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Sea of Poppies

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One



The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny, for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream: how could she have, living as she did in northern Bihar, four hundred miles from the coast? Her village was so far inland that the sea seemed as distant as the nether-world: it was the chasm of darkness where the holy Ganga disappeared into the Kala-Pani, 'the Black Water'.

It happened at the end of winter, in a year when the poppies were strangely slow to shed their petals: for mile after mile, from Benares onwards, the Ganga seemed to be flowing between twin glaciers, both its banks being blanketed by thick drifts of white-petalled flowers. It was as if the snows of the high Himalayas had descended on the plains to await the arrival of Holi and its springtime profusion of colour.

The village in which Deeti lived was on the outskirts of the town of Ghazipur, some fifty miles east of Benares. Like all her neighbours, Deeti was preoccupied with the lateness of her poppy crop: that day, she rose early and went through the motions of her daily routine, laying out a freshly washed dhoti and kameez for Hukam Singh, her husband, and preparing the rotis and achar he would eat at midday. Once his meal had been wrapped and packed, she broke off to pay a quick visit to her shrine room: later, after she'd bathed and changed, Deeti would do a proper puja, with flowers and offerings; now, being clothed still in her night-time sari, she merely stopped at the door, to join her hands in a brief genuflection.

Soon a squeaking wheel announced the arrival of the ox-cart that would take Hukam Singh to the factory where he worked, in

Ghazipur, three miles away. Although not far, the distance was too great for Hukam Singh to cover on foot, for he had been wounded in the leg while serving as a sepoy in a British regiment. The disability was not so severe as to require crutches, however, and Hukam Singh was able to make his way to the cart without assistance. Deeti followed a step behind, carrying his food and water, handing the cloth-wrapped package to him after he had climbed in.

Kalua, the driver of the ox-cart, was a giant of a man, but he made no move to help his passenger and was careful to keep his face hidden from him: he was of the leather-workers' caste and Hukam Singh, as a high-caste Rajput, believed that the sight of his face would bode ill for the day ahead. Now, on climbing into the back of the cart, the former sepoy sat facing to the rear, with his bundle balanced on his lap, to prevent its coming into direct contact with any of the driver's belongings. Thus they would sit, driver and passenger, as the cart creaked along the road to Ghazipur – conversing amicably enough, but never exchanging glances.

Deeti, too, was careful to keep her face covered in the driver's presence: it was only when she went back inside, to wake Kabutri, her six-year-old daughter, that she allowed the ghungta of her sari to slip off her head. Kabutri was lying curled on her mat and Deeti knew, because of her quickly changing pouts and smiles, that she was deep in a dream: she was about to rouse her when she stopped her hand and stepped back. In her daughter's sleeping face, she could see the lineaments of her own likeness – the same full lips, rounded nose and upturned chin – except that in the child the lines were still clean and sharply drawn, whereas in herself they had grown smudged and indistinct. After seven years of marriage, Deeti was not much more than a child herself, but a few tendrils of white had already appeared in her thick black hair. The skin of her face, parched and darkened by the sun, had begun to flake and crack around the corners of her mouth and her eyes. Yet, despite the careworn commonplaceness of her appearance, there was one respect in which she stood out from the ordinary: she had light grey eyes, a feature that was unusual in that part of the country. Such was the colour – or perhaps colourlessness – of her eyes that

they made her seem at once blind and all-seeing. This had the effect of unnerving the young, and of reinforcing their prejudices and superstitions to the point where they would sometimes shout taunts at her – *chudaliya, dainiya* – as if she were a witch: but Deeti had only to turn her eyes on them to make them scatter and run off. Although not above taking a little pleasure in her powers of discomfiture, Deeti was glad, for her daughter's sake, that this was one aspect of her appearance that she had not passed on – she delighted in Kabutri's dark eyes, which were as black as her shiny hair. Now, looking down on her daughter's dreaming face, Deeti smiled and decided that she wouldn't wake her after all: in three or four years the girl would be married and gone; there would be enough time for her to work when she was received into her husband's house; in her few remaining years at home she might as well rest.

With scarcely a pause for a mouthful of roti, Deeti stepped outside, on to the flat threshold of beaten earth that divided the mud-walled dwelling from the poppy fields beyond. By the light of the newly risen sun, she saw, greatly to her relief, that some of her flowers had at last begun to shed their petals. On the adjacent field, her husband's younger brother, Chandan Singh, was already out with his eight-bladed nukha in hand. He was using the tool's tiny teeth to make notches on some of the bare pods – if the sap flowed freely overnight he would bring his family out tomorrow, to tap the field. The timing had to be exactly right because the priceless sap flowed only for a brief period in the plant's span of life: a day or two this way or that, and the pods were of no more value than the blossoms of a weed.

Chandan Singh had seen her too and he was not a person who could let anyone pass by in silence. A slack-jawed youth with a brood of five children of his own, he never missed an opportunity to remind Deeti of her paucity of offspring. *Ka bhail?* he called out, licking a drop of fresh sap from the tip of his instrument. What's the matter? Working alone again? How long can you carry on like this? You need a son, to give you a helping hand. You're not barren, after all . . .

