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AP Lang/Comp
October 9th, 2014

The Dance

Jack Langdon was a young man, no longer a child but still green and impressionable. Though his stature was tall, his face betrayed his naïveté and he beamed with a bright eagerness unshared by the rest of the HMS Rangoon’s hardened crew. Only about three months ago he was standing in his new, crisp and fitted blue frock and white waistcoat, proudly accepting his office of second lieutenant with his worldlier friend Davis Southerly, whom he had met when they were midshipmen, accepting the position of first. Now standing proudly on the hardly-weathered quarterdeck of the frigate, he was much more accustomed to the rounds of a naval officer and issued his orders in a deep, bellowing voice befitting a Royal Navy officer. Next to Jack, with his arms crossed and his face stern as he watched the crew, was the first lieutenant, and the two officers often enjoyed a bit of light conversation as they supervised the men.

They spoke with close familiarity, for as midshipmen they found that they had grown up only a few miles of each other and were well acquainted with the customs of their birth land. As the HMS Rangoon was bound to sail to Malaya, they often found themselves reminiscing about their villages and the people they had left behind. Jack himself was engaged to a wealthy lady of an ancient and noble blood who, though fairly amicable and pretty, was of a family known to be controlling and meddlesome in the affairs of their relatives and descendants. Uncertain of his future peace and happiness, he had decided to forgo the marriage and embark upon a life as a naval officer. On the other hand, Davis belonged to a long line of aged sea veterans and, being the eldest son, was expected to carry on the family tradition and agreed to do so with only little hesitation. Though vastly different in personality- Jack being rather idealistic and unfocused while Davis was stern, serious, and stubborn- the two of them easily created a strong friendship often found between two distant travelers and adventurers hailing from the same land.

As a new ship, the HMS Rangoon was to sail to Ceylon and rendezvous with their main fleet before continuing the rest of the journey to the port of Singapore. They were only a week or so from the British island, and they sailed a clear course with the confidence of a new vessel equipped with fine armaments and a veteran enlisted crew. Nevertheless, a fog had set upon the vast ocean since midnight, and the ship had trouble keeping its bearing in the vagueness of the mists. A few young scouts ascended the shrouds and the ratlines to perch at the crow’s nest or the tops where they could easily pass down a line of information regarding what they had scouted from above. The crew muttered from below, telling tales of superstition and mystery, while the more sensible ones voiced their worries that a storm might kick up. Meanwhile, Jack and Davis- and the other officers in fact- were mostly unconcerned and idled away on the deck with tales of women, sights, and adventure from back home.

The two were in the middle of the conversation when thunder began to crack above them and the dark clouds parted to let heavy rain pelt the deck of the ship. The sailing master, an aged veteran with a thick grey beard named Castor, began to storm about the main deck and yelled at the men to furl the sails. Confusion and chaos began to spread, and the officers jumped about the deck, helping with the sails while keeping the order with their authoritative presence. The timid third lieutenant, a distant nephew of the captain, struggled to keep up as a fierce wind kicked up around the Rangoon and the roaring waves began to toss the vessel here and there. The sails were relentlessly battered by wind and rain as the crew furled and unfurled them to navigate the vehement torrent. Quickly they began to rip and tear as the boom of the spank began to swivel about wildly, forcing the crew to duck each time it began to sweep the deck. Some men fell off the sides; while a few were able to catch the shrouds and clamor back on, a half a dozen men fell into the icy waters and were never seen again. Even for a veteran ship, sailing in a storm was a challenge, and the freshly built frigate struggled to sail in the devilish weather.

From the main top a mate began to herald the words of the scout, but the storm grew so loud in so little time that, with the noise and the confusion, the crew could hardly hear him. When the helmsman, violently gripping the ship’s wheel, finally heard the cry of “high rocks to port”, it was far too late for him to alter their bleak course. With the sails torn and tattered, in all aspects rendered completely useless, the ship had practically no navigability. The desperate crew could only turn the ship port and starboard in vain as it was violently thrown against the deadly rocks which were the bane of all sailors. Within minutes the ship was smashed against the jagged shore of an island and, though the crew of the ship continued to valiantly try to right the vessel’s course, they found themselves stuck on the shores of a foreign island. As the frigate struck its starboard on the raised shore of the island, the Rangoon began to rock violently and the crew found themselves hurled against the mast or knocked off the ship. Jack, dangerously dancing across the high ropes that connected the masts, grabbed a ratline and slid down to the deck before he was abruptly knocked against the foremast by the waves and fell unconscious.

