

A Memory of the Pacific

By W. Clark Russell

It was in December, 1818, that the ship *Walter Hood* shifted her berth to the woolsheds at Sydney to load a cargo for London. I was chief officer of the vessel my name, let me say here, is Adam Chichester.

I was standing on the wharf near the ship, waiting for the arrival of some wagons of wool, when the master of a German vessel that lay just astern of us came up to me, and said—

“Dot vhas a bad shob last night.”

“What was?” said I.

“Haf not you heard of der brudal murder in Shorge Street?”

“I have not seen a morning paper.

“She vhas dot small chop where dey sells grocery und odder tings on der left going oop. She vhas a Meester Abney, dey say. Der murderer vhas a beastly rogue called Murray; she helped in der shop; she hod been a soldier. Dis morning poor Abney vhas found dead in her bedt mit her troat cut und her skull splhit.”

“Have they got the murderer?”

“No. Dot vhas der pity. He make clean off mit sixty pound.”

Throughout the day people coming and going talked of this murder. The yarn ran thus:—Mrs. Abney occupied a room next to the murdered man’s; the son, Thomas, a youth of about eighteen, used an apartment at the back of the shop; the servant lay in the attics; the assistant, Murray, lodged out. Neither Mrs. Abney, her son, nor the servant had heard a sound in the night; Murray had broken into the house, passed into Abney’s room, and murdered him; then from a safe, whose key Abney kept under his pillow, he had taken about sixty sovereigns; all so noiselessly, the footfalls of a cat are not stiller. The family slept on, and the murder was not discovered till half-past seven in the morning.

It was known by these damning tokens that Murray was the murderer: first, the knife Abneys throat had been cut with was Murray’s; after using it he had dropped it behind some paper in the bedroom grate. Next, when he had shifted himself at his lodgings he had buried the clothes in the back garden; a dog belonging to the woman of the house was observed to run into the garden with its nose stooped as though on a trail, and stopping where the bundle was buried, it began to scratch and howl. The woman called a neighbor; they went to the place with a spade and found Murray’s clothes, covered with bloodstains.

The man himself was off, and the people who from time to time during the day gave me news of this thing told me he was still at large, that the police were in hot pursuit, and there was no hope for him.

That evening I strolled up George Street for a walk, and saw a great crowd at the Abney’s shop. I stopped to stare with the rest of them. They call this sort of curiosity vulgar and debasing. But crime puts the significance of human emotion, misery, and remorse into stocks and stones. Human passion gives the vitality of romance, tragic, or comic, to the most sordid and contemptible aspects of the common-place. I had passed that grocer’s shop twenty times, and often looked at the house. I looked at it again now, and found the matter-of-fact structure as strange grotesque, repulsive as a nightmare.

The days rolled on; Murray remained at large. His escape, or at least his marvellous manner of hiding, was the source of more excitement than the murder itself had proved. Most people supposed he had got clean away and was lurking among the islands, unless he was halfway on the road to Europe or America; others that he had struck inland and had perished in the wilds.

But by degrees of course the matter went out of one's head; out of mind certainly. Before the ship sailed I could walk up George Street and look at the shop and think of other things than the murder. Yet the memory of it was freshened a day or two before the tug got hold of us by the commander of the ship, Captain Charles Lytton, telling me that amongst those who had taken berths in the steerage were the widow and son of the murdered man.

"I'm almost sorry they chose this ship," said he, with an uneasy half-laugh. "For my part I'd as lief sail on a Friday as carry anything with such a shadow upon it as murder."

"They're long in catching Murray," said I.

"It's no fault of the police," he answered. "We're not in England here. A brisk walk takes a man into desolation. When you talk of catching a murderer, you think of beadles and fire-engines, and the electric telegraph. But the black man is still in this country; there's never a village pump betwixt Woolloomooloo and the Antarctic circle. Small wonder your bushranger flourishes."

