

The Drum of Saccharine

William Hope Hodgson

SS, Adriatic,

May 23.

Mr. Armes, my First Mate, and Mr. James, the Second, had a row to-day. They clubbed together in port and bought a hundred pounds of saccharine.

The duty on it, going into England, is considerable—sevenpence an ounce, upwards. In this case the duty will amount to about fifteen shillings a pound, as the stuff is over “proof,” as I might say, and the duty varies according to strength. I think the two of them are rather aghast at their own daring; they’ve been planning, all the way home, how they’re going to get the “goods” through the Customs.

Mr. Armes mentioned to me the proposition he and the Second Mate had in mind.

This was after they’d bought the stuff, and I told him it would not interfere with anything I was doing, and they could go ahead.

Only, if the Customs dropped on the saccharine, they must own up and pay the fine themselves. For I was not going to have the ship fined.

This was on the bridge, and he grinned at me, warningly.

“Sst! Remember the man at the wheel, Sir!” he said.

The row they had to-day came about through Mr. Armes proposing to hide the stuff in a big, empty paint-drum, which was to be made water-tight and then lowered over the side before the searchers came aboard. They would sink it on the end of a line and buoy the end with a casual bit of cork. Then, when the search was over, they would only have to get hold of the inconspicuous little float and haul the stuff up again.

The Second Mate’s notion was to hang the stuff down inside the hollow steel mainmast with a thin wire, the end of which could be fixed by jamming it under one of the nuts that held down the lid that covers the top of every mast that isn’t a spike mast.

It was in this morning’s watch that they got rowing about the thing—each wanting his own way and each sure that his method of hiding the stuff was the best.

Finally, they came up to me to ask my opinion. I was on the bridge at the time, and I had to keep telling them to speak quieter; for I could see that Sedwell, the man at the wheel, was curious.

When my two officers had explained their ideas I told them how I felt in the matter.

I said that, possibly, the Second Mate's plan was quite as good as the Mate's; but it was no better, and certainly not as safe; for if the stuff were found outside the ship neither they nor the ship could be fined, as long as there were no witnesses, and they would lose only the price they had paid for the stuff— though, of course, this would be bad enough; for the two of them had spent a year's savings on their "speculation." But I made it clear to them that I left the choice entirely with them. I preferred the First Mate's method, chiefly because it would keep the ship free; and I fancy we want to let things rest a bit; for I can tell lately, by the thoroughness of the official search, after each voyage, that we are somewhat under a cloud! Perhaps we have deserved it; for certainly I've had some very good luck lately.

"But, mind you," I said, "I stand out of this business altogether. Do it your own way, and, profit or loss, you must take the responsibility. I merely advise the two of you to take the First Mate's plan of sinking the stuff to a small float alongside just before the searchers come aboard. . . ."

"Sshh, Sir! Not too loud!" said Mr. James, the Second Mate, holding up his hand, quickly.

I stopped at once; for I had certainly spoken a little louder, in my intention to make it clear that I stood entirely out of the business, lock, stock and barrel, as you might say. I glanced over at Sedwell, at the wheel.

It struck me that the man was plainly trying to hear what we were saying, and I stepped over quickly to look at the compass. I found that he had indeed been taking more notice of the two officers' argument than of his steering; for the vessel was nearly two points off her course. I suggested to Sedwell that our ideas of steering were not, perhaps, quite identical. I endeavored to fuse this suggestion into him in as few words as possible, and returned to where the two Mates were standing.

"He was certainly trying to hear," I told them; "but I'm pretty sure he's heard nothing that matters. In fact, I'm *sure* he's heard nothing that could give your plans away."

"So are we, Sir," said the Second Mate, Mr. James. "We both tried to catch the few carefully chosen phrases you dealt out to him" (they both grinned); "but we could only just hear the more vigorous portion!"

May 24.

We docked this evening, and I was certainly interested to see whether the two of them got the stuff through; for a hundred pounds of saccharine is a hefty quantity to try to smuggle casually into port and afterwards ashore through the officers at the dockgates.