When Jack and Davis began to open their eyes, the storm had already cleared up and they were met with the sight of a shimmering sunset view. As they got up and tended to their injuries, they found most of the crew lying unconscious save for a few midshipmen, enlisted men, and the surgeon, who was accompanied by one of his mates. They checked on the crew and, while a few were dead or seriously injured, they found that most of the sailors were only lightly hurt. More concerning than the few casualties, a dozen and a half men were missing from the ship, including three of the more able midshipmen and the third lieutenant. Also present on the deck was the captain of the ship, Sir Aodhan Maguire, a looming tall figure with the blood of the Irish and the swagger of a Scot, whose severe face and strict discipline earned him the flattering nickname of “Iron Maguire”. When he saw Jack and Davis getting up, he walked towards them, which prompted a quick salute at attention by the two lieutenants. After he had put them at ease, he began to inform the lieutenants the situation of the Rangoon and her crew.

“Aye, boys,” said the captain in a thick drawl. “We’re in a right hames of a state. The scouts be all gone save fer Duncan, an’ he reckons thae th’island is nae so big, nae to have any official harbor anyhow. Ye lads an’ a few able crew are tae disembark an’ find a suitable place what fer tae encamp ‘till we’ve a plan tae salvage the ship ae what.”

“Sir,” started Davis. “Shall we gather the Indiamen from our crew? Perhaps they may speak as the natives do. And I suggest that we also bring the surgeon’s mate. There’s no saying what vile and abhorrent creatures may lie in that primitive jungle.”

“I doubt we may need more than two rifles,” Jack pitched in. “Our blades’ll make quick work of the canopy.” The captain thoughtfully nodded his bristled head and motioned to the wakened crew, calling forth the surgeon’s mate and two Indian warrant officers. He said something to them and turned back to the lieutenants, starting again.

“This be Arthur Combs, a man well in the tongue o’ thaun coloured folk. He got the tongue as an apprentice whae in Bombay Ye lot’ll be taking John an’ Dean, an’ I trust ye get along. Go an’ get what ye need and set off tae look for the site what fer the camp.” Jack and Davis gave a quick salute before approaching Arthur and the two Indians. The surgeon’s mate looked at them with a face that, though still soft and young, gave away years of experience with death and disease. With a brief salutation and a word of respect warranted by their rank and situation, they ordered John and Dean to fetch for the party two Enfield 1853s. It was not long after they had pulled out a rowboat had the Indians returned with their armaments and munitions, and they quickly set forth onto the murky waters and rowed towards the alien shore. As they approached the island, Jack was overtaken with a sort of awe and kneeled that, clutching the telescope tight to his eye, he could see for himself what awaited them at the thick canopy and the landing site. To his surprise, he saw what seemed to be a trail- and perhaps an animal’s trail, he thought to himself- that lead directly into the jungle.

When they had landed on the black shores of the island, the first to get off were the two lieutenants, followed by Arthur and the two Indians. Holding the rifles to the ground were the enlisted sailors, and the young surgeon’s mate carefully studied the landscape with suspicious and cautious eyes. The trail that Jack had spotted was- and beyond a doubt- a well-paved road of cobble and stone that was not unlike those found in France or Germany. They were lined neatly and uniformly, and with a regularity very much uncommon to the native roads of the Crown’s overseas territories. Though the lieutenants saw in it a sign of nearby civilization, the two Indian sailors began to whisper nervously amongst themselves. Picking up the whispers of the sailors, Arthur briskly caught up to the officers.

“Sirs,” he said in a reserved tone. “The men say this place is haunted. A legend, they say, of an island that eats ships and burn men alive. They say this road is some trap.” Though Jack was visibly animated by the tale, Davis gave Arthur a stern look befitting of the first lieutenant and gave him a brief but sharp reprimand.

“It would do you well to focus on marching, rather than listening to old ladies’ tales passed around by enlisted sailors, Mr. Combs.”

Lightly slighted by the cold response, Arthur nodded once and took to marching a pace equally between the officers and the sailors. They continued in this way, walking down the road until in the distance they could see in the distance what seemed to be a British settlement. The party now animated by the prospects of civilization and good company quickly picked up foot and hurried to the town. Cutting whatever canopy and brush stood in their way, the lieutenants were grazed all around by sharp twigs that it seemed they had been tossed in the brig and laid with the Captain’s daughter. However, the town was far from what it seemed.