Being accustomed to her brother-in-law's ways, Deeti had no difficulty in ignoring his jibes: turning her back on him, she headed

into her own field, carrying a wide wicker basket at her waist. Between the rows of flowers, the ground was carpeted in papery petals and she scooped them up in handfuls, dropping them into her basket. A week or two before, she would have taken care to creep sideways, so as not to disturb the flowers, but today she all but flounced as she went and was none too sorry when her swishing sari swept clusters of petals off the ripening pods. When the basket was full, she carried it back and emptied it next to the outdoor chula where she did most of her cooking. This part of the threshold was shaded by two enormous mango trees, which had just begun to sprout the dimples that would grow into the first buds of spring. Relieved to be out of the sun, Deeti squatted beside her oven and thrust an armload of firewood into last night's embers, which could still be seen glowing, deep inside the ashes.

Kabutri was awake now, and when she showed her face in the doorway, her mother was no longer in a mood to be indulgent. So late? she snapped. Where were you? *Kám-o-káj na hoi?* You think there's no work to be done?

Deeti gave her daughter the job of sweeping the poppy petals into a heap while she busied herself in stoking the fire and heating a heavy iron tawa. Once this griddle was heated through, she sprinkled a handful of petals on it and pressed them down with a bundled-up rag. Darkening as they toasted, the petals began to cling together so that in a minute or two they looked exactly like the round wheat-flour rotis Deeti had packed for her husband's midday meal. And 'roti' was indeed the name by which these poppy-petal wrappers were known although their purpose was entirely different from that of their namesake: they were to be sold to the Sudder Opium Factory, in Ghazipur, where they would be used to line the earthenware containers in which opium was packed.

Kabutri, in the meanwhile, had kneaded some atta and rolled out a few real rotis. Deeti cooked them quickly, before poking out the fire: the rotis were put aside, to be eaten later with yesterday's leftovers – a dish of stale alu-posth, potatoes cooked in poppy-seed paste. Now, her mind turned to her shrine room again: with the hour of the noontime puja drawing close, it was time to go down to the river for a bath. After massaging poppy-seed oil into Kabutri's

hair and her own, Deeti draped her spare sari over her shoulder and led her daughter towards the water, across the field.

The poppies ended at a sandbank that sloped gently down to the Ganga; warmed by the sun, the sand was hot enough to sting the soles of their bare feet. The burden of motherly decorum slipped suddenly off Deeti's bowed shoulders and she began to run after her daughter, who had skipped on ahead. A pace or two from the water's edge, they shouted an invocation to the river – *Jai Ganga Mayya ki . . .* – and gulped down a draught of air, before throwing themselves in.

They were both laughing when they came up again: it was the time of year when, after the initial shock of contact, the water soon reveals itself to be refreshingly cool. Although the full heat of summer was still several weeks away, the flow of the Ganga had already begun to dwindle. Turning in the direction of Benares, in the west, Deeti hoisted her daughter aloft, to pour out a handful of water as a tribute to the holy city. Along with the offering, a leaf flowed out of the child's cupped palms. They turned to watch as the river carried it downstream towards the ghats of Ghazipur.

The walls of Ghazipur's opium factory were partially obscured by mango and jackfruit trees but the British flag that flew on top of it was just visible above the foliage, as was the steeple of the church in which the factory's overseers prayed. At the factory's ghat on the Ganga, a one-masted pateli barge could be seen, flying the pennant of the English East India Company. It had brought in a shipment of *chalán* opium, from one of the Company's outlying sub-agencies, and was being unloaded by a long line of coolies.

Ma, said Kabutri, looking up at her mother, where is that boat going?

It was Kabutri's question that triggered Deeti's vision: her eyes suddenly conjured up a picture of an immense ship with two tall masts. Suspended from the masts were great sails of a dazzling shade of white. The prow of the ship tapered into a figurehead with a long bill, like a stork or a heron. There was a man in the background, standing near the bow, and although she could not see him clearly, she had a sense of a distinctive and unfamiliar presence.

Deeti knew that the vision was not materially present in front of her – as, for example, was the barge moored near the factory. She

had never seen the sea, never left the district, never spoken any language but her native Bhojpuri, yet not for a moment did she doubt that the ship existed somewhere and was heading in her direction. The knowledge of this terrified her, for she had never set eyes on anything that remotely resembled this apparition, and had no idea what it might portend.

Kabutri knew that something unusual had happened, for she waited a minute or two before asking: Ma? What are you looking at? What have you seen?

Deeti's face was a mask of fear and foreboding as she said, in a shaky voice: Beti – I saw a jahaj – a ship.

Do you mean that boat over there?

No, beti: it was a ship like I've never seen before. It was like a great bird, with sails like wings and a long beak.

Casting a glance downriver, Kabutri said: Can you draw for me what you saw?

Deeti answered with a nod and they waded ashore. They changed quickly and filled a pitcher with water from the Ganga, for the puja room. When they were back at home, Deeti lit a lamp before leading Kabutri into the shrine. The room was dark, with soot-blackened walls, and it smelled strongly of oil and incense. There was a small altar inside, with statues of Shivji and Bhagwan Ganesh, and framed prints of Ma Durga and Shri Krishna. But the room was a shrine not just to the gods but also to Deeti's personal pantheon, and it contained many tokens of her family and forebears – among them such relics as her dead father's wooden clogs, a necklace of rudraksha beads left to her by her mother, and faded imprints of her grandparents' feet, taken on their funeral pyres. The walls around the altar were devoted to pictures that Deeti had drawn herself, in outline, on papery poppy-petal discs: such were the charcoal portraits of two brothers and a sister, all of whom had died as children. A few living relatives were represented too, but only by diagrammatic images drawn on mango leaves – Deeti believed it to be bad luck to attempt overly realistic portraits of those who had yet to leave this earth. Thus her beloved older brother, Kesri Singh, was depicted by a few strokes that stood for his sepoy's rifle and his upturned moustache.

