

The Phantom Death

By W. Clark Russell

On the 24th of April, 1840, having finished the business that had carried me into the Brazils, I arrived at Rio de Janeiro, where I found a vessel lying nearly loaded, and sailing for the port of Bristol in four or five days. In those times, passenger traffic between Great Britain and the eastern coast of South America was almost entirely carried on in small ships, averaging from 200 to 500 tons. The funnel of the ocean mail steamer, with her gilded saloons and side wheels, which, to the great admiration of all beholders, slapped twelve knots an hour out of the composite fabric, had not yet hove into sight above the horizon of commerce, and folks were very well satisfied if they were no longer than three months in reaching the Brazilian coast out of the River Thames.

The little ship in which I took passage was a barque called the *Lord of the Isles*, her burden was something under four hundred tons. She was a round-bowed wagon of a vanished type, with a square, sawed-off stern, painted ports, heavy over-hanging channels, and as loftily rigged, I was going to say, as a line-of battleship, owing to her immense beam, which gave her the stability of a church. I applied to the agent and hired a cabin, and found myself, to my secret satisfaction, the only passenger in the ship. Yes, I was rejoiced to be the sole passenger; my passage out had been rendered memorably miserable by the society of as ill-conditioned, bad-tempered, sulky a lot of wretches as ever turned in of a night into bunks, and cursed the captain in their gizzards in a calm for not being able to whistle a wind up over the sea-line.

The name of the skipper of the *Lord of the Isles* was Joyce. He was unlike the average run of the men in that trade. Instead of being beef-faced and bow-legged, humid of eye and gay with grog-blossoms, he was tall, pale, spare: he spoke low and in an melancholy key: he never swore; he drank wine and water, and there was little or nothing in his language to suggest the sailor. His berth was right aft on the starboard side; mine was right aft also, next his. Three cabins on either hand ran forward from these two after-berths. Two of them were occupied by the first and second mates. Between was a roomy "state-cabin," as the term then was: a plain interior furnished with an oblong table and fixed chairs, lighted by day by a large skylight, by night by a couple of brass lamps.

We sailed away on a Monday morning, as well as I recollect, out of the spacious and splendid scene of the harbor of Rio, and under full breasts of canvas, swelling to the height of a main-skysail big enough to serve as a mizzen topgallant-sail for a thousand-ton ship of to-day, and with taut bowlines and yearning jibs, and a heel of hull that washed a two-foot wide streak of greenish copper through the wool-white swirl of froth that broke from the bows, the *Lord of the Isles* headed on a straight course for the deep solitudes of the Atlantic.

All went well with us for several days. Our ship's company consisted of twelve men, including a boatswain and carpenter. The fore-castle hands appeared very hearty, likely fellows, despite their pier-head raiment of Scotch can and broken small clothes, and open flannel shirt, and greasy sheath-knife belted to the hip. They worked with a will, they sang out cheerily at the ropes, they went in and out of the galley at meal-time without faces of loathing, and but one complaint came aft before our wonderful, mysterious troubles began; the ship's bread crawled they said, and, being found truly very bad, good white flour was served out in lieu.

We had been eight days at sea, and in that time had made fairly good way it drew down a quiet, soft, black night with the young moon gone soon after sunset, a trembling flash of stars over the mastheads, a murky dimness of heat arid of stagnation all round about the sea-line, and a frequent glance of sea-fire over the side when a dip of the barque's round bends drove the water from her in a swelling cloud of ebony. I walked the quarter-deck with the captain and our talk was of England and of the Brazils, and of his experiences as a mariner of thirty years' standing.

"What of the weather?" said I, as we came to a pause at the binnacle, whose bright disc of illuminated card touched into phantom outlines the hairy features of the Jack who grasped the wheel.

"There's a spell of quiet before us, I fear," he answered, in his melancholy, monotonous voice. "No doubt a day will come, Mr. West, when the unhappy sea-captain upon whose fore-head the shipowner would be glad to brand the words 'Prompt Despatch' will be rendered by steam independent of that most capricious of all things—wind. The wind bloweth as it listeth—which is very well whilst it keeps all on blowing; for with our machinery of trusses, and parrels, and braces, we can snatch a sort of propulsion out of anything short of hurricane antagonism within six points of what we want to look up for. But of a dead night and of a dead day, with the wind up and down, and your ship showing her stern to the thirty-two points in a single watch, what's to be done with an owner's request of *look sharp*? Will you come below and have some grog?"

