

## Captain Dobt-Foule's Last Voyage

All right, I admit it. We psychiatrists tend to insist on guilt when we're cornered because guilt is always the elephant in the room, you know. Guilt is the healthy touch of banality that makes meaning out of the absurd, and it is also the sibling of evil: look for the one, and you will find the other. All this comes to my mind because of an anecdote I recently read in a book about certain mysterious cases of shipwrecks. The story dates back to the 1850s, but because it was incomplete I delved a little more and found an article from 1964, "The Dobt-Perry Inquiry" by William Cooper, in *Maritime Culture*, a magazine ceased in the 1970s and hard to find ever since. Another useful source was the chapter "The Strange Case of the Galaxy", in the book *American Mysteries* by Norton Browler, of 1936. Both texts mention the story of Captain Dobt-Foule, commander of the merchant ship *Galaxy*, who mysteriously disappeared in the Atlantic Ocean in September 1855 while returning from Western Africa. To complete the reconstruction of the story, which seemed to me instructive in its way, I added some material my imagination has generously supplied in the form of a vivid and frightening dream, in which I was not only aboard Dobt-Foule's ship but I wore his clothes and had his thoughts as well. When I wrote down my dream and compared it with the testimonies of the officers of the *Galaxy*, as faithfully reported in Cooper's article, I found that my vision was unsettlingly genuine and tell-tale. And because as a psychiatrist I always have the habit of writing down my dreams, I would now like to do the same with my dream

about the last voyage of Captain Dobt-Foule on board of the Galaxy.

*The black sea is a slab of polished stone. The ship glued to its surface and the limp sails glow like pale ghosts under the Milky Way. A boat slowly drifts away as if towed by an invisible hand. A body falls from above, swishing through the air. With a splash does it sink into the water unstirred like molten peat. Dark logs slowly rolling overboard, down they plummet into the water. There, they turn into human bodies, whose dark skin shimmers in the feeble starlight. They moan and wail, as the darkness swallows them one by one...*

It was just a dream... The pale light of the dawn enters through the window, a new day begins struggling between the sulky sky above and the angry sea below. The vision still lingers in my mind. What does it mean? It was just a dream. My precious load of Nigerian timber rests in the hold. There's no need to let it go, not this time. There's nothing wrong with that, nothing to hide. And yet I cannot help but wonder how many times I let them sink, chained together, before the corvettes of the Royal Navy could board my ship?

Strange thoughts have visited me of late. I'm sick, no doubt, but with what? I feel no pain, my body's sound, and yet, I feel so cold and tired. Those dark things slowly sinking into the sea won't leave me alone. There was a time when I was young and steered my ship as if holding the wheel of my destiny, watching at the waves from the quarterdeck and commanding the storm with a flick of my left hand. The surface of the ocean is nothing but a mask. The sea is the darkness beyond the world. I feel stretched, old age has caught up with me. This is my last voyage, I knew it as soon as we set sail from Africa. It's my latest cruise at the end of the line. My wife and children are waiting for me in Boston, and I should

like to reunite with them, but I don't. They live happily, they're innocent perhaps. How long will that last? As long as they don't know about the children stolen from the rocky shores of Africa to be sold in crowded markets in Havana and New Orleans. How many did I let go at the first sight of the Union Jack streaming on the antenna of a distant cruiser? How many times have the Royal Marines searched my ship, only to find spices, lumber and molasses bound for the markets of New England or Virginia? The name of the Dobt-Foules shines like a beacon along the East Coast.

But say, should the mistakes of the youth overshadow a honourable career? Have I ever committed an act of gratuitous cruelty? Have any of my passengers been flogged without a reason? Who should judge me? My peers, those hypocrites who have gathered for years their shares from my trades? Should I climb the cross for their sins too? I'm so tired, and disgusted. If I went up on deck right now, without my coat and boots, the wind would lift me like a rag and throw me into the sea.

What was that? Ain't that the sound of bare feet? I won't sit here, while some shameless sailor sneaks into the officers' quarters. The door to the stairs is ajar, someone passed here. Loathsome dog, I'll bust ya! It's been a long time since the whip cracked on my ship. No one dare break the law on my ship. The duty officer will pay for it too. Order, for Chrissake! They must not forget that I alone rule over my ship. Hold on, though. Dragging on deck a drunken sailor by the hair and ordering a whipping in front of the crew isn't something I can do in my underpants. Did ever a judge enter the chamber in his slippers? Would ever a general cross the battlefield butt-naked? I have to put on some clothes, I got time. That bum will be snoring in the map closet, warm and cosy. He'll get

what he deserves in minute. I'll allow him one more minute of truce. That closet must be warm, the most comfortable place to hide and forget yourself for a while. Sure, one is safe in there. How can you get lost amid so many maps? All the worlds, the new and the old, the known as well as the uncharted, lie there, rolled up on the shelves. And the wildest, darkest lands can't be scary when they're just a bunch of lines drawn on a scrap of paper. Yes, when I die, if the ocean hasn't claimed my remains first, I want my tomb to be lined with my maps. I'm rambling, standing in the aisle in my robe. Let's go back inside, close the door, get dressed.

