

THE BENGALI PACKET

*Being a Review of the Sarah Ogden Case*

*And an Introduction, for the Author's Children, to Matters of Some Delicacy*

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Written and posted from my rooms at the Hotel where, against all probability and despite the best efforts of bad people, I have arrived comfortably.

— Dr. Josef Wennik  
April, 1904

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I .

*On the Ocean Wide and Wicked*

CHILDREN,

You are aware of what I do, the places I go, and the risks involved in my work. So I needn't tell you by what extraordinary means I arrived where I did; I need only tell you the place. And this is where I begin my account.

Not that it was immediately clear where we were. There was only the dark, and the five of us in it. Five grown-up, well-paid, and presumably expert men, groping round in blind circles like inmates of Bedlam. And no sooner had we found ourselves circumstanced in this way, than someone called out "It's a ship!" and we all went down in a heap.

The floor, it appeared, was in violent motion beneath us. For the moment we were splayed

across it in a groaning tangle of limbs, but just as quickly were we thrown upright again, and we stood weightless, clinging together in a body, so that in the next toss those of us who'd got our footing were hauled back down by those who hadn't. Two of my colleagues, holding to opposite tails of my coat, rent that garment up to the shoulders. And Dr. Braunner's top-hat went bouncing off into the gloom, the bare-headed little man bouncing helplessly after it, swearing lustily. Thus for our dignified entrance into the Ogden Case.

Still, it was more the surprise of our being in motion, than the motion itself, that caused us inconvenience. In little time we'd adjusted to the room's actions and were back about our business. Dr. Hoff put into my hands an old lamp he'd come upon, somehow, in the confusion. And with this item lit and hung from a crossbeam, we turned from our own pale and blinking faces to the scene about us.

I admit my first impulse was to dim the light again, as if, in a second try, I might have raised a different room from the dark. There seemed something fundamentally *wrong* with this one: It was a rude, low-ceilinged affair, walled in a black, salt-ravaged iron that I would not have touched with a pair of tongs. A throbbing of engines sounded from no distinct place and carried up through one's feet, with a force to shake the rivets from the walls. And a mob of boxes, sacks and crates, looking very much alive in the inconstant light, crowded us from all angles, as though leaguings together to drive off the intrusion.

Our hearts sank as we realized, for certain now, that we were at sea, and most probably in the belly of a merchant steamship. Doctors Getz and Hoff announced from a porthole that there was no land to starboard, and that the seas were being raised by a storm. Hoff judged—correctly, as it happened—that we had crossed into the higher latitudes of the Atlantic, and would soon be among icebergs. This seemed like odd intelligence, given that a pair of life-rings flanking the cabin door identified this as the *Virago*, out of Bengal.

“An excursion steamer from the East Indies, caught in the North *Atlantic*?” snorted Dr.

Braunner. He had returned to view, and stared defiantly at us from beneath his stove-in hat. It was clear that any comment on Dr. Braunner's fall would have invited fisticuffs.

"The life-rings might have been taken from another ship," said Dr. Getz, who added, with an impressive look: "We might have fallen in with pirates."

"Pirates?" Braunner turned on Dr. Getz. "Shame we didn't bring my four-year-old boy along, herr doctor. You'd have had a backer for that theory. *Pirates*, to be sure."

"I don't mean Bluebeard, sir. You realize there are still any number of criminals afloat—"

"Why did you call this an excursion ship?" I asked Dr. Braunner.

"Did I? Well..." he said, looking to me and then scanning the room again: "We're in the store-room, aren't we? Look at the stores."

And here he had a point. The staples of serious and prolonged sea-travel—your hard-tack and cured meats, rope and rigging and so forth—these were nowhere in evidence. In their place were dusty crates of champagne and filberts; snuff, cheroots, bath-salts and betel-nut in mouldering boxes and rent-open sacks; long-disused hoops and racquets of Oriental design; a pair of bouzoukis, neither strung; a wide ivory vessel, shaped like a lion's head and sprouting with old silk parasols; theatrical masks and robes thrown negligently over a rack and abandoned to decay... and none of these in any quantity that would have counted for freight. No, if the *Virago* had been provisioned to any purpose, it was not that of crossing the globe.

"There are plague ships, you know," piped Dr. Getz, not entirely helpfully. "Derelict ships, too, that go floating abroad for tens of years without sinking, pulled along with the currents, no one to man them or to explain whence they came—"

"There are indeed," said Dr. Braunner who, being as short and turbulent as Getz was tall and fey, made a natural foil for that man. "Though you sense you're having to *shout* this good information over the roar of *engines*? These are industrious ghosts, herr doctor, who would keep their

engines coaled.”

“I don’t believe I mentioned ghosts, sir,” Getz returned, in high indignation. “And you’re free to advance your own theories, if you don’t like mine. But I’ll tell you, this ship is bound on no good business, and I think we ought not to have come.”

Of little use in crisis, Dr. Getz had nonetheless voiced the prevailing opinion. Braunner offered to send him home in the first box or barrel that might be found seaworthy, but I could see Getz’s fear had taken root in all the men, Braunner perhaps most of all. And as they drew slowly together beneath the lamp, I could see, too, that one of us was missing.