The second mate, a man named Bonner, was in charge of the deck. I followed the captain into the cabin, where he smoked a cigar; he drank a little wine and water I drained a tumbler of cold brandy grog, then stepped above for an hour of fresh air, and afterwards to bed, six bells, eleven o'clock, striking as I turned in.

I slept soundly, awoke at seven o'clock, and shortly afterwards went on deck. The watch were at work washing down. The crystal brine flashed over the white plank to the swing of the bucket in the boatswain's powerful grasp, and the air was filled with the busy noise of scrubbing-brushes, and of the murmurs of some live-stock under the long boat. The morning was a wide radiant scene of tropic sky and sea—afar, right astern on the light blue verge, trembled the mother-o'-pearl canvas of a ship; a small breeze was blowing off the beam; from under the round bows of the slightly-leaning barque came a pleasant, brook-like sound of running waters—a soft shaling as of a foam over stones, sweet to the ear in that heat as the music of a fountain. Mr. Bonner, the second mate, was again in charge of the deck. When I passed through the companion hatch I saw him standing abreast of the skylight at the rail: the expression of his face was grave and full of concern, and he seemed to watch the movements of the men with an inattentive eye.

I bade him good morning; he made no reply for a little, but looked at me fixedly, and then said, "I'm afraid Captain Joyce is a dead man."

"What is wrong with him?" I exclaimed eagerly, and much startled.

"I don't know, sir. I wish there was a medical man on board. Perhaps you'd be able to tell what he's suffering from if you saw him."

I at once went below, and found the lad who waited upon us in the cabin preparing the table for breakfast. I asked him if the captain was alone. He answered that Mr. Stroud, the chief mate, was with him. On this I went to the door of Captain's Joyce's cabin and lightly knocked. The mate looked out, and, seeing who I was, told me in a soft voice to enter.

Captain Joyce lay in his bunk dressed in a flannel shirt and a pair of white drill trousers. All his throat and a considerable portion of his chest were exposed, and his feet were naked. I looked at him scarcely crediting my sight: I did not know him as the man I had parted with but a few hours before. He was swelled from head to foot as though drowned: the swelling contorted his

countenance out of all resemblance to his familiar face; the flesh of him that was visible was a pale blue, as if rubbed with a powder of the stuff called "blue" which the laundresses use in getting up their linen. His eyes were open, but the pupils were rolled out of sight, and the "whites," as they are called, were covered with red blotches.

I had no knowledge of medicine, and could not imagine what had come to the poor man. He was unconscious, and evidently fast sinking I said to Mr. Stroud, "What is this?"

The mate answered, "I'm afraid he's poisoned himself accidentally. It looks to me like poison. Don't it seem so to you, sir? See how his fingers and toes are curled.

I ran my eye over the cabin and exclaimed, "Have you searched for any bottles containing poison?"

"I did so when he sent for me at four o'clock, and complained of feeling sick and ill. He was then changing color, and his face was losing its proper looks. I asked him if he thought he had taken anything by mistake. He answered no, unless he had done so in his sleep. He awoke feeling very bad, and that was all he could tell me."

I touched the poor fellow's hand, and found it cold. His breathing was swift and thin. At moments a convulsion, like a wrenching shudder, passed through him.

"Is it," I asked, "some form of country sickness, do you think—some kind of illness that was lying latent in him when we sailed?"

"I never heard of any sort of sickness," he answered, "that made a man look like that— not cholera even. And what but poison would do its work so quickly? Depend upon it he's either been poisoned, or poisoned himself unawares.

"Poisoned!" I exclaimed. "Who's the man in this ship that's going to do such a thing?"

"It's no natural illness," he answered, looking at the livid, bloated face of the dying man; and he repeated with gloomy emphasis, "He's either been poisoned, or he's poisoned himself unawares."

I stood beside Mr. Stroud for about a quarter of an hour, watching the captain and speculating upon the cause of his mortal sickness; we talked in low voices, often pausing and starting, for the convulsions of the sufferer made us think that he had his mind and wished to sit up and speak; but the ghastly, horrid, vacant look of his face continued fixed by the stubborn burial of the pupils of his eyes; his lips moved only when his frame was convulsed. I put my finger upon his pulse and found the beat threadlike, terribly rapid, intermittent, and faint. Then, feeling sick and scared, I went on deck for some air.

The second mate asked me how the captain was and what I thought. I answered that he might be dead even now as I spoke; that I could not conceive the nature of the malady that was killing him, that had apparently fastened upon him in his sleep, and was threatening to kill him within the compass of four or five hours, but that Mr. Stroud believed he had been poisoned, or had poisoned himself accidentally.