We sailed on a Monday in the beginning of February, having been belated by the breakdown of some transport machinery in the interior. There went about a dozen people to the steerage company, and we carried ten passengers in the saloon. The *Walter Hood* was a smart and beautiful clipper of a vanished type; elliptical stern, a swelling lift of head with an exquisite entry of cut-water, coppered to the bends, a green hull, yards as square as a frigate's, with a noble breast of topsail and royal yards hoisting close under the trucks, man-of-war style. On a wind, one point free, she could have given her tow-rope to any Blackwall liner then afloat and not known there was anything in her wake.

When we were clear of the Heads, I came aft after seeing to the ground tackle, and in the waist saw a woman in deep mourning, looking over the rail at the receding land. A young fellow stood beside her. He too was in black. I cannot recall a finer specimen of a young man than that youth. His height was about six feet. He held himself erect as a soldier. His breadth of shoulder warranted in him the hurricane lungs of a boatswain. He was looking at the land, and his face was hard with a fixed and dark expression of grief.

The third mate was near. I whispered to him to say if those two were the Abneys. He answered they were. When some time later on I had leisure to look about me, I observed that the widow of the murdered man and her son held aloof from their fellow-passengers down on the main-deck. She always appeared with a veil on. She and the youth would get together in some corner or recess, and there sit, talking low. The steerage folks treated them with a sort of commiserative respect, as though affliction had dignified the pair. The steward told me he had picked up that, after the murder of Abney, the widow had sold off the contents of the shop and her furniture; she was going home to live with her sister, the wife of a tradesman at Stepney. He told me that the son often spoke of his father's murder.

"His notion is," said the steward, "that Murray's out of the colony, and's to be found in England. That's his 'ope. He's a bit crazed, I think, with some queer dream of meeting of him, and talks, with his eyes shining, of a day of reckoning. Otherwise he'd have stayed in Sydney, where he's got friends, and where his father's murder was likely to have improved his prospects by bringing him pity and business."

When the Australian coast was out of sight, the wind chopped from the westward into the south, and blew a wonderful sailing breeze, bowling a wide heave of sea from horizon to horizon in lines of milky ridges and soft, dark blue valleys, freckled as with melting snow, and along this splendid foaming surface rushed the ship with the westering sunlight red as blood in every lifting flash of her wet sheathing. So through the night; the white water full of fire poured away on either hand the thunderous stem; the purely-shining stars reeled above our phantom heights of sail faint as steam.

At ten a corner of crimson moon rose over our bows, to be eclipsed for awhile by the shadowy square of a ship's canvas right ahead; but before the moon had brightened into silver we had the stranger abeam of us, and were passing her as though she were at anchor—a lubberly, blubberly whaler, square-ended, with stump topgallant-masts—a splashing grease-box gamely tumbling in our wake with a convulsive sawing and shearing of her masts and yardarms, as though, sentient but drunken too, the lonely fabric sought to foul the stars with her trucks, and drag the stellar system out of gear.

So through next day, and a whole week of days and nights following; then the breeze scanted one afternoon, and at sundown it was a glassy calm, with a languid pulse of swell out of the southeast, and a sky of red gold, shaded with violet cloud, brighter eastwards when the sun was set than astern where the light had been.

The middle watch was mine that night. I turned out with a yawn at midnight, and going on deck found the reflection of the moon trembling with the brushing of a delicate warm cats-paw of wind; the sails were asleep, and the shin was wrinkling onwards at two knots. The moon was over our port main-topsail yardarm, and being now hard upon her full, and hanging in a perfectly cloudless sky, she filled the night with a fine white glory till the atmosphere looked to brim to the very stars with her light the Southern Cross itself in the south shone faint in that spacious firmament of moonlight.

I never remember the like of the silence that was upon that sea; the sense of the solitude of the prodigious distances worked in one like a spirit, subduing the heart with a perception of some mysterious inaudible *hush!* floating to and meeting *in* the ship out of every remote pale ocean recess. I had used the sea for years, and knew what it was to lie motionless under the Line for three weeks, stirless as though the keel had been bedded in a sheet-flat surface of ice or glass; but never before had the mystery, the wonder, the awe which dwell like sensations of the soul itself in any vast scene of ocean night that is silent as death, and white as death too with overflowing moonlight, affected and governed me as the beauties and sublime silence of this midnight did.