Apparently, the First Mate's plan was the one they'd chosen, for they disappeared below with the biggest empty paint-drum we've got in the ship. I stayed on the bridge all the morning, so as to give them full liberty; and they fixed and caulked the thing up in my cabin, where no one could see them.

Just before the officers came aboard, the Mate slipped away aft, to where he had previously slung the paint-drum over the quarter. He took a look round, then lowered it rapidly away, and let go the end of the line, to which he had bent on a piece of rough cork, that looked as if it were nothing but a bit of old stuff that was just floating about in the water.

It was Sedwell's wheel again, as it chanced; and when I turned from having a quick look to see how the Mate had managed I caught Sedwell also staring aft, over his shoulder, at the Mate.

I explained to Sedwell that, as a variant, he might as well take a look ahead, now and then, to see that we made some show of following in the wake of the tug.

When the Customs came up over the side, we were already a hundred feet ahead of the place where the Mate had let go the buoyed paint-drum; and I felt that the thing should succeed; for we were going slowly ahead all the time.

Yet, I was a little anxious about Sedwell, in one or two ways. The man plainly had some suspicion; but as we moved steadily farther and farther away, I felt safer about the saccharine.

It would be impossible for him to get away from the ship before dark. I could see to that! And then, he could do no harm; for the two Mates would have had ample time, by then, to deal with the stuff themselves.

The officers reported themselves to me; but before we went down into the cabin, to go through the usual preliminaries, I excused myself a moment and had a word with Mr. Armes.

"That man, Sedwell, is on to the game, "I told him. "Watch him."

“Very good,” said the Mate, “I’ll certainly watch him, Sir!” Down in my cabin, the officers struck me as being most perfunctory in their work.

I asked them to take a look through my gear, as I wanted to get ashore as soon as possible. Here again, their attitude was most peculiar. Instead of the exact and elaborate search-methods that have been lately wasted on my ship, they simply made believe to look over my belongings, and were actually out of the cabin within five minutes.

This made me form certain conclusions, and when I went up on deck again I had word with my two officers.

“They’ve done my place already,” I told them. “Hardly looked at a thing!”

“Same with us, Sir,” said the two Mates.

“Looks as if we were getting to be considered a reformed character, as one might say.”

“Rather rich, after the way you cleared all that stuff safely last trip. Sir!” said Mr. James, my Second.

The two of them grinned at me; but I pulled them up.

“You’ll grin on the other side,” I told them *If this business of yours goes wrong! Have you kept an eye on that Sedwell?*”

“Yes, Sir,” said the First Mate.

“Excuse me. Sir, shoving in cheeky like,” said the bo’sun, coming up to me at this moment; “but I been watchin’ that Sedwell knows as you got a little flutter on wiv’ the Custom people, an’ I sees the Mate dump the stuff astern; an’ then I sees that yon Sedwell ’ad seen it, same as me. Well, I didn’t know as it mattered, till the search officers come up on the bridge to see you, Sir, an’ you goes down to speak to the First Mate. But then I got suspicious; for I seen the officers swappin’ quick talk with Sedwell, quiet like; and then, when you went up again on the bridge, they made as if they’d never seen ’im. An’ now, look at ’em, they ain’t more than pretendin’ to search the ship. I ’ope you don’t mind my shoving in like this. Sir; but I’d lay my pay-day to a marlin-spike, as yon Sedwell’s split.”

“Thank you, Bo’sun,” I said. “I’ll remember this. Keep an eye on Sedwell while you’re about the deck.” As the bo’sun walked away, I looked at the two Mates, and the two Mates looked at me.

"This will need some pondering about," I said, gravely.

