

Uncle Thomas tells about the Wreck of the Medusa

by Thomas Bingley

Good evening, boys. The tale which I am going to tell you this evening, so far exceeds in misery and crime all of those which I have already told you, that it is almost necessary for me, before I begin, to assure you that it really happened. I question indeed, if the wildest imagination could have contrived to conjure up such a complication of disasters.

It must be something very terrible indeed, Uncle Thomas!

It is, boys;—but you shall judge for yourselves. On the restoration of the general peace, in the year 1814, the French possessions on the west coast of Africa, which had been taken by the British forces, were agreed to be given up. An expedition, consisting of a frigate and three other vessels, having on board nearly four hundred persons, men of science, artisans, agriculturists, &c., was accordingly despatched, in June, 1816, to take possession of them. The naval part of the expedition was entrusted to an officer named Lachaumareys, who commanded the Medusa, of forty-four guns.

In consequence of the ignorance of the officers of the ship of the navigation of the coast, the Medusa unfortunately run aground on the bank of Arguin, on the coast of Africa. After in vain trying every means of getting her off, and finding that all hope of saving the vessel was useless, they took measures to secure the safety of the crew and passengers. Finding that the boats did not afford sufficient accommodation for the whole, a raft was hastily constructed; but in the tumult of abandoning the wreck, it happened that the raft, which was destined to carry the greatest number of persons, had on board the smallest quantity of provisions.

When all was ready, the boats pushed off, towing the raft, those on board assuring the passengers on the raft that they would conduct them in safety to land. They had not proceeded above a couple of leagues, however, when, one after another, the boats cast off the tow-lines, and left the raft to its fate, each striving to make off with all possible speed.

By this time it was discovered that the raft was completely overloaded, and the articles of which it was composed becoming saturated with water, it sunk below the surface, so as to immerse every person on board nearly up to the middle in water. Finding themselves thus abandoned, and threatened every instant with being swallowed up in the deep, the most horrible ideas took possession of their imaginations; they gave themselves up to despair. With some difficulty, the officers who were on board succeeded in restoring their men to a certain degree of tranquillity. Their own confidence had well nigh given way when they found that they were in the middle of the ocean, without chart or compass on the raft. It was discovered that one of the men had preserved a pocket-compass, but in their anxiety to secure this invaluable little instrument, it fell from the hands of the person who held it, and disappeared between the openings of the raft.

As night came on, the breeze freshened and the sea began to swell. By midnight the weather had become very stormy, the waves breaking over them in every direction. During the whole night the unhappy wretches struggled against death, holding firmly by the spars to prevent themselves from being swept away, tossed by the waves from one end to the other, sometimes precipitated into the sea, floating between life and death; "mourning over our misfortunes," says one of the survivors, "certain of perishing, yet contending for the remains of existence with that cruel element which threatened to

swallow us up. Such was our situation till break of day—horrible situation! How shall we convey an idea of it which will not fall far short of the reality?"

In the morning the wind abated and the sea subsided a little, but the day-light displayed a scene scarcely less appalling than the storm of the night. Ten or twelve of the unhappy men had their limbs jammed between the spars of the raft, and exhausted by fatigue and hunger, and unable to extricate themselves, had perished in this situation. Several had been swept away altogether, so that when they came to count their number, it was found that twenty had disappeared.

The day turned out beautiful, and they flattered themselves with the hope that in the course of it some of the boats would come to their rescue. Evening approached, however, and none was to be seen. As the night advanced, the storm again rose; the waves broke over them, many were swept away, and the crowding to the centre of the raft became so oppressive, that several were crushed to death. Firmly persuaded that they were on the point of being swallowed up by the sea, the soldiers and sailors, abandoning themselves to despair, resolved to sooth their last moments by drinking to intoxication. They bored a hole in the head of a large cask, and continued to suck till the salt water, mixing with the wine, rendered it no longer palatable. Excited by the wine acting on empty stomachs and on bodies weakened by hunger and fatigue, they now became deaf to the voice of reason, and openly declared their intention to murder their officers and to cut the ropes which bound the raft together. One wretch, indeed, seizing an axe, actually began the dreadful work. The officers rushed forward, and their interference was a signal for a general revolt. The mutineers, for the most part, were fortunately badly armed, and the sabres and bayonets of the opposite party kept them at bay. One fellow was discovered secretly cutting the ropes which bound their frail raft together. He was instantly flung into the sea. Others cut the ropes which supported the mast, and it fell on one of the officers and broke his thigh. He was instantly seized by the mutineers and thrown overboard, but was saved by his friends. Finding that it was necessary to make a desperate effort to put an end to the mutiny, the officers once more rushed forward, and many of the mutineers fell. By-and-by, the effects of the wine which they had drank wore off, and they sank into calmness and servility, crying out for mercy, and begging forgiveness on their knees.