The noise of moving gears from the rudder case tells me the sea grows wild and the helmsman is struggling with the waves. I ought to climb on deck. But look at that watch! It's a quarter past five already. Hear! Footsteps behind the door again. Come on, get on the traitor! But who's this wax-pale face I see at this ungodly hour? Good God, it's the damn German cook.

«What the hell d'you think you're doing in my quarters, Mr Kohler?»

«You startled me, darting out of your cabin like that, sir.»

What does he want? Is he asking for an explanation? I owe him none, not even if I decided to hang myself from the topmast.

«Wanted to clean up the saloon before breakfast, sir.»

«Would you be so kind to go and fetch the officer of the watch?»

«Ay, sir.»

How a loathe him. It must be my quarter of Dutch blood, but I hate his guts. I shut the door and from my upholstered bench I can look at the ocean. The sun is about to rise behind

us, we are sailing northwest. I can't remember when I ordered to change our route...

«Did you want to see me, sir?»

«Why don't you knock before entering, Mr Grave?»

«I did, sir.»

«What news from the deck?»

«The hurricane is still in sight in the southwest quadrant, apparently unchanged. The sea is rough and getting worse. A second storm is approaching from the north.»

Another storm. The blank look in my second mate's eyes gets me on the nerves. With Cape Verde already twelve hundred miles behind us, and twelve hundred to Bermuda, after which still nine hundred to Boston. Damn hurricane, I've seen you grow like a tower into the sky, with your black roots planted into the ocean... the Gulf is waiting for you, what business do you have with me? Mr Thugs must have willingly set that course. What was he thinking? Should we flee in the face of one storm only to wind up right into the mouth of another? It ain't going to happen. Didn't I give an order? Am I the captain or what?

«You may go, Mr Grave.»

Alone again. The sun is blinking through the clouds, it's time to go on deck. There, Mr Thugs is scanning the horizon astern with a grim expression on his rascal's face. His lizard-like, wrinkled face, with those small sly eyes under the low forehead, matches his name. He is a good first mate, tough and immune to tropical fevers and crises of conscience, and notorious for the care he puts in whipping the flesh off the bones. We have learned to understand each other and I wouldn't trade him for any other officer, but now an invisible wall of estrangement seems to divide us for the first time.

«Was it you that ordered a change of course, Mr Thugs?»

«Ay, sir. It was already late, sir, when I reckoned we were catching up with the hurricane.»

«Nonsense! Since when can a brig fly faster than a hurricane? What's this, the Flying Dutch? No, Mr Thugs, we won't catch up with him. That monster is a demon, nothing stands in his way. He feeds on the ocean itself and won't slow down until he hits the land like a wrath of God. Keep the bow in his wake and we'll be in Bermuda ahead of twenty days.»

«But this wind strains the sails, sir.»

«Mr Thugs, follow that hurricane, he will tow us with his invisible, wild fingers!»

«Listen to me, sir, we'd better keep northwest, let's not miss the trade winds.»

«So you expect me to head for the Grand Banks like a cod fisher? No, Mr Thugs, our course is west-southwest to Bermuda.»

«What is this madness? If we get too close to the hurricane, or if that other storm catches up with us, you'll lose the ship, sir.»

«Not if you and the crew obey my orders. Course to west-southwest.»

«Sir, I beg you, let's reach the Grand Banks and from there we'll sail downwind to Boston, should it take us forty days or more. But for God's sake, let's not get too close to that monster, please.»

«You suggest we should slip through the storms like a mouse between two cats, don't you? What makes you think that? Reckoning? Experience? Instinct? You didn't fear any storm when you were young, what's been of you?»

«I have a bad feeling about that, sir, but I won't let you call me a coward. I'm not afraid of that hurricane. It's your stubbornness that scares me.»

«Ah, this is it then. You no longer trust your commander. Look, Mr Thugs: we have nothing but the wind to rely on, and the best wind we have now drives us in pursuit of that hurricane. Helmsman! Set course to west-southwest. All hands to brace the yards, studding sails out!»

