

of the Captain, the Naturalist and the Telescope

“Well, then, I shall tell it, forthwith, for I am not one to turn down the opportunity to tell a tale.”

The doctor settles back with his wine, and takes on his storytelling tone. “It so transpired that I met the good captain in the 'Seafarer's Rest', a public house in Dover. The man was known to me, and I had often thought that he had the air of one who, while once dashing and adventurous, had become but a shadow of his former self. I determined to learn his tale, and to this end, said, late into the night, 'Good Captain, tell me of yourself, and how is it a man of your obvious naval quality comes to be piloting a small sloop out of Dover, rather than exploring the wide world, where there is adventure to be had?'

“'Sir,' he said, 'I have had my fill of adventure. I shall tell you my tale, that you never again ask me why I pilot a small sloop out of Dover.' And as he told his tale to me, so I tell it to you. As a young man, he had impressed the admiralty with his knowledge of knotwork and naval regulations, and reached the rank of Captain at a young age. Given his command, he determined to sail to China, where he would protect the Empire's assets with his wit, charm and cannon, and hopefully do some exploring along the way. In his company, however, was a naturalist from York, who, like many a young scholar, myself included, sought fame and fortune through the intimate study of the primitive natives and vegetation of the colonies. Now, this particular naturalist was a shiftless blighter, in the Captain's words, more given to dicing with the crew than studying the exotic flora and fauna of the regions they travelled, and the Captain developed a marked distrust of the man, quite rightly. Also in the Captain's possession was a telescope of exquisite quality - the casing was made by the most masterful of Swiss smiths, and the lenses were ground from the highest quality crystal, and, as the final part in their manufacture, polished with a cloth woven from moonbeams, such that the telescope could see clean around the world. Needless to say, the 'scope was the Captain's most favoured possession, but he did not know that it was cursed.

“You looked shocked, my friends, but the telescope bore a curse of the worst type. Whatever was seen through the moonbeam-polished lenses was seen in the most threatening, evil and perfidious light. It was said that men looking at the stars with this device had been driven mad. So it was that, after several months of sailing, when the crew were surly, the water barrels near empty, and the food stores limited to, by and large, and perhaps the Lady Kathryn may like to cover Gerald's ears, rats, that the Captain took out his telescope and surveyed the coast of an island, deep in the Pacific, and saw nothing but treacherous cliffs and even more treacherous natives. After sailing around the island for several days, the Captain made the brave and heroic decision to go ashore alone, such that he might offer himself as a sacrifice to the natives and secure his crew some much-needed provisions. However, those familiar with the region will recognise the islands of the Pacificus Pacificus tribes, who are, indeed, the most friendly savages a man could hope to meet. Overjoyed at his unexpectedly warm welcome, the Captain resolved to signal the ship, but first he located the ship with his telescope - and saw a most distressing sight! For he saw, or believed he saw, the naturalist inciting the crew to mutiny!

“The Captain drew his sword and leaped into his longboat, then sheathed his sword and rowed out to the ship. The naturalist, who had been involved in nothing more sinister than a game of dice, took fright and leaped into the rigging. The Captain, full of the most vile wrath, pursued him. In the crow's nest they wrestled, until the naturalist took the Captain's telescope from him and threatened to drop it to the deck below. In his fury, the Captain dove for the telescope, but as his hands closed around it

he missed his footing, and he fell! Halfway down, his foot caught a stray rope, which twisted him around. He dropped the telescope, which landed, eyepiece upward, in a pile of ropes. The captain, who suddenly found himself again free of the rope, was turned such that he landed on the telescope, which became wedged firmly in his... well, I don't like to say in mixed company, but I am assured that it was a most unpleasant experience.

"The once-dashing Captain found himself, if I may say, the butt of much mirth at the expense of his crew, and the garrison when his ship made port, and the entire navy upon return to England, and moreover he had to endure, for the entire voyage, the presence of the naturalist, upon whom it had fallen to remove the offending instrument. I hope, then, that your curiosity is satisfied as to the nature of the incident, and as to why the Captain has not since travelled further than Calais."

The Doctor refills his wine glass from a carafe on the table, and faces Lady Kathryn. "As to his clammy hands, my lady, I cannot speculate."

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