"Poisoned!" echoed the second mate, and he sent a look in the direction of the ship's galley. "What's he eaten that we haven't partaken of? A regular case of poisoning, does the chief officer think it? Oh no—oh no— who's to do it? The captain's too well liked to allow of such a guess as that. If the food's been fouled by the cook in error, how's it that the others of us who ate at the cabin table aren't likewise seized?"

There was no more to be said about it then, but in less than half an hour's time the mate came up and told us the captain was gone.

"He never recovered his senses, never spoke except to talk in delirium," he said.

"You think he was poisoned sir?" said the second mate.

“Not wilfully.” answered Mr. Stroud, looking at me. “I never said that; nor is it a thing one wants to think of,” he added, sending his gaze round the wide scene of flashing ocean.

He then abruptly quitted us and walked to the galley, where for some while he remained out of sight. When he returned he told the second mate with whom I had stood talking that he had spoken to the cook, and thoroughly overhauled the dressing utensils, and was satisfied that the galley had nothing to do with the murderous mischief which had befallen the skipper.

“But why be so cock-certain. Mr. Stroud,” said I, “that the captain’s dead of poisoning?”

“I am cock-certain,” he answered shortly, and with some little passion. “Name me the illness that’s going to kill a man in three or four hours, and make such a corpse of him as lies in the captain’s cabin,”

He called to the second mate, and they paced the deck together deep in talk. The men had come up from breakfast, and the boatswain had set them to the various jobs of the morning; but the news of the captain’s death had gone forward; it was shocking by reason of its suddenness. Then, again, the death of the master of a ship lies cold and heavy upon the spirits of a company at sea; ’tis the head gone, the thinking part. The mate may make as good a captain, but he’s not the man the crew signed articles under. The seamen of the Lord of the Isles wore grave faces as they went about their work; they spoke softly, and the boatswain delivered his orders in subdued notes. After a bit the second mate walked forward and addressed the boatswain and some of the men, but what he said I did not catch.

I breakfasted and returned on deck: it was then ten o’clock. I found the main-topsail to the mast and a number of seamen standing in the gangway, whilst the two mates hung together on the quarter-deck, talking, as though waiting. In a few minutes four seamen brought the body of the captain up through the companion hatch, and carried it to the gangway. The corpse was stitched up in a hammock and rested upon a plank, over which the English ensign was thrown. I thought this funeral very hurried, and dreaded to think that the poor man might be breathing and alive at the instant of his launch, for after all we had but the mate’s assurance that the captain was dead; and what did Mr. Stroud know of death—that is, as it would be indicated by the body of a man who had died from some swift, subtle, nameless distemper, as Captain Joyce seemingly had?

When the funeral was over, the topsail swung, and the men returned to their work, I put the matter to the mate, who answered that the corpse had turned black, and that there could be no more question of his being dead than of his now being overboard.

The breeze freshened that morning. At noon it was blowing strong, with a dark, hard sky of compacted cloud, under which curls and shreds of yellow scud fled like a scattering of smoke, and the mates were unable to get an observation. Mr. Stroud seemed engrossed by the sudden responsibilities which had come upon him, and talked little. That afternoon he shifted into the captain’s berth, being now, indeed, in command of the barque. It was convenient to him to live in that cabin, for the necessary nautical appliances for navigating the ship were there along with facilities for their use. Mr. Bonner told me that he and the mate had thoroughly examined the cabin, overhauled the captain’s boxes, lockers, shelves and the like for anything of a poisonous nature, but had met with nothing whatever. It was indeed an amazing mystery, he said, and he was no longer of opinion with Mr. Stroud that poison, accidentally or otherwise taken, had destroyed the captain. Indeed, he now leaned to my view, that Captain Joyce had fallen a victim to some disease which had lain latent in him since leaving Rio, something deadly quick and horribly transforming, well known, maybe, to physicians of the Brazils, if, indeed, it were peculiar to that country.