Now, on entering her puja room, Deeti picked up a green mango leaf, dipped a fingertip in a container of bright red sindoor and drew, with a few strokes, two wing-like triangles hanging suspended above a long curved shape that ended in a hooked bill. It could have been a bird in flight but Kabutri recognized it at once for what it was – an image of a two-masted vessel with unfurled sails. She was amazed that her mother had drawn the image as though she were representing a living being.

Are you going to put it in the puja room? she asked.

Yes, said Deeti.

The child could not understand why a ship should find a place in the family pantheon. But why? she said.

I don't know, said Deeti, for she too was puzzled by the sureness of her intuition: I just know that it must be there; and not just the ship, but also many of those who are in it; they too must be on the walls of our puja room.

But who are they? said the puzzled child.

I don't know yet, Deeti told her. But I will when I see them.

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The carved head of a bird that held up the bowsprit of the *Ibis* was unusual enough to serve as proof, to those who needed it, that this was indeed the ship that Deeti saw while standing half-immersed in the waters of the Ganga. Later, even seasoned sailors would admit that her drawing was an uncannily evocative rendition of its subject, especially considering that it was made by someone who had never set eyes on a two-masted schooner – or, for that matter, any other deep-water vessel.

In time, among the legions who came to regard the *Ibis* as their ancestor, it was accepted that it was the river itself that had granted Deeti the vision: that the image of the *Ibis* had been transported upstream, like an electric current, the moment the vessel made contact with the sacred waters. This would mean that it happened in the second week of March 1838, for that was when the *Ibis* dropped anchor off Ganga-Sagar Island, where the holy river debouches into the Bay of Bengal. It was here, while the *Ibis* waited to take on a pilot to guide her to Calcutta, that Zachary Reid had his first look at India: what he saw was a dense thicket of mangroves,

and a mudbank that appeared to be uninhabited until it disgorged its bumboats – a small flotilla of dinghies and canoes, all intent on peddling fruit, fish and vegetables to the newly arrived sailors.

Zachary Reid was of medium height and sturdy build, with skin the colour of old ivory and a mass of curly, lacquer-black hair that tumbled over his forehead and into his eyes. The pupils of his eyes were as dark as his hair, except that they were flecked with sparks of hazel: as a child, strangers were apt to say that a pair of twinklers like his could be sold as diamonds to a duchess (later, when it came time for him to be included in Deeti's shrine, much would be made of the brilliance of his gaze). Because he laughed easily and carried himself with a carefree lightness, people sometimes took him to be younger than he was, but Zachary was always quick to offer a correction: the son of a Maryland freedwoman, he took no small pride in the fact of knowing his precise age and the exact date of his birth. To those in error, he would point out that he was twenty, not a day less and not many more.

It was Zachary's habit to think, every day, of at least five things to praise, a practice that had been instilled by his mother as a necessary corrective for a tongue that sometimes sported too sharp an edge. Since his departure from America it was the *Ibis* herself that had figured most often in Zachary's daily tally of praiseworthy things. It was not that she was especially sleek or rakish in appearance: on the contrary, the *Ibis* was a schooner of old-fashioned appearance, neither lean, nor flush-decked like the clippers for which Baltimore was famous. She had a short quarter-deck, a risen fo'c'sle, with a fo'c'sle-deck between the bows, and a deckhouse amidships, that served as a galley and cabin for the bo'suns and stewards. With her cluttered main deck and her broad beam, the *Ibis* was sometimes taken for a schooner-rigged barque by old sailors: whether there was any truth to this Zachary did not know, but he never thought of her as anything other than the topsail schooner that she was when he first signed on to her crew. To his eye there was something unusually graceful about the *Ibis*'s yacht-like rigging, with her sails aligned along her length rather than across the line of her hull. He could see why, with her main- and headsails standing fair, she might put someone in mind of a white-winged bird in flight: other tall-masted

ships, with their stacked loads of square canvas, seemed almost ungainly in comparison.

One thing Zachary did know about the *Ibis* was that she had been built to serve as a 'blackbirder', for transporting slaves. This, indeed, was the reason why she had changed hands: in the years since the formal abolition of the slave trade, British and American naval vessels had taken to patrolling the West African coast in growing numbers, and the *Ibis* was not swift enough to be confident of outrunning them. As with many another slave-ship, the schooner's new owner had acquired her with an eye to fitting her for a different trade: the export of opium. In this instance the purchasers were a firm called Burnham Bros., a shipping company and trading house that had extensive interests in India and China.

