“Insanity” OR “Captain Lasse”

The window of the aeroplane was scratched and dirty; I could hardly tell what the countryside looked like. Nothing was able to ease my anxiousness toward the advent of my destination, and the tattered seat, creaking with a high-pitched squeak occasionally heard, could hardly contain my fidgeting self. I rubbed my sweating hands together only to find that they still contained my train tickets for the Capital Limited Express. I used my find to calm the tension of the situation; indeed, the noise of the chair was causing stares from a young couple, probably on honeymoon, the husband donning a shining black top hat while the lady’s head suffered under a large flowered hat with elegant ribbons, who was sitting right opposite me.

“Do you think we are almost there?” the young man asked me.

Eager to have a diversion to my thoughts, I answered quite enthusiastically. “We have been traveling almost five hours; how far could Darfords be when one is traveling by aeroplane?”

The couple laughed easily, seeming just as relieved with the conversation. “So why is it that you are journeying to the capital?” the wife asked, “A man of your stature should certainly not be going for work, am I right?”

“I wish what you say is correct. However, I am here on business for the Imperial East Indian Trading Company.”

The young man’s eyes flicked toward me with a look of recognition. “My father works there. Do you know Jean Hartford Wilkinson?”

I leaned my head back in thought; the name seemed vaguely familiar, but I had no interest in piecing together people with the young couple. “No, I can’t say I know the good man.” The conversation, in all actuality, had died out with this comment; each party had expected a result, for me a diversion, which failed to come to effect. The talking stopped, and we sat smiling at each other quite awkwardly for the next twenty minutes until the conductor, a spry fellow with lanky limbs and bright eyes, slid open the compartment door most excitedly.

“The aeroplane touches down in three minutes; please fasten your belts,” the man said, and with this remark he quickly exited by slamming the door to our placid faces. I touched my hat to the closed door and the rapidly receding shadow which I feigned I saw through the window in it. The couple used the ephemeral presence of the conductor as an expedient to excite another excruciating exchange:

“So we’re nearly there,” the young lady said as I proceeded to fasten the waistbelt which the conductor had indicated.

I smiled at her and her husband, who was nodding like a jackass. “So we’re nearly there.”

I had boarded the Limited Express train for Darfords at the Imperial Interprovincial Airport and let it steam away my nervousness with a quick nap. I abruptly woke up to find the train being emptied, and my feelings came back with my hurry to get out of the train and to my hotel. I emerged from the station to the bright sunlight of noontime. It was market day in the capital, and the streets were bustling with hordes of businessmen like myself along with the crowds of shoppers and the horse-carts of suppliers. It was market day in the capital, and the port to my left was strangely empty. It was market day in the capital, and there was not a sailing ship in sight, much less a steamer. My thoughts stuck to this, and following not my directive but my prying curiosity, I broke my aggressive stride amidst the crowds of shoppers and banked left to the port.

When I arrived at the quay, I looked down to find the water boiling. Boiling, it was, and not with heat but with flaring tree-trunks, though the solemnity of a tree was no description of the myriad alligators which I here saw. I raised my gaze toward the horizon to find that the water churned far into the distance with the foul creatures, and that the docks with which I was so familiar were nonexistent.

In my awe, I wandered dumbfoundedly through the streets, walking to my hotel like a zombie. The cobblestone roads were now empty as I had stood at the edge of the quay gawking until the sounds of the factories faded and the day had departed. I entered the ancient gas-lit building and had an obsequious concierge take my luggage to my room before asking him where I might find a good, hard drink to divert my attention from the matters of my work. He politely directed me to a nearby tavern (indeed, it was owned by the hotel) and left rather disgustedly with my tip, which reflected my desire to limit expenditures of company money to some degree. The tavern, also gas-lit, had a gaudy sign over its door that read “Robbers Roost.” Located on the veritable border of the industrial district with the market district and the port, I decided that I could gain valuable information by engaging the other patrons in enlightening conversation.

