

THE CHARLES KENT

It was sunset, August 30th of last year. As I remember it was a particularly fine sunset. Cape Tryon loomed up in the distance across the bay, and the lighthouse stood in black contrast with a crown of white against the sun's red disk. It had been my good fortune to see the sun go to rest in many climes: I have watched the glory of his steep descent from the Norwegian fjords, among the snowy peaks of the Alps, along the Mediterranean shore; I have seen the mighty peaks of Snowdon and Hellvelyn silhouetted against him; I have seen the jagged line of the Rockies leap up against his declining power, but nowhere does his bewitching grandeur—when he wraps the flowing robes of imperial majesty about himself, gathers his purple and crimson cushions around him, and flings across the sky that outmost mantle, set with the moon and stars to shut out night and void from his abode—equal with such subtle shades of gorgeousness the beauty of an Island sunset.

The sun had completely disappeared, but still we sat uncommunicative — communing with ourselves on the broad verandah of my uncle's home, the parochial house near New London Bay. The twilight deepened gradually until we were mere blurs in the darkness. My uncle, Father John, spoke: "I suppose, Lord Wansbrough, Josh has shown you most of our interesting places about here."

"It's all jolly interesting," Wanny replied.

"We saw a queer old duffer and a queer old ship today," interpolated my old roommate at Oxford, now Rev. Kenneth Taylor.

"Bill James and the Charles Haskell; I can tell you that story if you will" returned my uncle.

Hopkins shifted with pipe and cushions to lean against one of the enormous verandah posts (they were made from the spars of the ill-fated Marco Polo) and I could see Pearson's eager eyes staring under the glow of his pipe. Wanny and Ken helped themselves to cigars, then uncle John began.

"This story is a true story, in fact the happening I am going to tell you of had an influence on my vocation. Merciful Providence made it one of the causes that sent me to labour in the Vineyard of the Master. It was perhaps one of the greatest blessings showered upon me.

My nephew can tell you how I wanted to become a sailor, and how, when I was fifteen, my father packed me off to sea with Captain Robert Vincent, my own grand uncle. Well, I sailed to many parts of the world with him, and at the age of twenty I was given my master's certificate. I left my uncle's ship, the *Armida*. Old timers remember her, she was the fastest barque that ever stood out from the North American coast. I took passage to Halifax, intending to visit my parents, whom I had not seen since I first went to sea, and landed towards the end of August.

"It is fifty-two years ago today that we left Halifax on that strange voyage. Yet the scenes we underwent are as vivid in my mind as if they had happened yesterday. The *Charles Kent* was a beauty, speedy, trim, easily handled, and as good a sea vessel as ever left the port of Halifax. I was twenty then, keen for the sea, and I had an eye for beauty in ships as well as other things, and the *Charles Kent* captured me the first time I laid eyes on her. I marvelled at that time how Bill James, who was but some two years my senior, newly awarded his masters certificate, and not blessed with the world's goods, had acquired her.

"The day before we sailed I fell in with an old sailor about the wharves, an old Cockney he was, too, and I shan't ever forget him.

"'Don't go aboard 'er, sir' he said. 'She's 'anted. Mebbe you ain't 'eard about 'er. I know. I was on 'er, since which I've given up beer and 'avent been to sea.'

"It appears that the *Charles Kent* was of Plymouth registry, and that she was commanded by one of that class, now mostly extinct, who fear neither man, God nor devil captains, a man with a particularly hard reputation from the Long Island Sound to St. John's, Newfoundland. He is supposed to have quite a few murders to his credit, and his crews generally deserted at the first port of call. His name, if I remember rightly, was Thacker, but that does not matter. On a dark and misty night fifty-five years ago, when the *Charles Kent* was bound for the Gaspé coast, sailing before a stiff breeze, (Thacker always carried every stitch of canvas she could possibly stagger under) somewhere in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, forty or fifty miles off St. Peter's, P. E. I., she struck a large fishing schooner approximately amidship and rode right over her. Some of the crew saw struggling forms in the water just as she swept on. Cries were heard out

of the darkness, and the helmsman was attempting to put about when the captain harshly commanded him to keep his course, and, when a seaman remonstrated about the victims, Thacker said brutally: 'Let the damned Britishers go to hell where they belong. I only wish I could hit some more of them.' Well the Charles Kent continued on her way, loaded without incident, and started to return.