The new owners' representatives had lost no time in calling for the schooner to be dispatched to Calcutta, which was where the head of the house, Benjamin Brightwell Burnham, had his principal residence: the *Ibis* was to be refitted upon reaching her destination, and it was for this purpose that Zachary had been taken on. Zachary had spent eight years working in the Gardiner shipyard, at Fell's Point in Baltimore, and he was eminently well-qualified to supervise the outfitting of the old slave-ship: but as for sailing, he had no more knowledge of ships than any other shore-bound carpenter, this being his first time at sea. But Zachary had signed on with a mind to learning the sailor's trade, and he stepped on board with great eagerness, carrying a canvas ditty-bag that held little more than a change of clothes and a penny-whistle that his father had given him as a boy. The *Ibis* provided him with a quick, if stern schooling, the log of her voyage being a litany of troubles almost from the start. Mr Burnham was in such a hurry to get his new schooner to India that she had sailed short-handed from Baltimore, shipping a crew of nineteen, of whom nine were listed as 'Black', including Zachary. Despite being undermanned, her provisions were deficient, both in quality and quantity, and this had led to confrontations, between stewards and sailors, mates and fo'c'slemen. Then she hit heavy seas and her timbers were found to be weeping: it fell to Zachary to discover that the 'tween-deck, where the schooner's human cargo had been accommodated, was riddled with peepholes and air ducts, bored by

generations of captive Africans. The *Ibis* was carrying a cargo of cotton, to defray the costs of the journey; after the inundation, the bales were drenched and had to be jettisoned.

Off the coast of Patagonia, foul weather forced a change in course, which had been plotted to take the *Ibis* across the Pacific and around Java Head. Instead, her sails were set for the Cape of Good Hope – with the result that she ran afoul of the weather again, and was becalmed a fortnight in the doldrums. With the crew on half-rations, eating maggoty hardtack and rotten beef, there was an outbreak of dysentery: before the wind picked up again, three men were dead and two of the black crewmen were in chains, for refusing the food that was put before them. With hands running short, Zachary had put aside his carpenter's tools and become a fully fledged foretopman, running up the ratlines to bend the topsail.

Then it happened that the second mate, who was a hard-horse, hated by every black man in the crew, fell overboard and drowned: everyone knew the fall to be no accident, but the tensions on the vessel had reached such a point that the ship's master, a sharp-tongued Boston Irishman, let the matter slip. Zachary was the only member of the crew to put in a bid when the dead man's effects were auctioned, thus coming into possession of a sextant and a trunk-load of clothes.

Soon, being neither of the quarter-deck nor of the fo'c'sle, Zachary became the link between the two parts of the ship, and was shouldering the duties of the second mate. He was not quite the novice now that he had been at the start of the voyage, but nor was he equal to his new responsibilities. His faltering efforts did nothing to improve morale and when the schooner put in to Cape Town the crew melted away overnight, to spread word of a hell-afloat with pinch-gut pay. The reputation of the *Ibis* was so damaged that not a single American or European, not even the worst rufflers and rum-gaggers, could be induced to sign on: the only seamen who would venture on her decks were lascars.

This was Zachary's first experience of this species of sailor. He had thought that lascars were a tribe or nation, like the Cherokee or Sioux: he discovered now that they came from places that were far apart, and

had nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean; among them were Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese. They came in groups of ten or fifteen, each with a leader who spoke on their behalf. To break up these groups was impossible; they had to be taken together or not at all, and although they came cheap, they had their own ideas of how much work they would do and how many men would share each job – which seemed to mean that three or four lascars had to be hired for jobs that could well be done by a single able seaman. The Captain declared them to be as lazy a bunch of niggers as he had ever seen, but to Zachary they appeared more ridiculous than anything else. Their costumes, to begin with: their feet were as naked as the day they were born, and many seemed to own no clothing other than a length of cambric to wind around their middle. Some paraded around in drawstringed knickers, while others wore sarongs that flapped around their scrawny legs like petticoats, so that at times the deck looked like the parlour of a honeyhouse. How could a man climb a mast in bare feet, swaddled in a length of cloth, like a newborn child? No matter that they were as nimble as any seaman he'd ever seen – it still discomfited Zachary to see them in the rigging, hanging like monkeys on the ratlines: when their sarongs blew in the wind, he would avert his eyes for fear of what he might see if he looked up.

After several changes of mind, the skipper decided to engage a lascar company that was led by one Serang Ali. This was a personage of formidable appearance, with a face that would have earned the envy of Genghis Khan, being thin, long and narrow, with darting black eyes that sat restlessly upon rakishly angled cheekbones. Two feathery strands of moustache drooped down to his chin, framing a mouth that was constantly in motion, its edges stained a bright, livid red: it was as if he were forever smacking his lips after drinking from the opened veins of a mare, like some bloodthirsty Tartar of the steppes. The discovery that the substance in his mouth was of vegetable origin came as no great reassurance to Zachary: once, when the serang spat a stream of blood-red juice over the rail, he noticed the water below coming alive with the thrashing of shark's fins. How harmless could this betel-stuff be if it could be mistaken for blood by a shark?

The prospect of journeying to India with this crew was so unappealing that the first mate disappeared too, taking himself off the ship in such a hurry that he left behind a bagful of clothes. When told that the mate was a gone-goose, the skipper growled: 'Cut his painter, has he? Don't blame him neither. I'd of walked my chinks too, if I'd'a been paid.'