The second mate went below, and I paced the deck alone. Saving the fellow at the helm, I seemed to be the only man in the ship. Not a figure was visible. But then I very well knew that to my call the deck would be instantly clamorous and alive with running shapes of seamen.

After I had walked a little while, I crossed to the port side where the flood of moonshine lay shivering upon the ocean, and looked at the bright white rim of the sea under the moon, thinking I saw a sail there. It was then I heard a faint cry; it sounded like a halloaing out upon the water on the port bow. I strained my ears, staring ahead with intensity. Then hearing nothing, I supposed the sound that had been like a human voice hailing was some creaking or chafing noise aloft, and I was about to resume my walk when I heard it again, this time a distinct, melancholy cry.

“Did you hear that, sir?” cried the fellow at the wheel.

I answered “Yes,” and sung out for some hands to get upon the forecastle and report anything in sight. The halloaing was repeated; in a few minutes a man forward hailed the poop and told

me there was a boat or something black two points on the port bow; on which I shifted the helm for the object, which the night-glass speedily resolved into the proportions of a small open boat, with a man standing up in her.

By this time the captain, who had been aroused by our voices, was on deck. We floated slowly down upon the little boat, and the captain hailed to know if the man had strength to scramble aboard alone.

“Yes, sir,” was the answer.

“Then look out for a line.”

The boat came under the bow; a rope’s end was thrown and caught. The man languidly climbed into the fore-channels, omitting to secure the boat, which drove past and was already in our wake whilst the fellow was crawling over the side. Some of our seamen helped him over the rail, and he then came aft, walking very slowly, with an occasional reel in his gait, as though drunk or excessively weak.

He mounted the poop ladder with the assistance of a seaman. The moonlight was so bright it was almost the same as seeing things by day. He was a short, powerfully built man, habited in the Pacific beachcomber’s garb of flannel shirt and dungaree breeches, without a hat or shoes; his hair was long and wild, his beard ragged; he was about thirty years of age, with a hawkbill nose, and large protruding eyes, hollow cheeked, and he was of the color of a corpse as he faced the moon.

He begged for a drink and for something to eat, and food and a glass of rum and water were given to him before he was questioned.

He then told us he had belonged to the Colonial schooner *Cordelia* that had been wrecked five days before on a reef, how far distant from the present situation of our ship he did not know. The master and Kanaka crew left the wreck in what he called the long-boat. He said he was asleep when the schooner grounded. He did not apparently awaken until some time after the disaster; when he came on deck he found the schooner hard and fast and deserted. A small boat was swinging in davits; he lowered her and left the wreck, unable to bring away anything to eat or drink with him, as the hold was awash and the vessel quickly going to pieces and floating off in staves.

He delivered this yarn in a feeble voice, but fluently; undoubtedly he had suffered; but somehow, as I listened, I could not satisfy myself that what had befallen him had happened just as he stated.

He asked what ship ours was, and looked round quickly when he was told she was the *Walter Hood* from Sydney bound to London. The captain asked him what his rating had been aboard the schooner; he answered, “Able seaman.” He was then sent forward into the fore-castle.

I went below at four, and was again on deck at eight, and learned that the man we had resused was too ill to “turn to,” as we call it. The ship’s doctor told me he was suffering from the effects of privation and exposure, but that he was a hearty man, and would be fit for work in a day or two. He had told the doctor his name was Jonathan Love, and that the *Cordelia* belonged to Hobart Town, at which place he had joined her. The doctor said to me he did not like his looks.

“I make every allowance,” he went on, “for hairiness and color, and for the expression which the sufferings a man endures in a dry, starving, open boat at sea will stamp upon his face, sometimes lastingly. There’s an evil memory in the eyes of that chap. He glances at you as though he saw something *beyond*.”

