon them, or to the active and gathering volcano that threatened every instant to explode under their feet.

It being impossible for the boats, after the first trip, to come alongside the Kent, a plan was adopted for lowering the women and children by ropes from the stern, by tying them two and two together. But from the heaving of the ship, and the extreme difficulty in dropping them at the instant the boat was underneath, many of the poor creatures were unavoidably plunged repeatedly under water; and as much as humanity may rejoice that no women was eventually lost by this process, yet it was impossible to prevent, as it was deplorable to witness, the great sacrifice it occasioned of the younger children,—the same violent means which only reduced the parents to a state of exhaustion or insensibility, having entirely extinguished the vital spark in the feebler frames of the infants that were fastened to them.

Amid the conflicting feelings and dispositions manifested by the numerous actors in this melancholy drama many affecting proofs were elicited of paternal and filial affection, that seemed to shed a momentary halo around the gloomy scene.

Two or three soldiers, to relieve their wives of a part of their families, sprang into the water with their children, and perished in their endeavours to save them. One young lady who had resolutely refused to quit her father, whose sense of duty kept him at his post, was near falling a sacrifice to her filial devotion, not having been picked up by those in the boat until she had sunk five or six times. Another individual, who was reduced to the frightful alternative of losing his wife or his children, hastily decided in favour of his duty to the former. His wife was accordingly saved, but his four children, alas! were left to perish. A fine young fellow, a soldier, who had neither wife nor child of his own, but who evinced the greatest solicitude for the safety of those of others, insisted on having three children lashed to him, with whom he plunged into the water; not being able to reach the boat, he was again drawn into the ship with his charge, but not before two of the children had expired. One man fell down the hatchway into the flames, and another had his back so completely broken as to have been observed quite doubled fallen overboard. These numerous spectacles of individual loss and suffering were not confined to the entrance upon the perilous voyage between the two ships. One man, who fell between the boat and the brig, had his head literally crushed to pieces; and some others were lost in their attempts to ascend the side of the Cambria.

Seeing that the tardy means employed for the escape of the women and children, neces-

rarily consumed a great deal of time that might be partly devoted to the general preservation, orders were given that along with the females, each of the boats should also admit a certain portion of the soldiers; several of whom, in their impatience to take advantage of this permission, flung themselves overboard, and sunk in their ill-judged and premature efforts for deliverance.

One poor fellow of this number, a very respectable man, had actually reached the boat, and was raising his hand to lay hold of the gunnel, when the bow of the boat, by a sudden pitch, struck him on the head, and he instantly went down. There was a peculiarity attending this man's case that deserves notice. His wife to whom he was warmly attached, not having been of the allotted number of women to accompany the regiment abroad, resolved in her anxiety to follow her husband, to defeat this arrangement, and accordingly repaired with the detachment to Gravesend, where she ingeniously managed, by eluding the vigilance of the sentries, to get on board, and to conceal herself for several days; and although she was discovered, and sent ashore at Deal, she contrived a second time, with true feminine perseverance, to get between decks, where she continued to secret herself until the morning of the fatal disaster.

While the men were thus bent in various ways on self-preservation, one of the sailors, who had taken his post with many others over the magazine, awaiting with great patience the dreaded explosion, at last cried out, as if in ill humour that his expectation was likely

to be disappointed, "Well! if she won't blow up, I'll see if I can't get out of her;" and instantly jumping up, he made the best of his way to one of the boats which I understand he reached in safety.

I ought to state, that three out of the six boats we originally possessed, were either completely stove or swamped in the course of the day, one of them with men in it, some of whom were seen floating in the water for a moment before they disappeared; and it is suspected that one or two of those who went down must have sunk under the weight of their spoils, the same individuals having been seen eagerly plundering the cuddy cabins.

As the day was rapidly drawing to a close, and the flames were slowly, but perceptibly extending; Colonel Fearon and Captain Cobb evinced an increasing anxiety to relieve the remainder of the gallant men under their charge.

To facilitate this object, a rope was suspended from the extremity of the spanker boom, along which the men were recommended to proceed, and thence slide down by the rope into the boats. But as from the great swell in the sea, and the constant heaving of the ship, it was impossible for the boats to preserve their station for a moment; those who adopted this course incurred so great a risk of swinging for some time in the air, and of being repeatedly plunged under water, or dashed against the sides of the boats underneath, that many of the landsmen continued to throw themselves out of the stern windows

on the upper decks, preferring what appeared to me the more precarious chance of reaching the boats by swimming. Rafts made of spars, hencoops, &c. were also ordered to be constructed, for the twofold purpose of forming an intermediate communication with the boats,—a purpose by the bye, which they very imperfectly answered,—and of serving as a last point of retreat, should the extension of the flames compel us to desert the vessel altogether.

The gradual removal of the officers was at the same time commenced, and was marked by a discipline the most rigid, and intrepidity the most exemplary; none appearing to be influenced by a vain and ostentatious bravery, which in cases of extreme peril, affords rather a presumptive proof of secret timidity than of fortitude, nor any betraying an unmanly or unsolderlike impatience to quit the ship; but with the becoming deportment of men neither paralyzed by, nor stupidly insensible to, the accumulating dangers that encompassed them, they progressively departed in the different boats with their soldiers. They who happened to proceed first, leaving behind them an example of coolness that could not be unprofitable to those who followed.