The *Ibis's* next port of call was to be the island of Mauritius, where they were to exchange a cargo of grain for a load of ebony and hardwood. Since no other sea-officer could be found before their departure, the schooner sailed with Zachary standing in for the first mate: thus it happened that in the course of a single voyage, by virtue of desertions and dead-tickets, he vaulted from the merest novice sailor to senior seaman, from carpenter to second-in-command, with a cabin of his own. His one regret about the move from fo'c'sle to cabin was that his beloved penny-whistle disappeared somewhere on the way and had to be given up for lost.

Before this, the skipper had instructed Zachary to eat his meals below – 'not going to spill no colour on my table, even if it's just a pale shade of yaller.' But now, rather than dine alone, he insisted on having Zachary share the table in the cuddy, where they were waited on by a sizeable contingent of lascar ship's-boys – a scuttling company of launders and chuckeroos.

Once under sail, Zachary was forced to undergo yet another education, not so much in seamanship this time, as in the ways of the new crew. Instead of the usual sailors' games of cards and able-whackets, there was the clicking of dice, with games of parcheesi unfolding on chequerboards of rope; the cheerful sound of sea-shanties yielded to tunes of a new kind, wild and discordant, and the very smell of the ship began to change, with the odour of spices creeping through the timbers. Having been put in charge of the ship's stores Zachary had to familiarize himself with a new set of provisions, bearing no resemblance to the accustomed hardtack and brined beef; he had to learn to say 'resum' instead of 'rations', and he had to wrap his tongue around words like 'dal', 'masala' and 'achar'. He had to get used to 'malum' instead of mate, 'serang' for bosun, 'tindal' for bosun's mate, and 'seacunny' for helmsman; he had to memorize a

new shipboard vocabulary, which sounded a bit like English and yet not: the rigging became the 'ringeen', 'avast!' was 'bas!', and the cry of the middle-morning watch went from 'all's well' to 'alzbel'. The deck now became the 'tootuk' while the masts were 'dols'; a command became a 'hookum' and instead of starboard and larboard, fore and aft, he had to say 'jamna' and 'dawa', 'agil' and 'peechild'.

One thing that continued unchanged was the division of the crew into two watches, each led by a tindal. Most of the business of the ship fell to the two tindals, and little was seen of Serang Ali for the first two days. But on the third, Zachary came on deck at dawn to be greeted with a cheerful: 'Chin-chin Malum Zikri! You catchi chow-chow? Wat dam t'ing hab got inside?'

Although startled at first, Zachary soon found himself speaking to the serang with an unaccustomed ease: it was as if his oddly patterned speech had unloosed his own tongue. 'Serang Ali, where you from?' he asked.

'Serang Ali blongi Rohingya – from Arakan-side.'

'And where'd you learn that kinda talk?'

'Afeem ship,' came the answer. 'China-side, Yankee gen'l'um allo tim tok so-fashion. Also Mich'man like Malum Zikri.'

'I ain no midshipman,' Zachary corrected him. 'Signed on as the ship's carpenter.'

'Nevva mind,' said the serang, in an indulgent, paternal way. 'Nevva mind: allo same-sem. Malum Zikri sun-sun become pukka gen'l'um. So tell no: catchi wife-o yet?'

'No.' Zachary laughed. 'N'how bout you? Serang Ali catchi wife?'

'Serang Ali wife-o hab makee die,' came the answer. 'Go topside, to hebbin. By'mby, Serang Ali catchi nother piece wife . . .'

A week later, Serang Ali accosted Zachary again: 'Malum Zikri! Captin-bugger blongi poo-shoo-foo. He hab got plenty sick! Need one piece dokto. No can chow-chow tiffin. Allo tim do chhee-chhee, pee-pee. Plenty smelly in Captin cabin.'

Zachary took himself off to the Captain's stateroom and was told that there was nothing wrong: just a touch of the back-door trots – not the flux, for there was no sign of blood, no spotting in the mustard. 'I know how to take care o' meself: not the first time I've had a run of the squitters and collywobbles.'

But soon the skipper was too weak to leave his cabin and Zachary was handed charge of the ship's log and the navigation charts. Having been schooled until the age of twelve, Zachary was able to write a slow but well-formed copperplate hand: the filling of the log-book posed no problem. Navigation was another matter: although he had learnt some arithmetic at the shipyard, he was not at ease with numbers. But over the course of the voyage, he had been at pains to watch the Captain and the first mate as they took their midday readings; at times he had even asked questions, which were answered, depending on the officers' moods, either with laconic explanations or with fists to his ear. Now using the Captain's watch, and a sextant inherited from the dead mate, he spent a good deal of time trying to calculate the ship's position. His first few attempts ended in panic, with his calculations placing the ship hundreds of miles off course. But on issuing a hookum for a change of course, he discovered that the actual steering of the ship had never been in his hands anyway.

'Malum Zikri think lascar-bugger no can do sail ship?' said Serang Ali indignantly. 'Lascar-bugger savvi too muchi sail ship, you look-see.'

Zachary protested that they were three hundred miles off course for Port Louis and was answered with an impatient retort: 'What for Malum Zikri make big dam bobbery'n so muchee buk-buk and big-big hookuming? Malum Zikri still learn-pijjin. No sabbi ship-pijjin. No can see Serang Ali too muchi smart-bugger inside? Takee ship Por'Lwee-side three days, look-see.'

Three days later, exactly as promised, the twisted hills of Mauritius appeared on the jamna bow, with Port Louis nestled in the bay below.