Well, three days passed, and nothing of any moment happened. The wind drew ahead and braced our yards fore and aft for us, and the tub of a barque went to leeward like an empty cask, shouldering the head seas into snowstorms off her heavy round bow, and furrowing a short scope of oil-smooth wake almost at right angles with her sternpost. Though Mr. Stroud had charge of the ship, he continued from this time to keep watch and watch with Mr. Bonner as in the captain's life, not choosing, I daresay, to entrust the charge of the deck to the boatswain. On the evening of this third day that I have come to, I was sitting in the cabin under the lamp writing down some memories of the past week in a diary, when the door of the captain's berth was opened, and my name was faintly called. I saw Mr. Stroud, and instantly went to him. His hands were clasped upon his brow, and he swayed violently as though in of pain, with greater vehemence than the heave the deck warranted; his eyes were starting, and, by the clear light of the brace of cabin lamps I easily saw that his complexion was unusually dusky, and darkening even, so it seemed to me, as I looked.

I cried out, "What is the matter, Mr. Stroud?"

"Oh, my God! " he exclaimed, " I am in terrible pain—I am horribly ill—I am dying."

I grasped him by the arm and conducted him to his bunk, into which he got, groaning and holding his head, with an occasional strange short plunge of his feet such as a swimmer makes when resting in the water on his back. I asked him if he was only just now seized. He answered that he was in a deep sleep, from which he was awakened by a burning sensation throughout his body. He lay quiet awhile, supposing it was a sudden heat of the blood; but the fire increased, and with it came torturing pains in the head, and attacks of convulsions; and even whilst he told me this the convulsive fits grew upon him, and he broke off to groan deeply as though in exquisite pain and distress of mind; then he'd set his teeth, and then presently scream out, "Oh, my God! I have been poisoned—I am dying!"

I was thunderstruck and terrified to the last degree. What was this dreadful thing—this phantom death that had come into the ship? Was it a contagious plague? But what distemper is there that, catching men in their sleep, swells and discolors them even as the gaze rests upon them, and dismisses their souls to God in the space of three or four hours?

I ran on deck, but waited until Mr. Bonner had finished bawling out some orders to the men before addressing him. The moon was young, but bright, and she sheared scythe-like through the pouring shadows, and the light of her made a marvelous brilliant whiteness of the foam as it burst in masses from the plunge of the barque's bows. When I gave the news to Mr. Bonner, he stared at me for some moments wildly and in silence, and then rushed below. I followed him as quick as he went, for I had often used the sea, and the giddiest dance of a deck-plank was all one with the solid earth to my accustomed feet. We entered the mate's berth, and Mr. Bonner lighted the bracket lamp and stood looking at his shipmate, and by the aid of the flame he had kindled, and the bright light flowing in through the open door I beheld a tragic and wonderful change in Mr. Stroud, though scarce ten minutes had passed since I was with him. His face was bloated, the features distorted, his eyes rolled continuously, and frequent heavy twitching shudders convulsed his body. But the most frightful part was the dusky hue of his skin, that was of a darker blue than I had observed in the captain.

He still had his senses, and repeated to the second mate what he had related to me. But he presently grew incoherent, then fell delirious, in about an hour's time was speechless and lay racked with convulsions; of a horrid blue, the features shockingly convulsed, and the whites of his eyes alone showing as in the captain's case.

He had called me at about nine o'clock, and he was a dead man at two in the morning, or four bells in the middle watch. Both the second mate and I were constantly in and out with the poor fellow; but we could do no good, only marvel, and murmur our astonishment and speculations. We put the captain's steward, a young fellow, to watch him—this was an hour before his death—and at four bells the lad came out with a white face, and said to me, who sat at the table, depressed and awed and overwhelmed by this second ghastly and indeterminable visitation, that the chief mate was dead, had ceased to breathe, and was quickly turning black.

Mr. Bonner came into the cabin with the boatswain, and they went into the dead man's berth and stayed there about a quarter of an hour. When they came out the boatswain looked at me hard. I recollect that that man's name was Matthews. I asked some questions, but they had nothing to tell, except that the body had turned black.

"What manner of disease can it be that kills in this fashion?" said I. "If it's the plague, we may be all dead men in a week."

"It's no plague," said the boatswain, in a voice that trembled with its own volume of sound.

"What is it?" I cried.

"Poison!" he shouted, and he dropped his clenched fist with the weight of a cannon-ball upon the table.

I looked at the second mate, who exclaimed, "The boatswain swears to the signs. He's seen the like of that corpse in three English seamen who were poisoned up at Chusan."

"Do you want to make out that both men have committed suicidw?" I exclaimed.

"I want to make out that both men have been poisoned!" shouted the boatswain, in his voice of thunder.

There was a significance in the insolence of the fellow that confounded and alarmed me, and the meaning was deepened by the second mate allowing his companion to address me in this roaring, affronting way without reproof. I had hoped that the man had been drinking, and that the second mate was too stupid with horror to heed his behavior to me, and without giving either of them another word I walked to my cabin and lay down.

