A CASE OF AMNESIA

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In the month of July, 1898, the brigantine "Samar" of San Francisco left Pulo Batang in the Philippines with a half cargo of coal and some few tons each of tar, asphalt, paints and oils, etc., for a sawmill in the Strait of San Bernardino, there to load three frame houses in section for Yap and Puguluk in the Caroline Islands, some 900 miles to the eastward in the N. E. "trades" region. After leaving the Strait she made to the S. E. for some 700 miles, lying as close as possible to the N. E. "trade," until she got into the doldrums, and later met the S. E. trades three degrees north of the equator. Going "about" then, the ship headed up to windward of the course to Yap, and was further enabled to gain easting by the counter-equatorial current which they found to be setting to windward at the rate of forty miles per day.

Everything now pointed to a successful passage, but on the third day after the ship was placed on the starboard tack, smoke was observed to be making its way into cabin and lower "foesle" through the bulkheads shutting off the cargo. The ship was on fire in her inflammable cargo, and when the main hatch was opened, flames shot up into the air to a height of twenty feet. Hatches were replaced with great difficulty, in the hope that the fire might be smothered by being deprived of air, but this fond hope was soon dispelled, for before long the hatches were all blown up in an explosion and the ship was seen to be doomed. Fire was raging fore and aft below decks.

The life-boat from the forward house was provisioned and equipped, and then swung overboard to take the crew from the burning vessel; but when the ten men, including a passenger who was on a health cruise, got into the boat she filled to the thwarts, her seams being innocent of caulking or paint, for she had not been in the water for some two years.

In this predicament three men left the lifeboat and boarded the ship at the stern, as yet free of fire, and provisioned the dinghy which hung in the davits across the stern, placing in it seven cases of tinned goods and a good supply of water, the intention being that the lifeboat should tow this one with its three occupants until such time as they could be taken into the
larger boat, which had room and to spare so soon as it could be kept free of water.

The boats remained close to the burning ship until she sank, meanwhile deciding upon which course to take for safety. The Gillolo Islands were some 300 miles to the southward, but the southing in the wind prevented their being made for; the Moluccas lay as far to the west, with a fair wind to win to them, but as there was no chart showing these islands in the boat, and as no one possessed any knowledge of them, it was decided to make for Zamboanga, the southernmost port in the Isle of Mindanao, some 700 miles to the west and north. So in this direction bore the boats, the small one in tow.

On the second day of towing, when some 160 miles had been made to the good, the three men were taken into the lifeboat; but as it was found that their weight so submerged the boat that she again commenced to fill, two of them returned to the dinghy: the first mate and Bell, the young American accountant from the sawmill, who had been brought down to skin and bone by blackwater fever and was on a voyage of recuperation.

On the night following, the dinghy’s tow rope parted in a squall, and the boats became separated never to meet again, each being out of sight of the other at daybreak. All might still have been well had not tragedy intervened: the mate fell overboard while effecting a repair to the mast, and was seized by a shark as his body struck the water. There was little or no wind at the moment, and Bell with great difficulty, for he knew nothing about the handling of boats, managed to get the boat’s head around with an oar, and using the oar as a paddle, he succeeded in reaching the body of his shipmate, which was then floating—only to find that the shark had taken away the man’s abdomen. The mate was still alive, and Bell tried to get him into the boat, but this was beyond the power of his enfeebled frame, and his efforts ended in a dead faint on the bottom boards.

The life-boat reached Zamboanga in safety, and reported the loss of the dinghy. It was then expected that she might arrive very shortly afterwards, but this she failed to do, and the searching ships discovered of her not a trace.