But the finest illustration of their conduct, was displayed in that of their chief, whose ability and invincible presence of mind, under the complicated responsibility and anxiety of a commander, husband, and father, were eminently calculated, throughout the dismal day, to inspire all with composure and fortitude.

remarked that the sun was setting, I looked round, and never can I forget the intensity with which I regarded his declining rays. I had previously felt deeply impressed with the conviction that night the ocean was to be my bed; and had, I imagined, sufficiently realized my mind, both to the last struggles and the consequences of death.

Some time after the shades of night had enveloped us, I descended to the cuddy, in quest of a blanket to shelter me from the increasing cold; and the scene of desolation which here presented itself was melancholy in the extreme. The place which, only a few hours before, had been the seat of kindly intercourse and social gaiety, was now entirely deserted, save by a few miserable wretches, who were either stretched in irrecoverable intoxication on the floor, or prowling about, like beasts of prey, in search of plunder. The sofas, drawers, and other articles of furniture, the due arrangement of which had cost so much thought and pain, were now broken into a thousand pieces, and scattered in confusion around me, some of the geese and other poultry escaped from their confinement were cackling about in the cuddy; while a solitary pig, wandering from its sty in the fore-castle, was ranging at large in the undisturbed possession of the Brussels carpet that covered one of the cabins. Glad to retire from a scene so cheerless and affecting, and rendered more dismal by the smoke that was oozing up from below, I returned to the poop where I again found Capt. Cobb, Colonel Fearon,

and the few officers that remained, superintending, with unabated zeal, the removal of the rapidly diminishing sufferers, as the boats successively arrived to carry them off.

As the boats were nearly three quarters of an hour absent between each trip, which period was necessarily spent by those in the wreck in a state of fearful inactivity, abundant opportunity was afforded for collecting the sentiments of many of the unhappy men around me, some of whom, after remaining perhaps for a while in silent abstraction, would suddenly burst forth as if awakened from some terrible dream to a still more frightful reality into a long train of loud desponding lamentation, that gradually subsided into its former stillness.

But it was not till the close of this mournful tragedy that backwardness, rather than impatience, to adopt the perilous and only means of escape that offered, became generally discernable on the part of the unhappy remnant still on board; and that it made it not only imperative on Captain Cobb to reiterate his threats as well as his entreaties that not an instant should be lost, but seemed to render it expedient for one of the officers of the troops to express his intention of remaining to the last, to limit, in the hearing of those around him the period of his own stay.

Captain Cobb, in his immoveable resolution to be the last if possible, to quit his ship, and in his generous anxiety for the preservation of every life entrusted to his charge, refused to seek the boat, until he again endeavoured

to urge those around him, who seemed struck dumb and powerless with dismay. But finding all his entreaties fruitless, and hearing the guns whose tackle was burst asunder by the advancing flames, successively exploding in the hold in which they had fallen, this gallant officer, after having nobly pursued, for the preservation of others, a course of exertion that has been rarely equalled either in its duration or difficulty, at last felt it right to provide for his own safety, by laying hold on the topping-lift, or rope that connects the driver boom with the mizen-top, and thereby getting over the heads of the infatuated men who occupied the boom, unable to go either backward or forward, and ultimately dropping himself into the water.

The means of escape, however, did not cease to be presented to the unfortunate individuals above referred to long after Captain Cobb took his departure,---since one of the boats persevered in keeping its station under the Kent's stern, not only after all expostulation and entreaty with those on board had failed, but until the flames, bursting forth from the cabin windows, rendered it impossible to remain, without inflicting the greatest cruelty on the individuals that manned it.

Quitting for a moment, the subject of the wreck, I would advert to what was in the meantime taking place on board the Cambria. I cannot, however, pretend to give you an adequate idea of the feeling of hope or despair, that alternately flowed, like a tide, in the breasts of the unhappy females on board

the brig, during the hours of torturing suspense in which many of them were unavoidably held, respecting the fate of their husbands ;--feelings which were inconceivably excited, rather than soothed, by the idle and erroneous rumours occasionally conveyed to them, regarding the state of the Kent. But still less can I pourtray the alternate pictures of awful joy, and of wild distraction, exhibited by the sufferers, (for both parties for the moment seemed equally to suffer;) as the terrible truth was communicated, that they and their children were indeed husbandless and fatherless; or as the objects from whom they had feared they were for ever severed, suddenly rushed into their arms.

But these feelings of delight, whatever may have been their intensity, were speedily chastened, and the attention of all arrested, by the last tremendous spectacle of destruction.

After the arrival of the last boat the flames which had spread along the upper deck and poop, ascended with the rapidity of lightning to the masts and rigging, forming one general conflagration, that illumined the heavens to an immense distance and was strongly reflected on several objects on board the brig. At last about half-past one o'clock in the morning, the devouring element having communicated to the magazine, the long threatened explosion was seen, and the blazing fragments of the once magnificent Kent were instantly hurried, like so many rockets, high into the air.