I pity my good old Mr Thugs as he watches helplessly at the men leaping and climbing like monkeys. The poor man looks humiliated as he talks to me again:

«It'd be a shame to get rid of the cargo this time. We have to bring it back, we owe it to the owners and all those who have invested even one single dollar in the cruise. We shouldn't get into trouble right now, should we? Don't you think it'd be a mistake to mess with our conscience right now?»

«Mess with our conscience? You're afraid of throwing some logs overboard? If I well remember, you never recoiled when we had to cast them slaves overboard, and it was you that chained them together. You disgust me, Mr Thugs. I'd better go below before doing something I will regret.»

Downstairs everything is quiet, only my heart is still pounding. Little by little, I calm down, leaning on the bulkhead. Suddenly a sound comes from the dark end of the corridor, like a choking sob. I take a few steps towards that darkness but I stop in front of the map closet with my hand on the brass doorknob, shivering. What am I afraid of? Why do I hesitate? I let go of the handle and run into my cabin, but as soon as the door closes I detect a piercing smell, a mixture of dead water and rotten seaweed. Before I can even notice the presence of the intruder, a pair of skeletal arms grasp my knees like the pincers of a monstrous crab. Under a tangle of sodden, salt-encrusted hair, two large eyes stare at me. I feel like

screaming at that mask of misery is hideous, the stank overpowers me.

«I implore you, save me!» the stranger whispers, then he lets go of me and falls to the floor with a thud. He is not one of my men. How did he manage to get on board? Surely not while the ship was docked in Nigeria. This man has come undoubtedly out of the ocean, but how? I cannot waste any time, a castaway is lying in my cabin and I must rescue him. The poor devil must have gone adrift for weeks. I pour a few drops of water into his mouth until he finally regains consciousness.

«Where is your ship?» I ask.

He weakly shakes his head. I make him lie down on the bench, but when I reach for the door, the man pulls himself up with unexpected strength and cries, «Where are you going?»

«To fetch my first mate and the surgeon.»

The stranger stares at me in horror and mutters a few incomprehensible words, I only grasp «mercy... save me... your secret...», then he passes out again. I sit and watch him. This man remained suspended for God knows how long between two abysses equally unfathomable. He must have gone crazy. In every port I heard stories of sailors who lost their minds after drifting alone for weeks and months at sea. But his arrival is also a wonder. What are the odds for a ship to sight a human head in the middle of the ocean? And what are the odds that a castaway, with no more strength or hope, reaches a ship flying on heavy seas and grabs hold of a buoying line and hoists himself up? Yes, his presence in my cabin is quite a mystery. Is he real? I'll keep my passenger a secret until I sort this out.

Back on deck, the wind, the daylight and the voices of my men bring me back to reality. Mr Thugs stands on the quar-



terdeck next to the helmsman with a grim expression on his lizard face. The ship moves downwind towards the sulky horizon and from the north another storm roars in pursuit. I go forward and slip into the galley hatch, where I find Mr Kohler.

«I'd like a ration of biscuits and a couple of apples, please.»

That stupid cook can't take his eyes off me, he looks like he saw a ghost.

«Wrap the whole in a napkin, I'll take it with me to my cabin.»

The cook obeys, occasionally glancing at me with suspicion. When the bundle is fastened, I slip it under my arm and without a word I go out, followed by the cook, whose idiotic face emerges from the hatch.

My guest is now awake. The bundle lies open on the table in front of him, and with his bony fingers he grasps the biscuit.

«Slow down, sir! No one will rob you of your food.»

The stranger pays no attention to me and when he has finished with the biscuit he licks the crumbs off the table and bites into one apple. Blood spurts from his lips and drips onto the table, but he doesn't care. I look at him with pity, he has lost all restraint. What a price for salvation! But as if reading my mind, the stranger stops and says:

«I disgust you, I can see it in your eyes. No one should ever watch a conscience fallen into abjection.»

I raise my eyebrows in astonishment as he scarfs down the second apple. Then he drinks and finally sits back sighing deeply, with his eyes closed.

«Your ship is a legend, Captain,» he says. «The Galaxy and her commander.»

I watch him attentively, it's impossible to tell his age. I seem to know him. I try to remember where I've seen his face, but I just can't.

«There's a storm chasing us,» he says.

«I know. But you didn't tell me the name of your ship yet.»

«My ship? Oh yeah, the Prodigy.»

I mentally repeat that peculiar name, I've never heard of it in all the years of my seamanship.

«Do you mind if I smoke?» I ask politely.

«You're the master.» His tone is starting to annoy me.

«What did you do aboard the Prodigy, if I may ask?»