'From now on the story was much less satisfactory, but the gist of it was this, that when she arrived at the spot where the tragedy occurred (and this arrival took place at night apparently) strange things began to happen. Although there was a fair wind blowing, and she had all the stays set, she became practically motionless. Then, he said, the men became afraid, and all fled below except the captain. They could hear him raving and cursing on the deck, as though he were addressing persons. He fired the pistol he always carried, ramped up and down, and dragged heavy objects back and forth. Finally things quieted down. Then the ship began to move; there was no sound to be heard from Thacker but still no one ventured out till daylight. The wheel was lashed, but Catpaine Thacker was not to be seen, he has never been seen since. Stranger even than his disappearance was the fact that the ship was in sight of Halifax, having covered over three hundred miles between midnight and morn. She put into Halifax, and the crew, including mates and boat-swain left in a body, and gave her such a reputation that she had been lying idle ever since. After three years ineffectual attempts to have her manned or sold, her owners were glad to take any offer, so Bill James, who laughed at such things, had bought her for a song, about a month previously. I wasn't very much perturbed either. I had heard many such stories before, and, indeed, I had just come from the Barbadoes in such a ship and nothing had happened.

"Now Bill James had done more than buy the Charles Kent; he had also married a Halifax girl, Minna Hale. A very beautiful woman she was, too, as I remember her when she came aboard, tall, dark, with flashing eyes and a low, well-modulated voice. Her hands were the finest I have ever seen, and she had the delicate, high-tensioned temperament of the artist. Indeed, she painted remarkably well, and, when I came to know her, I had a greater admiration

for James, who could capture such a rare soul. James had had difficulty about a crew, but around the last of August a derelict Swede was towed into Halifax, and he secured her mates and crew. They were all from North Europe, the crew mainly Finns, and the mates were Swedes and Norwegians. None of them spoke English except the mates, and they, very imperfectly, but all understood orders and signals.

"Probably my presence requires some explanation. Well, as I said, I had just come up from the Barbadoes to Halifax on my way home when I bumped into James (we had been school-mates), who told me he was sailing for the Island in a day or two, and invited me along, as he said, to keep his bride and himself company. Minna, I soon saw, worshipped her husband, and he returned her affections many fold. I have never seen a man so much in love—had she been the very goddess Aphrodite herself, he could not have been more her slave.

"We left Halifax August 30th, 1873, in the most delightful weather imaginable, a fine, spanking breeze almost behind us, but not enough to roughen the sea. I remember that first night out under the stars. James, Minna and I sat on deck, and she sang some old Spanish love songs, and I accompanied her on the guitar, on which instrument I had acquired some proficiency during my two years in the West Indies. It must have been past midnight when I sought repose, and I left James and his wife on deck. When I awoke in the morning we were well into the Gut of Canso. The marvellous weather continued to hold, and we emerged into the Gulf on a golden evening. We had to put into Hawkesbury for something, and we didn't get away from there until the next morning. That night was even more glorious than the last. My recollections of Hawkesbury are very indistinct, as I have never been there since, but I can remember hearing the sounds from the shore, cow bells in the distance, boys singing and whistling through the country lanes, the occasional rattle of a cart or wagon over the ill-paved village street, and then stillness under the moon. It was beautiful, yet there was something of a wistful sadness in it, the feeling you have when you know you are leaving a place you love, forever,—an undefined kind of sadness. All at once Minna began to sing in her low, sweet voice, and it was that old Breton song, 'The Wine of the Gauls.' I don't know why, but

when she finished, I retired to my cabin without a word, and I found myself doing what I seldom do, and that was weeping, whether from joy or sorrow I could not tell, but the world seemed horribly remote, and I felt alone.