'I'll be dickswiggered!' said Zachary, in grudging admiration. 'Don't that just beat the Dutch? You sure that the right place?'

'What I tell you no? Serang Ali Number One sabbi ship-pijjin.'

Zachary was to learn later that Serang Ali had been steering his own course all along, using a method of navigation that combined dead reckoning – or 'tup ka shoomar' as he called it – with frequent readings of the stars.

The Captain was now too ill to leave the *Ibis*, so it fell to Zachary to conduct the shipowners' business on the island, which included the delivery of a letter to the owner of a plantation, some six miles

from Port Louis. Zachary was making ready to go ashore with the letter when he was intercepted by Serang Ali, who looked him up and down in concern.

‘Malum Zikri catch plenty trouble’n he go Por’Lwee like that.’

‘Why? Don see nothin wrong.’

‘Malum look-see.’ Serang Ali stepped back and ran a critical eye over Zachary. ‘What dam cloth hab got on?’

Zachary was dressed in his workaday clothes, canvas trowsers and the usual sailor’s banyan – a loose-fitting tunic made, in this instance, of coarse and faded Osnaburg cloth. After weeks at sea his face was unshaven and his curly hair was grimy with grease, tar and salt. But none of this seemed untoward – he was just delivering a letter after all. He shrugged: ‘So?’

‘Malum Zikri go so-fashion to Por’Lwee, no come back,’ said Serang Ali. ‘Too muchi press gang in Por’Lwee. Plenty blackbirder wanchi catch one piece slave. Malum go be shanghaied, made slave; allo time floggin, beatin. No good.’

This gave Zachary pause for thought: he went back to his cabin and looked more closely at the possessions he had accumulated as a result of the death and desertion of the two ships’ mates. One of them had been something of a dandy and there were so many clothes in his trunk as to intimidate Zachary: what went with what? What was right for which time of day? It was one thing to look at these fine go-ashores on others, but to step into them was quite another matter.

Here again, Serang Ali came to Zachary’s aid: it turned out that among the lascars there were many who boasted of skills apart from sailing – among them a kussab who had once worked as a ‘dress-boy’ for a shipowner; a steward who was also a darzee and earned extra money by sewing and mending clothes; and a topas who had learnt barbering and served as the crew’s balwar. Under Serang Ali’s direction, the team went to work, rifling through Zachary’s bags and trunks, picking out clothes, measuring, folding, snipping, cutting. While the tailor-steward and his chuckeroos busied themselves with inseams and cuffs, the barber-topas led Zachary to the lee scuppers and, with the aid of a couple of launders, subjected him to as thorough a scrubbing as he had ever had. Zachary offered no

resistance until the topas produced a dark, perfumed liquid and made as if to pour it into his hair: 'Hey! What's that stuff?'

'Champi,' said the barber, making a rubbing motion with his hands. 'Champoo-ing too good . . .'

'Shampoo?' Zachary had never heard of this substance: loath as he was to allow it on his person, he gave in, and to his own surprise, he was not sorry afterwards, for his head had never felt so light nor his hair smelled so good.

In a couple of hours Zachary was looking at an almost unrecognizable image of himself in the mirror, clothed in a white linen shirt, riding breeches and a double-breasted summer paletot, with a white cravat knotted neatly around his neck. On his hair, trimmed, brushed and tied with a blue ribbon at the nape of his neck, sat a glossy black hat. There was nothing missing, so far as Zachary could see, but Serang Ali was still not satisfied: 'Sing-song no hab got?'

'What?'

'Clock.' The serang slipped his hand into his vest, as if to suggest that he was reaching for a fob.

The idea that he might be able to afford a watch made Zachary laugh. 'No,' he said. 'I ain got no watch.'

'Nebba mind. Malum Zikri wait one minute.'

Ushering the other lascars out of the cabin, the serang disappeared for a good ten minutes. When he came back, there was something hidden in the folds of his sarong. Shutting the door behind him, he undid his waist knot and handed Zachary a shining silver watch.

'Geekus crow!' Zachary's mouth fell open as he looked at the watch, sitting in his palm like a gleaming oyster: both its sides were covered with intricately filigreed designs, and its chain was made of three finely chased silver strands. Flipping the cover open, he stared in amazement at the moving hands and clicking cogs.

'It's beautiful.' On the inner side of the cover, Zachary noticed, there was a name, engraved in small letters. He read it out loud: "Adam T. Danby". Who was that? Did you know him, Serang Ali?'

The serang hesitated for a moment and then shook his head: 'No. No, sabbi. Bought clock in pawnshop, in Cape Town. Now blongi Zikri Malum's.'

'I can't take this from you, Serang Ali.'

'Is all right, Zikri Malum,' said the serang with one of his rare smiles. 'Is all right.'

Zachary was touched. 'Thank you, Serang Ali. Ain nobody never gave me nothin like this before.' He stood in front of the mirror, watch in hand, hat on head, and burst into laughter. 'Hey! They'll make me Mayor, for sure.'

Serang Ali nodded: 'Malum Zikri one big piece pukka sahib now. Allo propa. If planter-bugger coming catch, must do dumbcow.'

'Dumbcow?' said Zachary. 'What you talkin bout?'

'Must too muchi shout: planter-bugger, you go barnshoot sister. I one-piece pukka sahib, no can catch. You takee pistol in pocket; if bugger try shanghai, shoot in he face.'