18

DREADFUL SUFFERINGS
OF
SIX DESERTERS FROM ST. HELENA,
IN A WHALE BOAT.

On December 12, 1799, a court of enquiry was held at St. Helena, before Captain Desfontaine, president, Lieut. B. Hodson, and Ensign Young, when the following extraordinary and affecting narrative of the sufferings of six deserters from the artillery of the Island of St. Helena, was made to them on oath, by John Brown, one of the survivors:—

In June, 1799, I belonged to the first company of artillery, in this garison, and, on the 10th of that month, about half an hour before parade time, M'Kinnon, gunner and orderly of the second company, asked me if I was willing to go with him on board of an American ship, called the Columbia, Captain Henry Lelar, the only ship then in the roads. After some conversation I agreed, and met him, about seven o'clock, at the play-house, where I found one M'Quin, of Major Seale's company, another man, called Brighthouse, another named Parr, and a sixth, Matthew Conway.

Parr was a good seaman, and said he would take us to the island of Ascension, or lie off the harbour till the Columbia could weigh anchor and come out. We went down about eight o'clock to the West Rock, where the American boat, manned with three seamen, was waiting for us, and took us alongside the Columbia. We went on board.

Brighthouse and Conway proposed to cut a whale-boat out of the harbour, to prevent the Columbia from being suspected.

We observed lanterns passing on the line towards the Sea-gate, and hearing a noise, thought we were missed and sought for us. We immediately embarked in the whale-boat with about twenty-five pounds of bread in a bag, and a small keg of water.

We then left the ship, pulling with two oars only, to get ahead of her. The boat was half full of water, and we had nothing to bale it out. In this condition we rode out to sea, and lay off the island at a great distance, in hourly expectation of the American ship taking us up.

About twelve o'clock the second day, no ship appearing, by Parr's advice we bore away steering N. by W. and then N.N.W. for the island of Ascension, using our handkerchiefs as substitutes for sails. We met with a gale of wind, which continued two days: the weather then became very fine and we suppose we had run about ten miles an hour. M'Kinnon kept a reckoning with pen, ink, and paper, with which, together with maps and charts, we were supplied by the Columbia.

We continued our course till about the 18th in the morning, when we saw a number of birds, but no land. About twelve that day, Parr said he was sure we must be past the island, accounting it to be eight hundred miles from St Helena.

On the 25th all our provisions were expended. On the 27th M'Quin put a piece of bamboo in his mouth to chew, and we all

followed his example. On the night of that day it was my turn to steer the boat, and recollecting to have read of persons in our situation eating their shoes, I cut a pease off one of mine; but being soaked with salt water I was obliged to spit it out, and take the inside sole, of which I ate a part, and distributed the remainder to the rest; but we found no benefit from it.

On the 1st of July Parr caught a dolphin, with a gaff that had been left in the boat. We all fell on our knees, and thanked God for his goodness to us. We tore up the fish, and hung it to dry; about four we ate part of it which agreed with us pretty well. On this fish we subsisted till the 4th; about eleven o'clock, when finding the whole consumed, Parr Brighthouse, Conway, and myself, proposed to scuttle the boat, and let her go down, to put us out of our misery.

On the 5th, about eleven, M'Kinnon proposed that it would be better to cast lots for one of us to die, in order to save the rest to which we consented. William Parr, being seized two days before with the spotted fever was excluded. He rote the numbers, and put them into a hat. We drew them out blindfolded, and put them in our pockets. Parr then asked whose lot it was to die; none of us knowing what number we had in our pocket, it was agreed that number five should die, and the lots being unfolded, M'Kinnon's was the fatal number.

We had concluded that he on whom the lot fell should bleed himself to death, for which purpose we had provided ourselves with

sharpened nails, which we got from the boat. With one of these M'Kinnon cut himself in three parts; in his foot, hand, and wrist; and praying to God to forgive his sins, he died in about a quarter of an hour.

Before he was quite cold, Brighthouse, with one of the nails, cut a piece of flesh off his thigh, and hung it up, leaving his body in the boat. About three hours afterwards we all ate of it, but only in a very small quantity. We dipped the body every two hours in the sea to preserve it. Parr having found a piece of slate in the bottom of the boat, he sharpened it on the large stone, and with it cut another piece off the thigh, which lasted us till the 8th; when it being the watch, and observing the water, about break of day, to change colour, I called the rest, thinking that we were near the shore, but saw no land, it being not quite daylight. As soon as day appeared, we saw land right a-head, and steered towards it. About eight in the morning we were close to the shore. There being a heavy surf, we endeavoured to turn the boat's head to it, but, being very weak, we were unable. Soon afterwards the boat upset. Parr, Conway, and myself got on shore, but M'Quin and Brighthouse were drowned. We discovered some indians, who took us to the governor's house, who gave us a bed and milk and rice to eat. We remained at St. Salvador about thirteen days, during which time the inhabitants made up a subscription of £200 each man. We then embarked in the Maria, a Portuguese ship, for Lisbon.

THE END.