On January 5th of the following year, some five and a half months afterwards, the officer on watch on board the steamer Equator bound from Matupi (now Rabaud) in New Britain to Elopura (now Sandakan, the commercial capital of British North Borneo) and Hong Kong, saw in the distance, when crossing the Sulu Sea, a small white-painted boat sailing
with a small sail set dead before the wind; he altered course immediately and called the captain. As the boat was approached, it was seen to have but a single occupant who was either asleep or dead in the stern-sheets; on the whistles being blown, the former proved to be the case. The man was Bell, and after he was picked up he had a strange story to tell. He related the loss of the *Samar*, known to his listeners, up to the time of his attempting to get the body of the first mate back into the boat, and then the next thing that he remembered was that, five days before being picked up, he was at sea alone in the boat, in which were still two cases of preserved beef and one of milk and, although he could not account for them, a number of cocoanuts and some fruit.

He knew, of course, that a long interval of time had to be accounted for; he wore a six-inch beard, and filled his clothes more than he had done for years; but this he was unable to do. Admitting the man's strange story to be true—and there was no apparent reason for doubting it—the case was one of total, though temporary, amnesia: an entire loss of memory over some months. He was, as has been said, no seaman, and there was no compass in the boat; but he was a man of intelligence, determination, and resource. He had noticed that the lifeboat had steered for the setting sun, and something to the left of it, and this course he had adopted when he found himself alone at sea. He had even remembered to make allowance for the change in the sun's declination; allowing for some six months having elapsed, as his beard more or less indicated. He had calculated that the month was January and that the sun would be at the southern limit of its orbit; therefore he had steered well to the right of it as it set, and maintained as well as he was able the same course throughout by the stars and the sun, observing that, so far as he could ascertain, the direction of the wind remained constant. He had also discovered a way of making the boat steer herself while he slept, thus proving his resourcefulness.

It was obvious that he had not all the time been in the boat; the nuts and fruits proved that, and a further clue was furnished by one of the crew, a man who had spent half a lifetime in these waters, and was sharp enough to notice that Bell's canvas shoes were covered with dried blue mud. This man remarked that in all his wanderings he had seen this blue clay but twice, once in the Labuk River in the north of Borneo, and again on an inhabited island to the S. E. of the Philippines—the name of which was, he thought, Palm's Island. The former was ruled
out by the distance and other conditions, leaving the latter as the only possibility. This did not, however, prove to be other than an indication, and it did not help materially to solve the question as to where Bell has spent the intervening months.

Bell elected to remain at Elopura, where he secured employment in the office of the recently established firm of Darby & Co., to remain there seven months and return then to his home in one of the Eastern States. He eventually recovered his memory, and wrote to a friend in Sandakan furnishing the missing details of his experience.

When he came out of his swoon in the stern sheets of the boat (which was, perhaps, on the following day) it was to see beside him an opened tin of meat and a half-eaten biscuit which had not before been there (suggesting a short period of amnesia never subsequently accounted for), and distant about half a mile, a palm-crested islet having a small bay, each horn of which was marked by a particularly fine clump of filao (casuarinas) into which he was able to navigate the boat, the sea being calm.

He found the island, though uninhabited, to be both storehouse and barn, stocked with cocopalms, fruit of many varieties, goats, birds and other things besides; moreover, it was well-watered, and the sea around teemed with fish. He stayed there for days, all the time expecting to be relieved. When rescue did not arrive, and he had studied and formed a plan of release, he left in a bid to make either the mainland of North Borneo or the isle of Mindanao. He was unable to say how long he had left the island before memory returned on the fifth day prior to his being picked up, but thought it, at the most, but two days.

The writer on the day of the arrival of this letter spent the evening on the veranda of the Sandakan Club, when it was the sole topic of the conversation, there being present several men who had known Bell during his stay in the country.

This break in mental condition is, perhaps, unique in psychological history, though, so far as the writer could learn, it was never subjected to scientific investigation as it might have been. There was a touch of humour in Bell’s rescue; he could not for hours be induced to leave the steamer’s saloon-mirror. The sight of a corpulent figure surmounted by a fat, fresh-coloured, if sunburnt, face framed in a great bushy beard was almost beyond the power of his belief, for the last time on which he had faced a mirror he had seen a figure of skin and bone with deep sunk eyes and protruding cheekbones.

There are evidently worse things on earth than being a castaway on an uninhabited island, lost in the immensity of great waters.