Zachary pocketed a pistol and went nervously ashore – but almost from the moment he stepped on the quay he found himself being treated with unaccustomed deference. He went to a stable to hire a horse, and the French owner bowed and addressed him as 'milord' and couldn't do enough to please him. He rode out with a groom running behind him, to point the way.

The town was small, just a few blocks of houses that faded away into a jumble of shacks, shanties and other hut-houses; beyond, the path wound through dense patches of forest and towering, tangled thickets of sugar-cane. The surrounding hills and crags were of strange, twisted shapes; they sat upon the plains like a bestiary of gargantuan animals that had been frozen in the act of trying to escape from the grip of the earth. From time to time, passing between fields of sugar-cane, he would come upon gangs of men who would put down their scythes to stare at him: the overseers would bow, raising their whips deferentially to their hats while the workers gazed in expressionless silence, making him glad of the weapon in his pocket. The plantation house came into view while he was still a long way off, through an avenue of trees with peeling, honey-coloured bark. He had expected a mansion, like those in the plantations of Delaware and Maryland, but in this house there were no grand pillars or gabled windows: it was a one-storeyed wood-framed bungalow, skirted by a deep veranda. The owner, Monsieur d'Épinay, was sitting on the veranda in his drawers and suspenders – Zachary thought nothing of

this, and was taken aback when his host apologized for his state of undress, explaining, in halting English, that he had not expected to receive a gentleman at this time of day. Leaving his guest to be waited on by an African maidservant, M. d'Épinay went inside and emerged a half-hour later, fully dressed, and regaled Zachary with a meal of many courses, accompanied by fine wines.

It was with some reluctance that Zachary checked his watch and announced that it was time for him to leave. As they were walking out of the house, M. d'Épinay handed him a letter that was to be delivered to Mr Benjamin Burnham, in Calcutta.

'My canes are rotting in the field, Mr Reid,' said the planter. 'Tell Mr Burnham that I need men. Now that we may no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed. Put in a word for me, will you not?'

With his farewell handshake, M. d'Épinay offered a word of warning. 'Be careful, Mr Reid; keep your eyes open. The mountains around are filled with marrons and desperadoes and escaped slaves. A gentleman on his own must be careful. Make sure your gun is never far from your hands.'

Zachary trotted away from the plantation with a grin on his face and the word 'gentleman' ringing in his ears: there were clearly many advantages to being branded with this label – and more of these became apparent when he arrived at the dockside quarter of Port Louis. With nightfall, the narrow lanes around the Lascar Bazar had come alive with women, and the sight of Zachary, in his paletot and hat, had a galvanic effect on them: clothes became the newest addition to his list of praiseworthy things. Thanks to their magic, he, Zachary Reid, so often disregarded by the whores of Fell's Point, now had women hanging off his arms and elbows: he had their fingers in his hair, their hips pressing against his own, and their hands toying playfully with the horn buttons of his broadcloth trowsers. One of them, who called herself Madagascar Rose, was as pretty a girl as he had ever seen, with flowers behind her ears and painted red lips: dearly would he have loved, after ten months on a ship, to be dragged behind her door, to stick his nose between her jasmimed breasts and to run his tongue over her vanilla lips – but suddenly there was Serang Ali, in his sarong, blocking the lane, his

thin acquiline face compressed into a dagger of disapproval. At the sight of him, the Rose of Madagascar wilted and was gone.

‘Malum Zikri no hab got dam brain inside?’ demanded the serang, arms akimbo. ‘Hab got water topside, in he head? What for wanchi flower-girl? He not big pukka sahib now?’

Zachary was in no mood for a lecture. ‘Get knotted, Serang Ali! Can’t nobody turn a sailor from a snatchwarren.’

‘Why for Malum Zikri wanchi pay for jiggy-pijjin?’ said the serang. ‘Oc-to-puss no have see? Is too muchi happy fish.’

This had Zachary foundering. ‘Octopus?’ he said. ‘What’s that got to do with anything?’

‘No hab see?’ said Serang Ali. ‘Mistoh Oc-toh-puss eight hand hab got. Make heself too muchi happy inside. Allo time smile. Why Malum not so-fashion do? Ten finger no hab got?’

It wasn’t long before Zachary threw up his hands in resignation and allowed himself to be led away. All the way back to the ship, Serang Ali kept brushing dust off his clothes, fixing his cravat, straightening his hair. It was as if he had acquired a claim on him, in having aided in his transformation into a sahib; no matter how much Zachary cursed and slapped his hands, he would not stop: it was as if he had become an image of gentility, equipped with all that it took to find success in the world. It dawned on him that this was why Serang Ali had been so determined to keep him from bedding the girls in the bazar – his matings, too, would have to be arranged and supervised. Or so he thought.

The skipper, still ailing, was now desperate to get to Calcutta and wanted to weigh anchor as soon as possible. But when told of this, Serang Ali disagreed: ‘Cap’tin-bugger plenty sick,’ he said. ‘If no catchi dokto, he makee die. Go topside too muchee quick.’

Zachary was ready to fetch a doctor, but the Captain would not let him. ‘Not goin’t’a have no shagbag of a leech fingerin me taffrail. Nothing wrong with me. Just the running scoots. I’ll be better the minute we make sail.’