It was now midnight, and tranquillity appeared once more to be restored; but scarcely an hour had elapsed when the mutineers, as if once more seized with sudden frenzy, rushed on the officers, tearing them with their teeth. A new scene of slaughter again took place, and the raft was once more strewed with dead bodies.

When day dawned, it was found that in the night of horror which had just elapsed, no fewer than sixty-five of the mutineers had perished, as well as two of the other party. The scanty stock of provisions which they at first possessed, was now exhausted. A single cask of wine only remained. They began to experience the most violent cravings of hunger, and in the extremity of their distress were forced to devour the dead bodies of their unfortunate companions. Some, who, even in the extremity to which they were reduced, revolted from this horrible repast, tried to stay the pangs of hunger by gnawing their sword-belts, cartridge-boxes, &c; but from them they found little relief.

A third night of horror approached. Fortunately, the weather was now calm, and they were disturbed only by the piercing cries of those who were hourly falling victims to hunger and thirst. The morning's sun showed the survivors the lifeless bodies of ten or a dozen more of their unfortunate companions, who had died during the night. They were all committed to the deep except one, who was kept to satisfy the cravings of his unhappy comrades. A shoal of flying-fish, in passing the raft, left a great number entangled between the spars. This afforded them a momentary relief from the shocking

repast to which they had of late been accustomed.

The fourth night was marked by another revolt. It was, however, soon quelled; two lives only being lost in the scuffle. Their number was now reduced to thirty; and it was calculated that the wine and fish which remained would be just enough to last four days; but in these four days they also calculated that ships might arrive from St. Louis to save them. Soon after this intimation was made, two soldiers were discovered behind the cask of wine, through which they had bored a hole for the purpose of drinking it. It having been determined that the punishment of death should be inflicted on any one who should be guilty of such a crime, they were immediately tossed into the sea.

Their number was thus reduced to twenty-eight; and, as nearly one half of them were so worn out and emaciated, that it was in vain to expect their surviving till assistance could arrive, (but, as long as they did live, they consumed part of the scanty stock of provisions,) a council was held, and after deliberation, it was decided to throw overboard the weak and the sickly. This shocking resolution was immediately carried into effect.

At length the raft was discovered by a small brig, which had been sent out in search of it. Of the 150 who embarked, fifteen only were received on board the brig; and of these, six died shortly after their arrival at St. Louis.

Oh dreadful, Uncle Thomas! It is indeed the most awful tale you have yet told us. Did the parties in the boats reach land safely?

Yes, Harry, they all reached the shore in safety, though several of them afterwards fell victims to the combined effects of hunger, thirst, and the oppression of a burning sun. Shortly after their arrival, the governor, recollecting that the Medusa, at the time of her wreck, had on board a large sum of money, despatched a vessel to try to recover it. From various causes, the ship was twice put back; and when she reached the wreck, fifty-two days after it was abandoned, she found three miserable wretches still on board, and so reduced as to be just on the point of expiring!

Where did they come from, Uncle Thomas?

Why, John, they had never quitted the ship. You will recollect that, when the boats left it, such was the scene of confusion, that the fewest provisions were put on board the raft, where there were the most passengers. Well, these men, along with fourteen others, had either concealed themselves, or refused to leave the ship. They managed to secure a quantity of provisions; and so long as these lasted, there appearing no danger of the wreck going to pieces, they remained quietly awaiting the arrival of assistance; but finding their provisions begin to run short, twelve of the most determined constructed a raft; but, setting off without either sail or oars, they were all drowned. Another, who had refused to embark with them on the raft, resolved, a day or two after, to try to reach the shore, and, lowering a hen-coop from the deck, placed himself on it; but, before he had sailed half a cable's length, he sank, to rise no more. The other four determined to stick by the wreck; and one of them died before assistance reached them.

Did the other three arrive in safety, Uncle Thomas?

I believe they did, Frank; one of them was, however, shortly afterwards found murdered in his bed. But I dare say you have had enough of horrors for the evening; so, I believe I must stop.

Oh yes, Uncle Thomas, quite enough for one evening. We will therefore bid you good night.

Good night, boys: I will be glad to see you again to-morrow.

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