"What do you think they will do?" asked Mr. Armes. And the two of them stared at me. "Exactly what you'd expect them to do," I said. "They'll send out a boat to find the buoy. They'll set a watch then, until you go for the stuff. Then they'll arrest you, and there'll be something more than the usual bother. You see, it's a reasonable little haul is a hundred pounds of saccharine; though what'll make them hot will be to nab us for our past flutters. I should leave it strictly alone. They can't possibly prove anything against you; for there's no mark on the paint-drum that Sedwell can swear to; and unless they catch you in the act of hauling it up, you can just keep mum and smile at them. Of course, you'll have to lose all that valuable stuff!"

The two Mates grinned at me in what, by a suspicious onlooker, might have been considered a sickly fashion.

"It's better, anyway, than anything else you can do," I said, "except come up to the hotel to-night, and I'll stand you both a good dinner to cheer you up." They both agreed that I was right and accepted my invitation. After all, there was no other course for them to steer. A little later, a shorer boat signalled us ahead and hooked on alongside as we came up. A messenger boy had brought an express letter from the owners, asking me to go ashore at once on important business. As I was reading it, the Chief of the Customs came up to see me, before going ashore, and I had to have a few words with him.

He and his men had certainly done their work in record time. It was quite plain to me that the "A.B." Sedwell was a Customs spy, who had shipped for the voyage out and home with us, to try to get a case against the ship or the officers. This is sometimes done (though never admitted) where the authorities have begun to be suspicious of smuggling in a particular vessel, yet cannot fix any proof on her.

"Perhaps you won't mind putting me ashore in your launch?" I asked the Chief, as he shook hands. "The owners want to see me at once." He agreed cordially, and I shouted to the steward to bring out my portmanteaux, which he had just been packing.

"I'll leave you to see her made fast, Mister," I called to the First Mate. "As soon as I've done my business, I shall take rooms at the Gwalia"

This was to let him know where to pick me up before going out to the dinner I had promised him and the Second Mate.

Twenty minutes later I was ashore. I shared a taxi, part of the way up from the docks, with our genial but dangerous enemy, the Chief of the search officers. As I dropped him, I could not help wondering whether their boat had already gone out to find the buoyed

saccharine.

It is strange, this almost amicable cut-and-thrust, that is none the less deadly because of the quietness and courtesy with which the thrust may be given. Here was I, seated in a taxi, sharing it with the well and pleasant mannered man on the seat alongside of me, who would, on the first opportunity, do his best to get me into serious trouble, even as I have undoubtedly got him certain ratings from his superiors in office, owing to my wits having, up to the present, out-matched his, as he and they know very well, but cannot prove.

I thought his eyes twinkled over some secret thought, as he jumped down and shook hands. No doubt he anticipated that the lure of the sunk saccharine would be bound to bring us straight into his hands that very night.

Maybe my own eyes twinkled as I said good-bye. He might watch a long time, so far, at least, as I was concerned, before the big, sunk paint-drum had a visitor. If only he knew just how much I knew! I thought to myself as I sat back, smiling.

Then I lapsed into serious thought—a hundred pounds of saccharine represents a certain amount of money. It was a lot for my two Mates to have staked on a single throw of the Customs dice, as one might say.

Well Well! . . . I turned my thoughts on a space, to dinner. At least, I could promise that it should be made a cheering function.

We had dinner in a private room at the Cecil.

“Certainly, Mr. Armes and Mr. James,” I told them, as I handed them a fat little bank-note each, “the occasion demands joy, and I think this slight celebration is almost morally justified.” My two officers smiled at me, and I raised my glass.

“Here’s my toast,” I said—

“To the flour that lies in the paint-drum.

To the spy that we spotted at once,

To the two portmanteaux that carried the stuff

While the Customs swallowed our jolly good bluff

That we worked on the dunce,

Viz. Sedwell the bum—

A right proper bum of a Customs House watcher,

Who heard, ah ! I fear,

What he has wanted to hear,

Just that, and no more!

Let us drink to the dear!’ ”

I had put this into shape while I was sitting waiting for them; and, really, I think it explains all that there is to explain.

We all drank; and as we drank, I doubt not, that, out on the dark waters of the river, a number of Customs officials kept a shivery and lurid watch for the smugglers who came not.

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