It may have been the result of the powerful sympathy between James and his wife, which seemed to exclude me, although I knew they both liked me. But they seemed to be on a different plane—a plane I could not reach. At what time I fell asleep I do not know, but the Island of Cape Breton was but a line on the horizon when I came on deck. I walked to the rail, where Minna leaned over, and we began to talk of home. We expected to reach port the next day. She had never been to the Island, but she looked forward with great anticipation to her future home. I can show you the house she was to have lived in. It is a ruin now, for the key has never been turned in the lock for the last fifty-two years.

"We passed East Point in the early afternoon, but the wind was dying rapidly and we lazed along. For minutes at a time the sails just flapped against the spars. At sunset we were not perceptibly moving; we were out of sight of land, but we could see two or three lighthouses along the North Shore of Prince Edward Island. I began to think of the ship's previous voyage, and I judged we must be in the immediate vicinity of the scene of the tragedy to Captain Thacker and the fishing smack. I did not sit very late on deck that night. I think I turned in about ten, and I know the captain and his wife were moving about overhead afterwards. About midnight I suddenly found myself sitting up in my berth thoroughly wide awake. I had been called though I heard no voice, nor did it seem strange to me at the time. I got up and went on deck, but could see nothing, it was so dark. I groped along to where the helmsman was, but still could see nothing; the binnacle lamps were out. The man at the wheel was in great excitement; he said he felt something had happened. There was not a breath of wind, and it was dreadfully hot. The binnacle lamps had gone out unaccountably, too; he had seen the boy put oil in them and trim them that morning; the ship was not moving; there was no danger. I attempted to light the lamps without avail. In a few minutes Captain James came up himself with a spare lamp, which threw a very feeble glow.

"We couldn't see anything wrong, but I could see the

poor fellow at the wheel was in a bad way. After Captain James left, he continued, in his execrable French, to tell me that there was someone watching us in the darkness. I could see he was very superstitious and had probably been able to pick up a little of the story about the ship's evil repute. I reassured him, for many unaccountable things happen at sea and elsewhere. I didn't feel in the least perturbed, and when I went back to my cabin I would have slept soundly had it not been for the heat. I never felt anything like it even in the midsummer of British Guiana.

"At sunrise I was again on deck, and my self-complacency received a sad shock. Our kedging anchor, with about five hundred fathoms of cable, had disappeared, its lashing tail leaving terrible evidence of destruction. One poor wretch had sought the bow, probably for coolness, but anyway his corpse was there headless. Two hours later he was consigned to the deep. That day, if possible, was hotter than the night before. The sun rose, a blood-red ball, and rolled its entire course through a scorched heaven. The very sea seemed blistered; there was no breath of wind to relieve the monotony of that day. The crew forgot the horrible fate of their comrade in the heat, and many a Scandanavian oath was muttered. The ship was swung this way and that by the shifting current and tides; during the day she embraced all the points of the compass.

"But it was Minna's conduct that startled me. When she came on deck she seemed pale and unlike herself. When her husband was busied elsewhere she touched my arm and said: 'He was here last night.'

"And when I asked her what she was talking about, she replied: 'Oh I know you don't believe that he can come back.'

"I walked away without saying anything, but I felt the heat must be driving her out of her mind. A little later, as I passed by, she stopped me by a movement of her hand, and, looking about to see that no one was near, she whispered: 'Do you think he can get us?'

"I murmured: 'Don't be silly.'

"'Oh!' she burst out, 'how I dread tonight and tomorrow.'

"I felt horribly sorry for her, for the terrible heat had preyed on her so that her mind was becoming unhinged.