Touching my hat as I entered the place, the bartender grunted an appeal for my choice in drink to which I submitted a meager request for a bottle of whiskey. I could only guess the extent of the tavern, the hazy glare of low-quality lighting blocking my perception of the depths of the seating area, which was filled with tablefuls of men in ashy suits with likewise ashen faces in deep deliberation with unfathomable comrades. Some appeared as businessmen like myself though I detected a large presence of seamen. Turning my eyes back to the bar itself for which I momentarily made, I spotted my bottle of whiskey and a glass there furnished by the bartender. After I poured myself a glass and quickly downed it, I felt the anxiety about my work which had so squandered my aeroplane travel slip away; it was, however, replaced by an intensification and ersatz focus on the presence of alligators in the sea. This proceeded to gnaw at me, and I consequently asked the bartender about the nebulous matter:

“You must be new to the capital, are you? But you seem well-traveled, good sir,” the man had asked a question in the stead of an answer; I decided that it would have been better to ask another customer of the “Robbers Roost” than the bartender himself, for such personages were known to pry.

“I must confess. I have been in the Congo for the last five years, from 1889, working for the Imperial East Indian Trading Company. I only returned to the provinces last month to visit my wife and children (I have two boys) before coming to do Company work in the capital,” I said. The words flowed out of mouth as I filled my glass again with the drink. Remembering my focus, I pushed my question again: “But what of those infernal beasts?”

The bartender, having learned of my African exploits became less rude to me but doubly wary. “The Congo, eh? …you returned, strictly for business reasons? Strictly?”

The man’s refusal to resolve my quandary was becoming slightly annoying. “The alligators, sir? The condition of the sea?”

The bartender finally relented and with a cautious eye leaned on the bar with his elbows. “…here is how… well, this is what happened: Back in ’92, some students were studying trigonometry, you know, down at the university, and they were making some sort of calculation table for… well something… ratios of some persuasion, I believe. Then they had a sort of problem… I’m not exactly sure what it was… someone told me that it had to do with getting negative results, but I am not an educated man, so I do not know for certain.

“Anyway, these folks all at once came down to the quay one hot day in the summer and they dropped some of their papers into the sea. No-one understands exactly what this effected, but no sooner had the papers been sucked into the depths than did alligators surface all over sea.” The bartender waved his hand around in a circular gesticulation. “Down in the Channel, they were. In the Strait of Gibraltar, they were (some say it was why aeroplane travel became so popular so rapidly).”

I could hardly believe the story, but in the depths of my mind, I felt it was true. My eyes glazed and I poured a third glass of whiskey. The conundrum still interested me, and I would now go around the tables to converse with seamen who were, for a reason I now knew, melancholy. I turned around to scan the patrons of the “Robbers Roost.” The smoky atmosphere of the tavern seemed a fitting frame for the sailors, surely unemployed, that I saw there. I went directly to a table thronged with the morose countenances and set my glass down. A sailor with an unshaven face and dark circles around his tired eyes looked up at me with horrid expression.

“What do you want?” He spat (the man was obviously drunk).

“Nothing doing!” I refuted the affront with a slight smile. “However, I must know what the shipping companies are doing to aid the problem of the alligators!”

The sailor gained a terrible glint in his eyes and a sneer in his edifice. He slammed the glass down on the table with a sharp crack. “You, an educated businessman, ask me what to do about the issue? Surely you are out of your mind, fine sir! As if we here have not tried any designs!” He made to stand up and began to attract some attention when the bartender rushed over, seeing that conflict feigned imminence, and whispered something in the ear of the sailor who subsequently retired to his seat. I did the very same with an empty chair at the table; the bartender had surely told the boisterous sailor of my work in the Congo.

“Hasn’t anyone tried anything?” I asked again; the sailor seemed to concentrate his overwrought mind and shortly came upon a conclusion:

“…I suppose you could ask… the one back there.” A wavering index pointed toward the back of the murky tavern. The sailor seemed altogether done with the conversation, and my interest in what he had pointed to was enough to wrench me away from the table. I got up and began to peer through the curtain of smoke while wading forward with the casual acknowledgements of other businessmen. The light glared through the smoke and the multitude of people through which I slowly pushed in the general direction of the sailor’s reference.

The back wall of the tavern made its appearance for the first time in a sly manner and with it, a character whom I was at once sure that the sailor had been indicating. He had a table to himself, but all eyes were on him. The man clutched a glass of whiskey with a jittery hand which he frequently raised to his lips while sucking a pipe with a grimace. Greasy yellow hair stuck out from a creased officer’s hat. He was really quite unremarkable, but something about how his face was put together struck me as peculiar. The sincere expression on his lips and his small nose was not matched by his bloodshot eyes, which moved with a steady frequency around the tavern. The action would look to be one of paranoia had not the very presence of the man and his demeanor been intimidating at the very same instant.

