

Le Chancellor

J. Verne

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Rereading in French the books by Verne I read and greatly enjoyed as a child, has to a large part been a disappointing experience. *Le Chancellor* on the other hand I have never read, not even heard of (just as a substantial part of his oeuvre remains unknown to me) and there could thus not be any case of disappointment. The story is a bit different from what you expect of a Jules Verne. For one thing it is not as scientifically didactic as his novels tend to be, there are but a few references to science although of course the story is kept on an impeccable factual level. It is about a shipwreck and the ordeals the surviving members endure on a drifting raft in the south Atlantic their numbers slowly decreasing due to a relentless attrition caused by the whims of nature. The narrative is presented as a diary, which hence eschews the traditional 'passe simple' in favor of the present tense for added dramatic effect (and hereby Verne seems to have been something of a pioneer). What starts out as a routine transportation from Charleston to Liverpool, with a small crew and a sprinkling of passengers, will eventually turn out to be a nightmare.

Why this is so is not particularly clear, this is not meant as criticism, after all this is what we encounter in reality. One thing, however, is obvious from the start, the captain is either descending into madness or is downright incompetent. Maybe the latter can be excluded, after all he is man of mature years, if not yet old, and must have had plenty of experience. In a ship there is a iron-bound hierarchy. The captain is in charge, and any defiance of his authority is to be considered as mutiny and thus punishable by death. Commanding a ship is an important and dangerous enterprise and it is absolutely necessary that one guy is in charge, disobedience should be compared to logical inconsistency in mathematics, and hence potentially lead to catastrophe. Thus the second man in command, a certain Kurtis, is reluctant to interfere with what appears as the erratic commands of his superior as he seems to navigate the ship idiosyncratically.

The first disaster that strikes the ship is that its cargo, consisting of cotton, catches fire. This seems not to be unheard of, cotton, like hay, inadequately dried, may rot and catch fire spontaneously. But what is worse it turns out that one of the passengers, against all regulations, have smuggled aboard potassium picrate which is an explosive. If the fire, which they try to control and extinguish, by sealing off the cargo, would reach it, there would be a catastrophic explosion. As it turns out this will not happen, but the perpetrator, one of those useless individuals, who survive comfortably by buying and selling, goes mad and jumps into the sea. Eventually the flames are extinguished by an inundation of water during a storm. This leads to the ship being caught on a small reef where it is stranded for some time. The reef with its strange mountain is obviously of volcanic origin, and an unknown feature on maps, thus indicating that they have chanced upon strange parts of the ocean. By this time the captain has relinquished his authority and Kurtis can finally take the command in a legal way having been ordered to do so. The ship is stuck, and only a strong tide would be able to release it, but that supposes a conjunction of the Moon

with the Sun, i.e. during a new moon, and preferably during an equinox. This occurs but unstranded the ship is still imprisoned, but then the explosives come in handy, and masterminded by the engineer Falsten, one of the passengers, a channel is created through which the ship can escape. Incidentally engineers are the heroes of Verne, and Falsten and Kurtis are the heroes of the tale, the narrator more and more showing his weakness. Kurtis never losing his 'sang-froid' and his sense of duty to the ship, its crew, and his passengers, never allowing himself to resign and give up hope.

An exact position has been determined and hence the nearest land, somewhere in the Guyanas, is determined. It is now only a matter of getting there as quickly as possible, but not too quickly, the ship is now in rather bad shape suffering a leak, which cannot be located. They try to pump out water, but they cannot keep pace with the inflow and it becomes clear that at some point it has to be abandoned, but there being not enough lifeboats a raft has to be constructed out of the material constituting the ship. There are more storms and at one the raft is lost and a new one has to be constructed. Meanwhile one of the passengers along with the defunct captain bribes a few crew members to escape in the only lifeboat. Escape to a certain death by drowning is understood. The passenger, a certain Mr Kear thereby leaves his wife in the lurch, both of them being rather despicable people, the latter being tended by a young orphaned girl, one of those sweet female characters that pop up repeatedly in Verne's fiction¹. Eventually the situation becomes untenable, the ship has to be abandoned as it is about to sink rapidly, and of course Kurtis is the last to leave, obeying the dictates of the moral conventions as to the behavior of a captain.

And now the real ordeal begins. At first leisurely, as provisions have been brought aboard allowing some modest rations of nourishment and water, maybe enough to see them through. But now the one misfortune after another hit the unfortunates. A storm threatens to capsize the raft, the horrendous waves threatening to make the raft perform a literal *culbuté*, they survive but at the price of losing their provisions. They are now doomed to starvation and thirst. The novel now reaches its climax. It is not so much an adventure story but a study in what human nature does in a state of extremity. Who will survive? Those with the hardest bodies and strongest minds? The former is of less importance, what damns a person is egotism, only when you feel the ties of loyalty with others can you transcend the hopelessness of your predicament. But as soon as you become an island onto yourself, only recognizing your own interests, you break as a reed. And indeed it is the egoistical individuals who succumb first. In extreme situations human civilized behavior breaks down and there is an inevitable drift towards savagery, in this case exemplified by cannibalism. It is an interesting phenomenon why there is such a strong tabu against cannibalism, even when someone has died accidentally. At first there is a feasting on a cadaver in which neither the narrator nor the other passengers take part, but the crew, with the exception of the captain, satisfy their hunger. The next step is of course to kill to eat, and to that purpose a drawing of lots is effected. One passenger with an invalid son to which he is devoted offers to effect it, and in this way he can make sure that his son is not selected, and as it turns out it becomes himself. His execution is postponed one day due to the protestations of the young woman. At this stage the narrator is at the end of

¹ One example being the young widow to be burned along with her deceased husband on a pyre, and saved by Fogg who would later marry her.

his tether and decided to kill himself he realizes that the water is not salty but fresh. As there is no land in sight this can only mean one thing, they must be at the outflow of the Amazon, no other river in the world would have that capacity to inundate the ocean so far away from land. And here Verne gives figures to the actual flow of the river remarking that is it 3000 times stronger than that of the Seine. And from now on it only takes a terse page to conclude the entire ordeal, although it is hardly apposite to talk about all is good which ends well.

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