I have no space here to describe the wild and terrifying fancies which ran in my head. For some while I heard the boatswain and the second mate conversing, but the cabin bulkhead was stout, the straining and washing noises all about the helm heavy and continuous, and I caught not a syllable of what they said. At what hour I fell asleep I cannot tell; when I awoke my cabin was full of the sunshine that streamed in through the stern window. I dressed. and took hold of the handle of the door, and found myself a prisoner. Not doubting I was locked up in error, I shook the door, and beat upon it, and called out loudly to be released. After a few minutes the door was opened, and the second mate stood in the threshold. He exclaimed—

"Mr. West, it's the wish of the men that you should be locked up. I'm no party to the job— but they're resolved. I'll tell you plainly what they think: they believe you've had a hand in the death of the captain and the chief mate—the bo'sun's put that into their heads; I'm the only navigator left, and they're afraid you'll try your hand on me if you have your liberty. You'll be regularly fed and properly seen to; but it's the crew's will that you stop here."

With that, and without giving me time to utter a word, he closed and secured the door. I leaned against the bulkhead and sought to rally my wits, but I own that for a long while I was as one whose mind comes slowly to him after he has been knocked down insensible. I never for an instant supposed that the crew really believed me guilty of poisoning the captain and chief mate: I concluded that the men had mutinied, and arranged with Mr. Burner to run away with the ship, and that I should remain locked up in my cabin until they had decided what to do with me.

By-and-by the door was opened, and the young steward put a tray containing some breakfast upon the cabin deck. He was but a mule of a boy, and I guessed that nothing but what might still further imperil me could come of my questioning him, so in silence I watched him put down the tray and depart. The meal thus sent to me was plentiful, and I drew some small heart out of the attention. Whilst I ate and drank, I heard sounds in the adjoining berth, and presently gathered that they were preparing the body of the chief mate for its last toss over the side. After a bit they went on deck with the corpse, and then all was still in the cabin. I knew by the light of the sun that the vessel was still heading on her course for England. It was a bright morning, with a wild windy sparkle in as much of the weather as I could see through the cabin window. The plunge of the ship's stern brought the water in a roar of milky froth all about the counter close under me, and the frequent jar of rudder and jump of wheel assured me that the barque was travelling fast through the seas.

What, in God's name, did the men mean by keeping me a prisoner? Did they think me a madman? Or that I, whose life together with theirs depended upon the safe navigation of the barque, would destroy those who alone could promise me security? And what had slain the two men? If poison, who had administered it? One man might have died by his own hand, but not both. And since both had perished from the same cause, self-murder was not to be thought of. What was it, then, that had killed them, visiting them in their sleep, and discoloring, bloating, convulsing, and destroying them in a few hours? Was it some deadly malady subtly lurking in the atmosphere of the after part of the vessel? If so, then I might be the next to be taken. Or was there some devilish murderer lying secretly hidden? Or was one of the crew the doer of these things? I seemed to smell disease and death, and yearned for the freedom of the deck, and for the sweetness of the wide, strong rush of wind.

The day passed. The second mate never visited me. The lad arrived with my meals, and when he came with my supper I asked him some questions. but obtained no more news than that the second mate had taken up his quarters in the adjoining berth as acting captain, and that the boatswain was keeping watch and watch with him.

I got but little rest that night. It blew hard, and the pitching of the vessel was unusually heavy. Then, again, I was profoundly agitated and in deep distress of mind; for, supposing the men in earnest, it was not only horrible to be thought capable of murder, there was the prospect of my being charged and of having to clear my character. Or, supposing the men's suspicion or accusation a villainous pretext, how would they serve me? Would they send me adrift, or set me ashore to perish on some barren coast, or destroy me out of hand? You will remember that I am writing of an age when seafaring was not as it now is. The pirate and the slaver were still afloat doing a brisk business. There often went a desperate spirit in ships' forecastles, and the maritime records of the time abound with tragic narratives of revolt, seizure, cruelty of a ferocious sort.

Another day and another night went by, and I was still locked up in my cabin, and, saving the punctual arrival of the lad with my meals, no man visited me.

Some time about eight o'clock on the morning of the third day of my confinement, I was looking through the cabin window at the space of grey and foaming sea and sallow flying sky which came and went in the square of the aperture with the lift and fall of the barque's stern, when my cabin door was struck upon, and in a minute afterwards opened, and the boatswain appeared.