My pointed nature and the effect of the whiskey precluded any sense of such intimidation in me and I immediately started asking questions to the dark figure: “…May I ask you a question? Yes? Well, then… what is the solution to the problem of the alligators?” My focus had journeyed on from the situation and the actions of the companies to the end of the issue itself.

The quick eyes riveted on my clothes, hands, and face. He turned slowly his face upward to meet my inquiring looks. The people around me, the other patrons of the tavern, halted in their matters and studied us; a murmur rippled through the depths of the place. I heard a faltering sort of grunt which then collapsed into an outright laugh issued from the man and then grave voice with a thick German accent (surprising, as I was not used to German sailors): “…I have heard… many a thing… but never this!” He looked about for agreement, but the others were too driven to sense humor; the question was likewise no real joke. “But, sir, I will suffice you. You seem of an interesting sort. Sit down, I say, sit down!”

I settled in the chair and touched my hat while extending a hand, “Jules Janssen, of the Imperial East Indian Trading Company; I am eager to make your acquaintance.” I continued, thinking of the useful information, “Just returning from the Congo, I might add. A fine pleasure, it is, to be back in the capital.”

To the surprise of my hospitable self, the man took my hand in a firm grip, “Lasse Groeger, the captain of no ship.” The others around us shivered at the display of two such dominating people coming in contact. “Contrary to what I say, I am launching a ship on her first run tomorrow at noon,” he continued.

I balked at the confidence with which he made his comment and the arcane sureness that arose within me when I had heard him. “In these waters? I will surely be there to see such an event.”

The captain only smiled, making an expression that seemed not to fit on his face correctly.

I woke the following morning at a decent time despite my activities of the evening, for my curiosity now extended once again to the situation and exact cause of the problem. The sun came through the windows and shed its light on the table; the pleasing sight of teeming breakfast dishes placed there by the chambermaid was revealed and I slouched out of the bed, which had almost enveloped me in its give. I did not bother to get a new change of clothes and a sense of purpose began to hurry me; the food was quickly exhausted, and I left, leaving a tip for the chambermaid, with my hair greasy and unwashed under a dull-looking bowler. The streets were covered in filth from the frenzy of yesterday’s market and a near-empty trolley car, blocked from use by the shoppers in its previous runs, rattled through the dense factory smog along some rails inset into the cobblestones. It slowed for me, and I trained my pace to hop aboard the car as it was traveling uptown toward the university.

A forgetful rider had left the morning newspaper on the seat; after sitting on it, I began to read to see what other great and transcendental events I had missed while I was away on business. The headlines talked about labor movements in the far-away United States and the opening of the London Tower Bridge, but I quickly found that my focus on the procuring of the answers permeated my awareness and would not let me cast any attention toward the paper; I found myself quickly bored and had wont for other entertainment. Looking up and around, I saw the sights of the capital glance by me: empty stores and venues lined the road while gloomy tenement houses looked down on the car from above.

Presently, the high stacks of buildings gave way to the broad parks and low houses of the university. I yelled to the driver of the trolley, and while the brakes screeched to slow the car, I jumped and broke into a caterwauling run toward the main gate, which I used to catch my evident fall. Dusting off my jacket, I looked around embarrassedly before fitting myself together and sauntering onto the campus. At once, it seemed, I came upon a slight fellow who had around him an air quite nervous; when I spoke to this man, it appeared rather to frighten his soul out of his feeble body:

“Wh… what do you want, fine sir?” he quibbled.

“Simply nothing doing! Where, might I ask, is the Trigonometric Department at this great university?” I tried dearly to be gracious save this faint shadow be shone and disappear forever.

“Wh… Why might you ask that?” (He was having trouble with his ‘w’ sound.)