“Men of a sweet and angelic expression of countenance are rarely met with in these seas,” said I.

“Likely as not he will prove an escaped convict,” said the doctor.

Three days passed, and Love still kept his hammock. But now the doctor reported him well, and the captain sent orders to the boatswain to turn the man to and find out what he was fit for. This happened during a forenoon watch which was mine. The day had broken in splendor. Masses of white cloud were rolling their stately bulk, prismatic as oyster shells, into the northeast, and the blue in the breaks of them was of the heavenly dye of the Pacific. The ship was curtsying forwards under breathing topsails and studding-sails, and the cuddy breakfast being ended, all the passengers were on deck.

I stood at the head of the starboard poop ladder watching the steerage passengers on the main deck. I took particular notice, I recollect, on this occasion, of the Abneys, widow and son, as they sat on the coaming of the main-hatch, the youth reading aloud to his mother. It was the contrast, I suppose, of the heavy crape and thick veil of the woman with the light tropic garments of the rest of the people which invited my eyes to the couple. I found my mind recalling as best my memory could the particulars of the horrible crime the widow’s sombre clothes perpetuated.

Then it was, and whilst I was recreating the picture of the shop in George Street, that I observed the young fellow lift his gaze from the page it had been fastened to, violently start, then leap to his feet with a sudden shriek. He was looking at the man we had rescued; *he* stood in the waist, trousers upturned, arms bared, posture as erect as a soldier’s; a formidable iron figure of a fellow of medium height, ragged with hair about the head and face

“Mother,” yelled the young fellow almost in the instant of his first shriek, whilst the rescued man turned to look at him. “Father’s murderer!—James Murray!—There he is!”

“Not by the son—not by the son!” shouted Murray, holding out his arms as the other rushed towards him. “Not by *you!* He’s got his father’s looks! Any man else—but—”

Before the young fellow could grasp him, Murray, in a single leap, swift and agile as a goat’s, had gained the fore-rigging, and was halfway up the shrouds, the young fellow after him.

“Not you!” roared the murderer, “not with your father’s face on you! S’elp me God, it *shan’t* be, then!” and rounding to the sea, he put his hands together and shot overboard, brushing the outstretched hand of his pursuer as he flashed past him.

“Pick us up! He must hang for it. Drowning’s too easy! He murdered my father!” and thus shouting the lad sprang into the water.

Such a scene of confusion as now followed defies my pen. The ceaseless screaming of the poor widow complicated the uproar. I bawled to the man at the wheel to put the helm down, then for hands to lay aft to clear away and lower a boat. All our passengers were from Sydney; most of the crew had shipped at that port; every one there had heard of the murder of Mr. Abney; and the effect of the discovery that we had fallen in with the murderer who had so long and successfully eluded justice, that he had been on board the ship three days, that he was yonder floating on our quarter, with the murdered man’s son making for him with bold furious sweeps of his arms—was electrical! women shrieked and men roared; overhead the sails flapped as the ship came to the wind, and there was the further noise of the heavy tread of seamen, the flinging down of ropes, my own and the captain’s sharp commands.

When I had time to look, I beheld a death struggle in the sea some quarter of a mile distant. They had grappled. God knows what intention was in the young fellow’s mind; it may be he hoped to keep the murderer afloat till the boat reached them. They churned up the foam as though it was white water there boiling on some fang of rock.

The moment the boat put off, an awful silence fell upon the ship.

“Pull, men, pull!” the captain shouted, and the brine flew in sheets from the oars as the little fabric sprang forward. But though the crew with the second mate in the stern-sheets toiled like demons, they were too late. The boat was within three of her own lengths of the spot, when the two men disappeared. We watched breathless, with a very madness and anguish of expectation, for a sight of the head of one or the other of them; but idly: and after the boat had hung some three-quarters of an hour about the place where they had vanished, with the second mate standing up in her, eagerly looking around, she was recalled, hoisted, and we proceeded on our voyage.