As they arrived at what one would assume to be the vicinity of the settlement, for it was marked by pebbles that stretched around the whole place, they soon saw that the town was in disrepair. It was shrouded in a mist unlike what had set on the ocean, and they gulped as they imagined the eyes of a thousand natives lurking in that ominous dark. Arthur, who was hardly disturbed by the spectacle - for he had seen worse horrors in Bombay- lit up a lantern and ventured forth into the dark. Though the lieutenants followed suit, the Indians were hesitant to go with the officers into the town, in fear of the superstitions they had passed about when they landed. Still, fearing the Captain’s daughter more than the tales of children and crones, they hurriedly ran after the officers and stayed close, their rifles held up like a child holds up a candle in the dark abyss of his room.

All the buildings were decrepit; a thick moss and vine had overtaken most of the defunct ruins. Signs of fire and death were everywhere, and abandoned muskets littered the ground. What seemed to be the town hall was little more than a shoddy sandcastle raised by creaky wooden beams, with vines and primal growth smothering whatever remained. The officers decided to leave the Indian marines at guard as they toed over the collapsed entrance, their heavy cutlasses drawn out at the ready to intercept any ghostly apparition or fierce savage that may come their way. Inside the ruins they found only a smoky room painted a blood red, though perplexingly the furniture still stood up. As Jack inspected several tables, he could have sworn that the writing on the burnt letters piled on the desks were still legible and wrote of desperate supplies necessary. All around the walls and the furniture were riddled with signs of struggle, gashes from sabres and marks from bullets festooning the damp walls. The ominous dark of the ruined building and the horrible state of it gave them pause, as they broke in a cold sweat and examined what seemed to be the dead corpse of a militiaman. As they approached the dread figure, Jack’s hand only a farthing’s throw from the rotten corpse, two loud shots rang around the deserted town and the officers quickly turned to inspect the racket.

When they left the gloomy ruins, they were met with a display more shocking than the one inside. Lying heavily wounded, his hand clutching his side which gushed out blood, was Arthur Combs, cursing the dead Dean who lay lifeless- a gunshot wound having split his face- a few feet away. The other Indian, John, stuttered as he tried to explain in a thickly accented and broken English that Dean had been possessed by the fog and maliciously turned on the surgeon’s mate. Arthur, on the other hand, did nothing but mutter and curse, crying about the bad air. He died within a minute, and the officers could do nothing but drag the dead bodies to the side of the road and lay cloths over their cold visages. The three survivors gathered in the middle of the cobble road, and the Indiaman began to explain what he had seen.

“The mist grew very, very thick, sirs,” stuttered the Indiaman, pale from fright. “It grew like a hand or a snake flying in the sky and, tapping Dean by the shoulder, took him by surprise and went in him by his eyes and his mouths. Then he grew angry, and said he could see evil men in the distance. He said that they were dancing and baring their weapons at us. We did not, could not understand what he had meant, sirs, but he grey very, very angry with the surgeon’s mate. He raised his musket and suddenly fired at him, and I instantly retaliated.”

“Do you mean to say that the mist became tangible?” implored the first lieutenant.

“Could you see the evil men? What did they look like?” pressed the second. The Indiaman shivered as he collapsed to the floor and hugged himself close.

“They use to tell tales, the sailors, sirs. About an island where the mist is so thick that it is like snakes dancing in the air. And when it goes into you, sirs, it makes you see things. Makes you see the thousand spirits. They dance around you, the whole thousand, and get nearer and nearer, and drive you mad.” Davis scoffed and, picking up the rifle and waving it around to intimidate some unknown foe, began to swagger about the cobbled street. He cursed out at the fog, pretending to take aim at the nothingness.

“Come on, you slimy dogs!” he yelled. “I’ll have any of you savages out here! There are no evil ghosts; these are only the hallucinations of ruffians who spend all their time in the sick ward r below deck!” Jack on the other hand, out of some awe or terror, kept his sabre close and stood by the Indiaman as the first lieutenant yelled hotheadedly into the fog. Suddenly in the distance they could hear the stamping of a thousand men. Off in the distance, vague silhouettes resembling ghastly, dancing savages encircled the town and slowly stomped closer and closer to the town. Davis, holding the rifle up and taking aim at the shadows, began to yell curses threatened to fire.