“Quite reasonably, I wish to inquire on the matter of the alligators,” I said. This sentiment expressed, his face receded in color, but he quickly closed his eyes and a calm look rose up from this, enveloping his soon prostrate mouth and bobbing chin; this accompanied some quiet words of strange synthesis:

“I am responsible. Solely I. I accept the guilt. I dropped the Inverse Trigonometric Canon into the ocean. It was I.” No sooner than were the words in the air than did his face duly twist into a miserable bundle of wrinkles, and likewise did he realize with his speech a new feeling, tugging my jacket and spouting such nonsense and tears that I made to get away from such a kaleidoscope and to the refreshing port, alligators or not. So I tore away from the poor shade and escaped his grasping hands without answers. I was in contempt with myself to be without resolution and the anxiety about matters of work came back to me. Embroiled in my troubles, I snagged a downtown trolley and proceeded back toward the sea.

My silver pocket-watch sprang open and pronounced the time, which was coming close to noon and had really moved all too fast for my most recent trolley, which found it fit to scream to a complete stop when any passenger flagged the attention of its driver. The ride had been searing, but the trolley and myself now neared the avenue to the ports and I leaped off the stationary trolley as it boarded another passerby. The fearsome watch harried me and I ran (intentionally, this time) swiftly to the quay holding fast my hat that it not be blown away. As I began to hear the squawking of birds, I also heard the low, mournful sound of a ship’s whistle; I only increased my pace. My ears picked up a small cracking sound as I came within sight of a leviathan of a steamship.

The ship, touting three magnificent smokestacks with red rings was a brilliant black color and a broad white strip around the main deck. At the bow, shining letters proclaimed her the “Décimateur.” I was slightly disappointed (but relieved as I could truly see the launch for myself) that the ship was not, in fact, in the water but indeed on its gantry; the cracking was merely the military firing upon the rebellious sea, but as I approached, a much deeper cracking sound emanated from the gantry which, long buckling under the weight of the ship had begun to give as the ship slowly slipped down toward the sea. Willingly so was this movement as I saw the beginnings of fumes from the stacks and the crew scurrying about the decks; yelling filled the air: yelling of the crowd, the crew, and a distinct voice, flying above these other harsh cadences, of which I could clearly draw the source.

“Janssen… Janssen, you blundering fool! Where are you?” Indeed, it was the same thick accent that I had heard the previous night in the tavern.

“Captain Groeger, I am here, good sir!” I shouted to the end of my vocal capacity as I realized my sound was surely intermixed with a crowd of other onlookers that I was suddenly with. The ship was gaining velocity, and I feared that my invitation would be spent (I had correctly imagined that the captain desired my presence on board). A ratline, having once secured the ship’s hull to the gantry, was being hauled up by a hefty sailor. This spied, I wrestled through the constricting crowd and confounded the confused policemen when I burst through their ranks and leapt onto this observed conveyance. Bracing my shoes against the titanium hull of the glorious ship, I climbed up the line and bounded over the muscled sailor. Ignoring calls questioning my presence, I stole inside the bridge. The bloodshot eyes recognized me immediately:

“Mr. Janssen! You have come too!” The dusty, creased officer’s cap of our last engagement had been replaced with a new, gold-rimmed hat that better reflected the ruling personality of its owner. “I had thought you would fail to make it!”

“Not on my life!” I broke into a grin and watched the avid captain reach into a nearby crate while the ship creaked along the gantry below; it, while not having contact yet with water, was quickly righting itself, and I was beginning to take note of the hot roar of the engine-work powering the behemoth.

The captain stood up straight with two Berthier carbines in his arms; one of these he threw to me while I seized a box of sharps from the charting table. This man brushed me out of the way in his illustrious exit of the compartment, and I, shortly following him, began to get caught up in the whole affair. The captain said nothing as he strode to the bow of the ship (leaving his capable first mate in charge) which was fast gaining on the tumultuous waters of the sea. He remained silent as he raised his rifle slowly in the face of the insurmountable odds demonstrated there. Despite the general rush of the surrounding activity, I could do nothing but watch this enchanting spectacle. A placidous bubble of calm in the deathly situation, he bore down upon the iron sights and took an aim. All at once, the ship gave a tremendous lurch a terrible crash was to be heard as the bow hit the water; the captain, however, kept steady through the experience and drew his breath in while training his arm upon the humble beginning of the alligators. I was likewise immobile as the stern fell into the sea just as the captain let off his first shot, felling a single alligator.

Realizing my dire uselessness, I sprang into affront against the horrible creatures and let off shots with great speed. Some members of the crew hefted Gatlings to the bow as well to annihilate the opposition. As I shot, I felt the paralyzing anxiety melt away, now permanently.