"That afternoon all was changed. She was extraordinarily vivacious, and for a time dispelled the gloom from my mind. I could see, too, an unmistakable relief on the face of the Captain. Ultimately, however, she complained of a headache and so she retired to her cabin. During the starboard dogwatch she came on deck again.

"Towards evening, the smoky sky began to thicken, but still without any sign of a breeze or hope of abatement of the heat. The sun set barely discernible through the haze, and in half an hour it was as dark as the previous night, and, although the moon must have been about full we failed to glimpse it.

"For a long time that night I remained on deck, trying to get relief from the heat. Minna was silent and James paced restlessly back and forth, every turn making me hotter; at last I could stand it no longer and I went below. I tried reading, that was worse, and I found my greatest relief was to lie and swelter in the darkness. At last I fell into a kind of a broken slumber from which I was awakened by one of the mates banging at my door. I sprang up at once and asked what was the matter, but all the mate could say in English was, 'the devil—devil'—and he would lapse in voluble Swedish which meant nothing at all to me. In the main cabin I saw Captain James pale as death; he spoke no word, but pointed to the unconscious form of his wife on the settee.

"She had been overcome by the heat, he muttered, and had fainted. He seemed paralyzed, so I began what remedies I knew, loosened her clothing and attempted to get some brandy down her throat. At last she showed some signs of returning consciousness, and we carried her to her berth, off the main saloon. She seemed delirious and kept crying, 'Oh don't let him take—don't let him take me.' Then I left her in the hands of her half-dazed husband. It was now about dawn, and I went on deck to see what was doing. There was not a soul to be seen; but that did not much matter, as there was not a breath of wind, and the ship could not have had any steerage way. By-and-by the mate who had awakened me appeared, and at his heels followed several sailors who began to wash down the decks, take down the lights, and go about the usual morning routine. One didn't have to be a detective, though, to tell that something was amiss. The mate refused to talk anything but Swedish, and so I had to desist.

"I could smell the coffee from the galley, and soon the boy brought me mine on deck, and even he had lost his usual morning smile. Shortly afterwards, James appeared, rather haggard looking, and stated that Minna was better, but he looked so woebegone that I refrained from asking any questions.

"The sun rose on a day even worse than the previous one. It seemed like the closing of a tempestuous evening, except that in the east of the lowering sky, the sun's disk was visible behind a thick veil, emitting a feeble light, but pouring down a death-like and oppressive heat. Now and then could be heard a rumble of thunder, interrupted and, as it were, irresolute; nor could one tell from which quarter it came. Around, not a breath of wind disturbed the surface of the sea, not a ship, not even a bird was to be seen. It was one of those days on which the traveller is silent, the hunter walks pensively, the worker in the field pauses in his song without being aware of it; one of those days which adds an indefinable weight to everything, to idleness, even to existence itself. There was a sort of corruption in the air, as though we were in the stronghold of some evil thing, intangible; something, though, that I was beginning to sense, but not more definitely than to think about it as the thing. Gradually this feeling began to grow upon me, and by noon I felt I was acting furtively. The haze thickened perceptibly on every quarter of the horizon, but yet, without any definite offering of wind. I suddenly felt that I was afraid to go below, and I knew I was developing a dreadful fear of the dark. It was just at this time my attention was diverted by sounds from the cabin, and I saw Minna emerge from the main companion-way. She was dressed gaily and laughing loudly—with no glance at me she walked by to the waist of the ship where the rail was low, and then, as I stood horror-struck, she calmly walked over the side. I could not see her fall from where I was, but I heard the splash—footsteps sounded on the deck, and there was James himself rushing after her. He plunged over almost before I had gained the use of my faculties. My shout brought half a dozen obviously half-intoxicated sailors, and we got out the boat after I had thrown James a line. We managed by sheer force to get him into the boat; we had to stun him to do it; but of Minna we never saw a trace. We discovered later that two heavy sounding-leads were missing, and I believe

that was the reason. We locked James in his cabin when he came to, as he insisted on diving into the sea again. He roared and kicked and shouted mutiny and finally began to sing. This kept up for an hour at least, but, when he saw it was no use, he quieted down.