“Dr. Hecht?” I called out.

“There, sir.” Hoff pointed over my shoulder, to where the shape of Dr. Hecht loomed in a weak aura of candle-light. He stood at such a distance that I had to revise my impression of the room’s size.

“Ehh: And what’s it you’re doing over there, doctor?” I called to him.

“He’s lit a candle, sir.”

“Lit before we arrived, Dr. Getz. By someone else.” This was the voice of Hecht.

“Then what—”

“There’s a mat put up on wine-casks. By way of a bed, I should think.”

“But there’s no one in it...?”

“Not at present. But you’ll watch that door, Dr. Getz. Our man ought to come back through it in short order, if he’s left a candle burning.”

“Oh? Very good,” said Getz, who started away from the door and refused to look at it. “But who would *sleep* in a room like this?” he mused, to cover his panic.

“Maybe one of your pirates,” suggested Dr. Braunner.

“No—My thought was, this could be the *brig*, and not a supply-room at all—”

“Good of them, to let a man walk in and out of the brig—”

“Dr. Hecht?” Hoff’s voice, ordinarily very steady, rose through the others, tinged with alarm: “Come away from there, if you would, sir.”

“I’ll finish my inspection of this bed, Dr. Hoff.”

“Plenty of time for that, if you’ll come join us, first . . .”

Dr. Hecht was on point of some more heated remark, but the words caught in his throat. His spine stiffened, and I observed his hat to rise, slightly, with the elevation of his hair.

Just as suddenly, too, did the ship’s engines die in my ears, and the skies without cease to thunder (or so it is in my memory). It appeared we had been watched this whole time, from a dark corner beside the bed, our observer holding so still as to elude Dr. Hecht’s notice when he stood not three feet before it. He saw it now, certainly. And as the rest of us did, each man froze in his turn. With our coats dirtied and rumped, our jaws fallen open and eyes agog, we must have looked something like men coming awake in a tavern, at the sound of a gun-shot: This cabin belonged to none of Dr. Getz’s pirates, nor to any of your conventional seagoing terrors—What confronted us was nothing more nor less remarkable than the figure of a little *girl*.

And a more quaint or composed apparition could scarce have been imagined. This was not your fainting or crying or scurrying type of girl, but very much the *staring* type; and she seemed content to do just that, in her green dress and bow, very little surprised by us and even less afraid. There was not a doubt she’d seen us, but something in the wide fixity of her eyes suggested she had been staring just like this, into the space before her, long before we came to occupy it.

“What’s the matter with her?” said Dr. Braunner, the first of us to find his voice. He advanced a step and put the question directly: “What’s the matter with you, dear?”

“Carefully...,” cautioned Dr. Hecht.

“You haven’t swallowed *sea*—” here the voice of Dr. Getz cracked, conspicuously—“ehh, *sea*—”

water, have you, dear?”

“Taken nightshade, I think,” Hoff whispered, beside me.

“She’s deranged, at any rate,” announced Dr. Braunner, “You note the eyes, Dr. Wennik?”

“I do,” I told him. “You’ll take care not to frighten her, please.”

Braunner only snorted. There was a sound of rummaging, and Getz appeared beside him with a length of bamboo. The two conferred in undertones.

“Gentlemen?” I called to them: “You’ll describe your project with that stick, before you—”

But Braunner had already dealt the girl a poke with it, at the shoulder.

Said Braunner, somewhat abashed: “Just testing.” Testing, that is, whether a cane put to the girl’s shoulder would strike it or pass right through. The former case had been observed, to the general relief.

“Very good,” I said, shaking myself from a daze. “You’re satisfied this is a girl, standing before us in the flesh.”

“Just so,” chimed Dr. Getz. “That was our purpose, you see, with the—”

“—A girl who can report, that on meeting the great scientific minds of Europe at sea, she was jabbed at with sticks.”

Getz turned a sagging grin to me.

“Commend yourselves, on doing the work of a party of baboons.” I plodded toward them, as the ship’s engines roared back to life, and the storm outside recommenced. “Away from her,” I ordered. “Go and search out the ship.”

“I’m minded she’ll tell us what’s outside that door, before we go,” growled Dr. Hecht.

“Yes: What goes on here, that we would find you aboard?” Braunner demanded, of the girl.

“At least tell us where we are, and where we’re going,” said Getz, the three men crowding tight

around her. “You may not be frightened, dear, but nor are you very safe, in this place.”

I was forced to lay hold of collars and shoulders, and to remove these men perforce. The girl, incredibly, had not moved from her spot. She stood rigid and unblinking, like a little idol, witnessing us with those enormous eyes. I knelt to her, as the others arranged themselves behind me in craning attitudes.

“I trust you’re able to hear me, and to speak,” I said.

“Pointless,” muttered Dr. Braunner, to grunts of assent.

But I’d taken hold of the girl’s hands, and her eyes had come to rest on mine. “No,” I said, “We’ll get this sorted quickly enough. We just need to know, dear, where we are and...ehh, where we’re going.”