“Davis, I fear that you may cause death to us rather than them!” bemoaned the calmer lieutenant, but scarcely had he heard Jack had he fired a round into the distance. The silhouettes did not seem to waver or break, but rather they distorted like a raindrop hitting the surface of a lake, and did not stop in their advance on the town. Gritting his teeth, he cursed that John was in league with the savage spectres and fired two shots into the Indian’s skull. Jack staggered back aghast and, staring at Davis in disbelief, gripped his blade. Though he at first faintly suspected that Davis had turned traitor, he realized what effect the spectral images had on men and decided to lie down on the road covering his eyes and ears, sheltering himself from the wild firing of the mad first lieutenant. For a few minutes he could hear nothing but the grating sound of reloading and the intense boom of the rifle shot, but after the tenth shot he could hear nothing more- not a shot, not a footstep. The town had become eerily silent, save for the ambience of the surrounding jungle. Cautiously, he raised himself up and looked at Davis.

He found the first lieutenant lying on the ground, riddled with several bullet holes. He bled out profusely, so much that his blue frock was stained a scarlet red. Around them he saw no sign of the savages save for several wisps of mist that had begun to clear up. The first lieutenant mumbled unintelligibly, cursing the fairies of the island, the Admiralty that sent him there, and the British Crown. Though Jack did all he could to stop the worst bleeding, pressing his kerchief against the deeper rifle-shot wounds,, Davis died within five minutes. The second lieutenant, not knowing what to do, knelt by his fellow officer’s corpse and began to cry out and sob for the men that had lost their lives to the fog, and for his stubborn, arrogant, and hotheaded friend, whom he had loved as a brother and lost to an alien madness. After a long hour had passed, he solemnly rose from the now pallid cadavers and dragged all four of the dead to the edge of the town. There he spent almost half an hour digging up a grave for them all; then, he laid them all there to rest side by side, their terrifying faces covered by their kerchiefs and scarves. Then, pitching the rifles up like posts, he sat by the grave to hold vigil.

Although he had planned to spend the night in vigil, Jack was continually tormented by the chilling wind. Irritably, he stood up and looked around, lighting a match to see around him. To his horror and shock, the three dead officers stood above their graves, though pale and very much translucent to where the second lieutenant could see right through them. They said no word, but stared at him in all their terrifying might, some ghostly blood pouring down from the wounds they had received in life. Not daring to even pick up a rifle, Jack let out a terrible yell- for when he turned around he had found the entire town was filled with the spectres of dead savages and officers and militia, all bleeding and staring at him. Though they did not march, the party of spirits appeared to come closer to Jack every time he blinked or averted his gaze of them; he made haste for the jungle immediately, never looking back even once. In the sky the red blood moon hung, the lunar eclipse playing out as the second lieutenant ran from the congregation of the dead. Jack did not know how long he had run when he finally stumbled upon the beach, where he was met with a sight of a greater absurdity.

The HMS Rangoon, patched up with pieces of freshly split wood, was calmly moored against a makeshift port by the rocky shores. There were several structures made of scuttled ship parts, and several sailors were helping to fill the ship up with game, pitch, and other supplies that seemed to have been recently hunted or gathered from the island. Present to receive the ragged and weary second lieutenant in shock was Captain Iron Maguire. He instantly pressed Jack about what had happened and where the other members of the expedition were, but the officer was unable to speak intelligibly. Soon he was attended to by the ship’s surgeon, and was laid in the sick ward to rest. Between his bouts of unconsciousness and consciousness, Jack had learned that he had been missing for five weeks- where he had thought he were gone for a mere five hours. He was unable to process the paradox, neither was he in any mood or condition to.

Within a few days, the HMS Rangoon was fully fixed and prepared to leave for friendly waters - finally, they prepared to embark. The night of their departure, Jack had a ghostly ill about him as he relived the events that had transpired in the deserted town. He had not yet told anyone his grim tale, though he had attempted to write down it down in his journal in vain. Every attempt was met with failure, for he both failed to differentiate between imagination and reality, and often began to break down and weep in the ward. From outside the ward he heard a loud and ghastly boom and, restless and without sleep, he ascended the stairs to the main deck where the sailors had gathered on port and starboard to lean out and watch the horizons. Everywhere the men chattered about the noise. As the booming became louder, Jack strained his eyes to catch sight of what was out in the distance; he took out his telescope and looked out at the ends of the seas. However, the image he had seen was not one he accepted in sanity, and he fell back to the ground terrified. He crawled to the stairs, but every boom and crash in the distant seas shook his mind and he finally fell unconscious; for the entire ship was encircled by the ghostly spectres of a thousand dancing savages.