He doesn't answer, he just looks outside. Guilt is talkative when venial, but it grows silent when serious. In the meantime, the smoke from my pipe rises thick and blue in the stuffy air of the cabin. He might be a fugitive, or even a murderer, for all I know.

«Are we meant for Havana?» he asks.

«Boston.»

«Then we must be off course, if I'm not mistaken.»

It makes me angry now.

«That is precisely *my* course.»

«Pursued by a storm and flying in the wake of a hurricane,» he chuckles.

«Does it scare you?»

He laughs, baring his yellow teeth and says, «The only one who ought to be scared is you.»

«Listen to me very carefully. I don't know who you are or what you did aboard the Prodigy. However, I remind you that on this ship *I* am the captain and commander. You must be an experienced seafarer, and considering your raw manners I suppose you might have been a scoundrel. Am I far from the truth?»

With my pipe suspended in mid-air, I wait. But he keeps looking at the sea and begins to sob softly.

«Forgive me, I didn't mean to offend you,» I say with remorse. «Please accept my apologies. I understand your suffering, believe me. You lost your ship and comrades, and I can imagine you survived at the cost of God knows what sacrifices...»

«Don't you dare patronise me,» he replies in a despising tone. «Don't mistake my tears for weakness, Captain. It's not for me that I cry. It's for you that I weep.»

«Oh well, that's enough. You are sick, you need some rest. You can take my bed.»

I leave the cabin in anger and go back on deck, where I stay for the whole afternoon scanning the horizon, lost in thought. The two storms are powerful and seem to seek and touch each other with their grey fingers. Mr Thugs ordered to reduce the sails and to get the windlass ready. The sun shines through a crack between the storms, right before setting. I gather another bundle of food from the kitchen, under the astonished gaze of the cook, and return to my cabin. From the stairs, hidden in the shadows, I can hear my two officers conversing:

«Did you hear too? The captain helps himself with food. He's getting odd. You must have pissed him off this morning, Mr Grave. I heard him raise his voice.»

«I don't know what you're talking about, Mr Thugs.»

«The fight you had in his cabin, of course. I heard him scream.»

«Maybe he was mad at Mr Kohler, you know how much he hates him.»

«Are you joking? Mr Kohler remained in the kitchen all morning.»

«Then he must have yelled at himself, because I didn't see the captain but for a few minutes before dawn. This is a strange journey indeed, Mr Thugs.»

The wind is crazy and the spars have to be constantly braced. However, the course remains unchanged for all helmsmen who alternate at the wheel, due west-southwest. In the darkness, the lanterns of the crawling Galaxy sway like two lost souls. My guest has fallen into a tormented sleep, full of spasms and mumbling, not too different from mine, after all. I lay down on the bench, I don't even take off my boots. What are those cries I can hear in a distance? I listen carefully, the voices fade in and out, as if the wind blew them away. How many hours I spend like this, in the torment of insomnia, I don't know. At dawn, a light knocking on my door disperses the voices. Through the crack of the door I see the cook, asking me where he will serve my breakfast.

«Leave it on the table in the saloon, Mr Kohler. And please, make it double. And one last thing: you need not tidy up my cabin today. I don't feel well and I think I'll get some rest.»

The cook disappears up the stairs. As I climb on deck a powerful gust of fresh wind hits me on my neck, waking me up completely. The first mate is on the quarterdeck and has just relieved Mr Grave and his watch.

«Good morning, Mr Thugs.»

«Sir.»

«I've just told Mr Kohler I don't want to be disturbed for the rest of the morning. I'm not feeling well and I want to rest. You will take command in my absence. I see we've gained on both storms. Set the wheel to the west.»

«So you haven't changed your mind.»

«Do as I say. Course due west and strengthen the sails. We have a good wind. Call me only if something extraordinary happens.»

My guest is up. I find him sitting on the bed, scratching his beard.

«You had a pretty rough night,» I say.

«I don't wish my nights to anyone.»

«Do you have a bad conscience?»

«You tell me. After all, what's conscience if not a pit of pains and nightmares, piled up layer upon layer?»

«Whatever,» I say, unwrapping the bundle of breakfast on the table for him. While looking at him, I cannot help but think what a hell of a fighter life is. It struggles to the end, and even one step away from annihilation it will find the strength to survive at any cost. After the meal, my guest washes himself and puts on my clothes. Though he's shaved and combed like a civilized man, I still find him repulsive. Now I notice that his clean face strangely looks like mine.

«I see you haven't changed the course. Why won't you go northwest, without risking your ship and life?»

«My first officer made the same point. But I have my reasons, my responsibilities...»

«Chasing a hurricane is a nice way of taking care for ship and crew. I wonder if you're trying to prove something.»