"Mr. West," said he, after looking at me for a moment in silence with a face whose expression was made up of concern and fear and embarrassment, "I've come on my own part, and on the part of the men, sir, to ask your pardon for our treatment of you. We was mistook. And our fears

made us too willing to believe that you had a hand in it. We dunno what it is now. but as Jesus is my God, Mr. West, the second mate he lies dead of the same thing in the next cabin!"

I went past him too stupefied to speak, and in a blind way sat down at the cabin table and leaned my head against my hand. Presently I looked up, and on lifting my eyes I caught sight of two or three sailors staring down with white faces through the skylight.

"You tell me that the second mate's dead?" said I.

"Yes, sir, dead of poison, too, so help me God!" cried the boatswain.

"Who remains to navigate the ship?" I said.

"That's it, sir!" he exclaimed, "unless you can do it?"

"Not I. There's no man amongst you more ignorant. May I look at the body?"

He opened the door of the cabin in which the others had died, and there, in the bunk from which the bodies of Captain Joyce and Mr. Stroud had been removed, lay now the blackened corpse of the second mate. It was an awful sight and, a passage of time horrible with the mystery which charged it. I felt no rage at the manner in which I had been used by that dead man there and the hurricane-lunged seaman alongside of me and the fellows forward; I could think of nothing but the mystery of the three men's deaths, the lamentable plight we were all in through our wanting a navigator, with the chance, moreover, that it was the plague, and not poison mysteriously given, that had killed the captain and mates, so that all the rest of us, as I have said, might be dead men in another week.

I returned to the cabin, and the boatswain joined me, and we stood beside the table conversing, anxiously watched by several men who had stationed themselves at the skylight.

"What we've got to do," said I, "is to keep a bright lookout for ships, and borrow some one to steer us borne from the first vessel that will lend us a navigator. We're bound to fall in with something soon. Meanwhile, you're a smart seaman yourself, Matthews, as well qualified as any one of them who have died to sail the ship, and there's surely some intelligent sailor amongst the crew who would relieve you in taking charge of the deck. I'll do all I can."

"The question is, where's the vessel now?" said the boatswain.

"Fetch me the log-book," said I, "and see if you can find the chart they've been using to prick the courses off on. We should be able to find out where the ship was at noon yesterday. I can't enter that cabin. The sight of the poor fellow makes me sick."

He went to the berth and passed through the door, and might have left me about five minutes, evidently hunting for the chart, when he suddenly rushed out, roaring in his thunderous voice, "I've discovered it! I've discovered it and fled like a madman up the companion steps. I was startled almost to the very stopping of my heart by this sudden furious wild behavior in him: then wondering what he meant by shouting "he had discovered it!" I walked to the cabin door, and the very first thing my eye lighted upon was a small snake, leisurely coiling its way from the head to the feet of the corpse. Its middle was about the thickness of a rifle-barrel, and it then tapered to something like whipcord to its tail. It was about two feet long, snow white, and speckled with black and red spots.

This, then, was the phantom death! Yonder venomous reptile it was, then, that, creeping out of some secret hiding-place, and visiting the unhappy men one after another, had stung them in their sleep, in the darkness of the cabin, and vanished before they had struck a light and realized indeed that something desperate had come to them!

Whilst I stood looking at the snake, whose horror seemed to gain fresh accentuation from the very beauty of its snow-white speckled skin and diamond-bright eyes, the boatswain, armed with

a long handspike, and followed by a number of the crew, came headlong to the cabin. He thrust the end of the handspike under the belly of the creature, and hove it into the middle of the berth.

“Stand clear!” he roared, and with a blow or two smashed the reptile’s head into a pulp. “Open that cabin window,” said he. One of the men did so, and the boatswain with his boot scraped the mess of smashed snake on to the handspike and shook it overboard.

“I told you they were poisoned.” he cried, breathing deep; “and, oh my God, Mr. West—and I humbly ask your pardon again for having suspected ye—do you know, sir, whilst I was a-talking to you just now I was actually thinking of taking up my quarters in this here cabin this very night.”

Thus much: and now to end this singular experience in a sentence or two. Three days after the discovery of the snake we sighted and signalled a large English merchantman bound to London from the Rio de la Plata. Her chief officer came aboard, and we related our story. He asked to see the snake. We told him we had thrown it overboard. On my describing it, he informed me that he guessed it was the little poisonous reptile known in certain districts of South America as the *Ibiboboko*. He returned to his ship, and shortly afterwards the commander sent us his third officer, with instructions to keep in company as long as possible.