"By four o'clock that afternoon the available crew consisted of myself and Marks, my West Indian servant. Every one of the crew and mates were dead drunk or about to be. It was a strange orgy—there was no fighting, very little talking even, but gathered around the forecabin, each appeared to be making it his solemn and sole end in life to get absolutely drunk, and as they fell over one by one I was dumbfounded. Nothing like it had ever happened before in my experience.

"Marks busied himself getting something to eat for us, and with cleaning and filling the binnacle lamps and riding lights. Then darkness came down like it does in the tropics, and with it my uneasiness returned. The thunder, which had continued its intermittent roll all day, no longer sounded irresolute, but rather, menacing. It was still impossible to say from which quarter it came, but under the cover of night it seemed to be creeping nearer, ever nearer. Marks was at the wheel, and I was endeavouring to plot out our course for New London, as I fully expected a hurricane before morning. During the afternoon, some of the drunken crew before collapsing, had stowed away the foresail, but the *Charles Kent* had still too much canvas spread, should the storm that I expected break. But we had to take our chance, as there was no one to man the ropes, and Marks and I would have our hands full at the wheel. I asked Marks how she was heading and he replied: 'S. SE, to a point E,' (which was for the beach somewhere,) so I gave him the course; but naturally we were dependent on the wind. My servant was but a mulatto boy, but his face showed the determination of a man under the flickering glare of the binnacle lamps. I don't know how long I sat smoking and drowsing by the chart-house, when all at once I felt as though someone had touched me on the shoulder or spoken to me. I looked about, but could not see a thing; and then, under the feeble glow of the lantern hung amidships, I saw a man climb over the rail and walk towards me. I knew at once it was Captain Thacker—an hard, evil face, ten times more evil-looking than ever in life, this fiend in the guise of man

came exultingly aft. I felt a coldness down my spine, but my pride bore me up. The apparition spoke, or did I dream it. 'Fools' it said, 'this is my ship and none other shall have her. The devil has given her to Jacob Thacker and I will take you, too, to the bottom of this sea.' I struggled mentally for a moment and involuntarily invoked St. Michael, and Thacker was retreating. Then he disappeared in a phosphorescent haze over the side.

"Marks was calling, 'I think the wind is coming, sah,' and I could hear far away a rumble—not thunder—more like the approach of a swift express train was that sound. I asked Marks if he had heard or seen anything. 'No, sah,' he replied, 'but I was a bit uneasy while you slept, sah. I thought you was going batty, too, sah.' And then I turned and saw the glimmer of the phosphorescent spot which had mesmerised me.

"Then the storm came. You have heard, at least *you* have, nephew, of the August gale of '73; well, that was the storm. A whistling could be heard above the rumbling of the thunder and the vibrant roaring of the wind. A jagged streak of lightning split the inky darkness, and then the wind hit us—at first it only seemed to be aloft, and with a rip and a tear our topsail and gallant tore loose and went floating out into the night, but the shock had given her weigh, and so we swung away before the wind. I struggled into my oil-clothes, and Marks had his on hand, and he rapidly got into his sea boots and skins while I took the wheel. We had not many miles of sea room, but we hoped for the best. There was a lull for a moment, but the clamour was unallayed—deep and throbbing was the coming gale. Behind we could perceive the broken sea as a multitude of phosphorescent flashes under the darkness—an immense waste appeared under the flash of the lightning—an immense waste covered by a drift of spray.