The next day the breeze freshened and the *Ibis* duly stood out to sea. The skipper managed to stagger out to the quarter-deck and declared himself to be all a-taunto but Serang Ali was of another opinion: ‘Captin catchi Cop’ral-Forbes. Look-see – he tongue go

black. Better Malum Zikri keep far from Captin.’ Later, he handed Zachary a foul-smelling decoction of roots and herbs. ‘Malum drinki he: no catchi sick. Cop’ral-Forbes – he one piece nasty bugger.’ On the serang’s advice Zachary also made a change of diet, switching from the usual sailor’s menu of lobscouse, dandyfunk and chokedog to a lascar fare of karibat and kedgeree – spicy skillygales of rice, lentils and pickles, mixed on occasion with little bits of fish, fresh or dry. The tongue-searing tastes were difficult to get used to at first, but Zachary could tell the spices were doing him good, scouring his insides, and he soon grew to like the unfamiliar flavours.

Twelve days later, just as Serang Ali had predicted, the Captain was dead. This time there was no bidding for the dead man’s effects: they were thrown overboard and the stateroom was washed and left open, to be cauterized by the salt air.

When the body was tipped into the sea it was Zachary who read from the Bible. He did it in a voice that was sonorous enough to earn a compliment from Serang Ali: ‘Malum Zikri number-one joss-pijjin bugger. Church-song why no sing?’

‘No can do,’ said Zachary. ‘Ain could never sing.’

‘Nebba mind,’ said Serang Ali. ‘One-piece song-bugger hab got.’ He beckoned to a tall, spidery ship’s-boy called Rajoo. ‘This launder blongi one-time Mission-boy. Joss-man hab learn him one-piece saam.’

‘Psalm?’ said Zachary, in surprise. ‘Which one?’

As if in answer, the young lascar began to sing: “‘Why *do* the heathen so furious-*ly* rage together . . . ?”

In case the meaning of this had escaped Zachary, the serang considerably provided a translation. ‘That mean,’ he whispered into Zachary’s ear, ‘for what heathen-bugger makee so muchi bobbery? Other works no hab got?’

Zachary sighed: ‘Guess that just about sums it all up.’

*

By the time the *Ibis* dropped anchor at the mouth of the Hooghly River, eleven months had passed since her departure from Baltimore, and the only remaining members of the schooner’s original complement were Zachary and Crabbie, the vessel’s ginger cat.

With Calcutta just two or three days away, Zachary would have been only too glad to get under weigh immediately. Several days

went by while the fretful crew waited for a pilot to arrive. Zachary was asleep in his cabin, dressed in nothing but a sarong, when Serang Ali came to tell him that a bunder-boat had pulled alongside.

‘Misto Dumbcow hab come.’

‘Who’s that?’

‘Pilot. He too muchi dumbcowing,’ said the serang. ‘Listen.’

Cocking his head, Zachary caught the echo of a voice booming down the gangway: ‘Damn my eyes if I ever saw such a caffle of barnshooting badmashes! A chowdering of your chutes is what you budzats need. What do you think you’re doing, toying with your tatters and luffing your laurels while I stand here in the sun?’

Pulling on an undershirt and trowsers, Zachary stepped out to see a stout, irate Englishman pounding the deck with a Malacca cane. He was dressed in an extravagantly old-fashioned way, with his shirt-collar up on high, a coat that was cut away in the skirts, and a Belcher fogle around his waist. His face, with its bacony hue, its mutton-chop whiskers, beefy cheeks and liverish lips, looked as if it could have been assembled upon a butcher’s counter. Behind him stood a small knot of porters and lascars, bearing an assortment of bowlas, portmanteaus and other baggage.

‘Do none of you halalcores have any wit at all?’ The veins stood out on the pilot’s forehead as he shouted at the unbudging crew: ‘Where’s the mate? Has he been given the kubber that my bunder-boat has lagowed? Don’t just stand there: jaw! Hop to it, before I give your ganders a taste of my latte. Have you saying your bysmelas before you know it.’

‘I do apologize, sir,’ said Zachary, stepping forward. ‘I’m sorry you had to wait.’

The pilot’s eyes narrowed in disapproval as they took in Zachary’s dishevelled clothes and bare feet. ‘Caulk my dead lights, man!’ he said. ‘You’ve certainly let yourself go, haven’t you? Won’t do when you’re the only sahib on board – not if you don’t want to be borak-poked by your darkies.’

‘Sorry, sir . . . just a bit discombobbd.’ Zachary stuck out his hand. ‘I’m the second mate, Zachary Reid.’

‘And I’m James Doughty,’ said the newcomer, giving Zachary’s hand a grudging shake. ‘Formerly of the Bengal River Pilot Service;

currently bespoke arkati and turnee for Burnham Bros. The Burra Sahib – Ben Burnham, that is – asked me to take charge of the ship.’ He waved airily at the lascar who was standing behind the wheel. ‘That’s my seacunny over there; knows exactly what to do – could take you up the Burrempooter with his eyes closed. What’d you say we leave the steering to that badmash and find ourselves a drop of loll-shrub?’

‘Loll-shrub?’ Zachary scratched his chin. ‘I’m sorry, Mr Doughty, but I don’t know what that is.’

‘Claret, my boy,’ the pilot said airily. ‘Wouldn’t happen to have a drop on board, would you? If not, a brandy-pawnee will do just as well.’