“My questions, if you’ll recall,” sniffed Dr. Getz.

“We’ll let her answer, then,” I said.

Her eyes narrowed, and she leaned forward to say, very carefully: “But I don’t know.”

“Ha!” cried Dr. Braunnner. “You see that? Doesn’t know. And *I* don’t know why we’re asking a six-year-old girl, of all people.” He introduced, just beside my ear, a pudgy index finger, leveled at the girl: “Is that how old you are, dear: Six?”

“Yes, sir.”

I stood and brushed Dr. Braunner’s hand aside—“Hem, yes. Six years old,” he was saying, with the air of a man who’s gotten to the Point: “Write that down, one of you.”

But the others only watched and shuffled quietly aside, as I led the girl past them. She mounted to her crude little bed, set her back to the pillows and, like a miniaturized lady in state, suffered us to gather round. She gazed at us without apprehension or even curiosity, waiting only for whatever might happen next.

Dr. Getz asked her if she wouldn’t like a glass of water. But encouraged to go find her one, he

cleared his throat into his fist and meditated a better question.

“I take it you’ve got a name...,” tried Dr. Hecht.

“Sarah,” said the girl, and she gave us her surname.

“Excellent,” said Dr. Hoff. “And we take it this isn’t really your home? This ship?”

“No.” She seemed to find some humor in the question.

“No? And why do you think you’re here now, instead of there?”

A cloud passed over her face. “Why aren’t you at home, Sarah?” I clarified.

“I went after Henry.”

“Her brother,” said Dr. Braunner. He rubbed his pince-nez on his sleeve and affected not to follow the conversation.

“Your brother led you here?” Dr. Geotze pushed forward, in a new effort to assert himself. “Is he somewhere on board?”

She shook her head, very slightly.

“Sarah, you’re aware that this is serious business?”

She nodded.

“Then you will forbear to speak in riddles. Now, I’ll tell you plainly what we’d like to know...”

A pause. “Dr. Wennik: Tell this girl what we’d like to know.”

“Ehh, we can start with you at home, dear,” I said. “What happened there, to you and your brother?”

“Well...We’d been at tiffin...”

“*Tiffin*? Where’s that?” Getz demanded.

“It’s not a place—” Hoff began.

“Then she’s making up words for things.”



“No, she knows what she’s saying,” I told them. “Tiffin’s a word they use in the East Indies.”

“Meaning...?”

“Mid-morning tea, I think.”

“She was taking *lunch*...”

“Essentially.”

“And this is useful intelligence.”

“I have to think so.”

Dr. Braunner had been studying his spectacles at arm’s length, as if they, of all objects in the world, interested him most; but he could sustain the act no longer: “A six-year-old girl finishes eating,” he cried, “gets up from the table and boards a *ship*?”

“I imagine there’s more to it than that—”

“Oh no,” Sarah interposed.

“No?”

“No. I hadn’t finished eating.”

I had just time to consider the strangeness of this remark, when the ship rolled into a deep swell and we were sent sprawling through the room again.

I fell athwart Sarah’s bed and lay clinging there for the moment, like a supplicant in the tragic theater. Awkward as the was, I was able to study her closely, and to confirm a few suspicions. It was clear, for instance, that in her eyes I was represented as some amusing and effectless species of ghost, whom she did not fear but vaguely pitied. I understood, too, that there would be no impressing Sarah with the dangers of her situation; I could as soon have ferried her home on my back. Still, she held a certain knowledge that had become vital to us. And if she was not fully conscious, yet, of what she knew, she was at least willing to help these inoffensive spirits, who’d taken such a keen interest in her...

Somewhere in the dark, Dr. Getz had been upended into a rotten-lidded crate, and with his flailing legs had managed to kick over a suit of armor. The racket was incredible. Hoff and Hecht were racing around him, alternately dodging and grabbing at his boots as though fighting the Hydra. Even more troubling, though, was the sight of Dr. Braunner, who'd perched himself on an earthen pot and was staring, troll-like, back at me, with just his knees, his nose, and his sack-belly bulging into the candle-light.

"What would you do with her?" he asked, quietly.

I stood and shot my cuffs, a bit self-conscious. "She knows how she came here, and why. And she can tell us."

"Can you?" he asked the girl. She nodded, with her eyes on me.

"I propose to listen," I said. "If her answer tells us nothing of why *we're* here, of what lies forward or how we'll get back, then I miss my guess. And you may proceed with her, after your own method."

Braunner only stared at me, avidly as the girl now, without speaking.

"...And I trust you'll allow her more than a few words at a time, herr doctor, till she's given her side of this complete."

Braunner waved his arm, as a man who makes no promises. But he silenced the others and bade them be seated, when they returned at last to the candle-light. I had been given the floor, as it were, with this extraordinary little person, she of the green dress and bow, the tiny folded hands, and the implacable eyes. I fished my notebook and leads from their pockets and, softening my voice as far as the boilers and pistons and groaning plates and planks of the ship would allow, I asked her a simple question about home.