"'Here she comes, sah,' said Marks, and half the Gulf seemed to be picked up by the wind and flung upon us. She buried her head in the water. I thought for a moment she was going right down; a rending crash fell on our ears, and, at the same moment, the mainsail and baloon jib with foretopmast went out into the sea. With this much canvas gone she righted and staggered on at a bewildering speed before the sea. I dashed the water from my eyes just in time to hear Marks shout, 'Hold hard, sah' as

another sea, bigger than the last, hit us, but we rode it more buoyantly. Our danger, I knew, was not immediately from the storm, bad as it was, but, to be caught in the bight between East Point and North Cape.

"Another pale flash revealed the black and secret chamber of the storm with its boiling floor. It seemed a sinister cave of evil with a ragged low-hanging pall, and then darkness again with fiercer grip closed round us.

"It was no use to talk, as the wind tore the words from your mouth and hurled them away into the night. At last I got my mouth to Mark's ear and shouted: 'Can you hold her?' and from a great distance came the answer; 'Yes——hold——all——right,' and then the wind cut us apart.

"The ship rolled from side to side, staggered, plunged, stayed down as if the wind were pinning her beneath the seas, and, as I was endeavouring to get my breath, I thought of the drunken sailors in the forecabin, and of Captain James below. I painfully pulled myself to the main companionway, and slid down into a cabin, already half-full of water let in by the seas which had swept the ship. The chairs were floating; I fumbled in the dimness to James' door, turned the key, and he stepped out. 'Will she come out of it,' he said. 'I could not see his face plainly, but he spoke sanely. 'I think so,' I replied, 'if we can avoid the bight,' and then a stream of water came rushing down the companionway. I grasped the door and held on while James clung to a stanchion. The ship seemed to turn upside down, the cabin lamp swung nearly to the ceiling and went out.

"'We must get out of here, James.'

"'Yes, we must. She'll go under any minute, if this keeps up.'

"We clambered on deck and slowly made our way aft to the chart room. The motion of the ship was crazy. She lurched hither and thither, helplessly. The wind seemed to pick her up and fling her with relentless fury down some dark void, only to throw on her a solid wall of water as if attempting to bury her beyond all hope.

"Our mainsail and foretopmast were gone; our trysails ripped from the gaskets; a green glimmer still showed occasionally from the starboard, but the binnacle lamps were out and we could only run before the gale. Our rail was torn off in places, and our boats were gone.

“James was speaking——’——lucky——’——lives——
——bad——’

I could get no more, and answered ‘Yes.’ I really felt there was nothing to be done but wait for the final catastrophe. The ship was done for; she could not stand up to such terrific battering. ‘Hold hard!’ A huge column of water stood poised over her stern, and then in one terrific clash, toppled over and buried the deck; down, down she seemed to go into the tenebrous depths. It seemed as though a thousand demon hands were dragging her down, as if a mob of devils were buffeting her, trampling upon her, their prey. Far overhead could be heard the wild appalling shriek of the wind, the sound of the wailing, mournful spirit of the storm.

“At last, after a seeming infinity of time, she rose gurgling to the surface, and the wind was down. The seas still smote her with demoniac force, but they gradually flattened out. Ragged rifts appeared and in the heavens; here and there a timid star peeped out upon the maddened sea. The clouds broke away in every direction, and at sunrise the only evidence of the storm was the running sea and the rack and ruin on our deck. The terrible buffeting had sobered the crew, and they appeared, pale and weak, upon deck, many of them cut and injured. We rigged a new jib and foresail, and we made port late that night. The rest is short. The crew left in a body. Captain James has never recovered from that dreadful voyage. He has refused to leave the old ship. His house is in ruin. He says Minna is coming back aboard, he must be there to receive her. He told me last week when I went to receive him that she was coming back to-night. Poor Bill. As for myself, I don’t know what happened, but I lost my taste for the sea, and I became what I am now.”

My uncle looked at his watch. “You know I say Mass at 6.30, so I must say good-night.”

“Good-night, Father,” was the chorus, and then we, too, retired.

Early the next morning the white-haired Marks entered my room.

“Father John was called away last night, sah. Captain James is dead. So Mass won’t be till eight o’clock, sah.”