«Should I? Why then?»

«Because you're old and tired and you've been knowing for a while that the burden you carry will drag you to the bottom.»

I feel anger boiling in my stomach.

«Listen to me. I saved you from the sea, which is a big deal, but my course remains my business. No storm has ever denied me a passage.»

«Do you really believe that hurricanes and calms exist for you? The laws of nature don't care about you. But what would you do if I demanded to change your course?»

«You demanding? That makes no sense, you have no authority here. Why should I change my course for you?»

«Because it's the only way you can save me.»

«I already saved your life!»

«Too long have you pretended not to see, until you finally turned blind. I know what scares you at night, those voices rising from the sea. It's because of them that you don't want to go home. I know you want to sink the ship.»

I feel the terror creeping into my head.

«Finally you're afraid of me.»

«You're crazy. Mark my words, there will be an inquiry about the sinking of the Prodigy, and if it turns out that you bear any responsibility for the disaster, I will make you regret the moment you boarded my ship...»

«You threatening me? Don't be ridiculous, I've been dead to you for so many years already! Do you know how long it takes for a body to sink? It's a long, lonely journey. But while the body descends into the darkness, the soul strives and fights to go up, like a bubble pining for the light. And when it comes to the surface, it lets out a cry.»

«You don't know what you're talking about. I warn you as my guest, do not abuse of your privileges.»

«Me, your guest? Privileges? Ah! You hypocrite! You cast me away a long time ago, don't you remember? You have thrown me into the waves like ballast, a hindrance to your abominable trades. Because I alone was there holding you back, begging you not to cross the line.»

«How dare you...»

«You pretend you forgot me, but I never abandoned you. I have *always followed in your wake*. I know all your exploits, I

counted one by one the slaves I saw falling from the deck of your ship chained together. I saw you, proud of yourself, of your wealth, of your recklessness, standing on the quarterdeck like a god.»

«You're crazy,» I yell, but I am shaking.

«One quickly gets used to evil, once one stops calling it so. You saved your honour by lying, you sold your precious cargoes by day and smuggled your slaves by night. Nothing was more important than reputation. But you also cast me into the waves with those poor things. And now I'm back at the turn of the tide.»

I sag into my chair, exhausted. He is the man of my dream! It's him who fell from above into the dark water. Suddenly a strange calm invades me. It's odd, how this silence expanding inside my head consoles me. It's not the tense silence that used to fall on deck every time we got rid of the slaves. This silence is profound, it's the sound of the abyss. What was done cannot be undone. This is my last voyage, indeed, although not the last for my crew. The time will come for them too.

Someone knocks, interrupting my thoughts. Mr Thugs has already opened the door and is looking inside with suspicion. But I'm sitting alone in a thick cloud of smoke. He notices the three bundles on the table, with the untouched food.

«What do you want, Mr Thugs?»

«Sir, you'd better come and see. You told me to call if anything odd happened, and well...»

I run up the stairs followed by my first mate. On deck, several sailors are leaning over the bulwark, handling gaffs and ropes.

«We've got it, sir!»

«What is it?»

«It's a boat, worn out by sun and water. God knows how long it's been adrift.»

I don't lean over to look, there's no need. I know all too well what it means, it's the last sign left to decipher. I go forward and cling to a shroud, scanning the horizon to the northwest, where a shred of clear sky glitters between the clouds.

«Mr. Thugs, change of course! Due northwest, all hands on deck, cross the yards!»

«Yes sir,» he shouts, spitting his half-cigar into the waves and repeating the command at the top of his lungs. All hands grip the ropes, like puppets trying to wrest their strings from the hands of an invisible puppeteer. Then I approach my first officer:

«Do you ever hear them?»

«Hear what, sir?»

«It doesn't matter, Mr Thugs.»

All sailors sing and sweat, the lines creak in the blocks and the chains clank from above, invisible behind the sails. I leave the command to my first mate and go back downstairs. My cabin is empty. My pipe is still warm, I light it and draw a smoke. I look at the spot where I last saw my guest and I know I will never see him again.

Now darkness is falling, and I climb on deck. Some sailors, rigging the royal up above, are only voices in the wind. Mr Thugs is standing next to the helmsman and the light of the binnacle lamp illuminates their tired, stern faces. I lean over the bulwark. The boat is still there. They forgot to cut it loose. I drop myself into it. No one saw me and as soon as I cut the line, the Galaxy rushes forward.

«Boat adrift!» someone cries.



«Let her go, she's just a wreck,» Mr Thugs replies. «Course due northwest! Let's go home!»

Alone in the dark, I drift away.