

THE COMING OF THE HURRICANE¹

Lafcadio Hearn*

July was dying; for weeks no fleck of cloud had broken the heaven's blue dream of eternity; winds held their breath; slow wavelets caressed the bland brown beach with a sound as of kisses and whispers. To one who found himself alone, beyond the limits of the village and beyond the hearing of its voices, the vast silence, the vast light, seemed full of weirdness. And these hushes, these transparencies, do not always inspire a causeless apprehension; they are omens sometimes—omens of a coming tempest. Nature—incomprehensible Sphinx!—before her mightiest bursts of rage, ever puts forth her divinest witchery, makes more manifest her awful beauty...

But in that forgotten summer the witchery lasted many long days—days born in rose light, buried in gold. It was the height of the season. The long myrtle shadowed village was thronged with its summer population; the big hotel could hardly accommodate all its guests; the bathing houses were too few for the crowds who flocked to the water morning and evening. There were diversions for all—hunting and fishing parties, yachting excursions, rides, music, games, promenades. Carriage wheels whirled flickering along the beach, seaming its smoothness noiselessly, as if muffled. Love wrote its dreams upon the sand....

Then one great noon, when the blue abyss of day seemed to yawn over the world more deeply than ever before, a sudden change touched the quicksilver smoothness of the waters—the swaying shadow of a vast motion. First the whole sea-circle appeared to rise up bodily at the sky; the horizon curve lifted to a straight line; the line darkened and approached, an immeasurable fold of green water, moving swift as a cloud shadow pursued by sunlight. But it had looked formidable only by contrast with the previous placidity of the open; it was scarcely two feet high; it curled slowly as it neared the beach, and combed itself out in sheets of woolly foam with a low, rich roll of whispered thunder. Swift in pursuit another followed—a third—a feeble fourth; then the sea only swayed a little, and stilled again. Minutes passed, and the immeasurable heaving recommenced.

One, two, three, four—seven long swells this time, and the Gulf smoothed itself once more. Irregularly the phenomenon continued to repeat itself, each time with heavier billowing and briefer intervals of quiet, until at last the whole sea grew restless and shifted color and flickered green; the swells became shorter and changed form. Then from horizon to shore ran one uninterrupted heaving—one vast green swarming of snaky shapes, rolling in to hiss and flatten upon the sand. Yet no cirrus-speck revealed itself through all the violet heights, there was no wind—you might have fancied the sea had been upheaved from beneath....

But the pleasure-seekers of Last Island knew there must have been “a great blow” somewhere that day. Still the sea swelled; and a splendid surf made the evening bath delightful. Then, just at sundown, a beautiful cloud-bridge grew up and arched the sky with a single span of cottony pink vapor, that changed and deepened color with the dying of the iridescent day. And the cloud-bridge approached, stretched, strained, and swung round at last to make way for the coming of the gale, even as the light bridges that traverse the Têche² swing open when the luggermen (fishing boats) sound through their conch-shells the long bellowing signal of approach.

Then the wind began to blow, with the passing of July. It blew from the north-east, clear, cool. It blew in enormous sighs, dying away at regular intervals, as if pausing to draw breath. All night it blew; and in each pause could be heard the answering moan of the rising surf, as if the rhythm of the sea moulded itself after the rhythm of the air; as if the waving of the water responded precisely to the waving of the wind – a billow for every puff, a surge for every sigh.

The August morning broke in a bright sky; the breeze still came cool and clear from the north-east. Clouds came, flew as in a panic against the face of the sun, and passed. All that day and through the night and into the morning again the breeze continued from the north-east, blowing like an equinoctial gale....

Then day by day the vast breath freshened steadily and the waters heightened. A week later sea-bathing had become perilous.... The gray morning of the 9th dimly lighted a surf that appalled the best swimmers. The sea was one wild agony of foam, the gale was rending off the heads of the waves and veiling the horizon with a fog of salt spray. Shadowless and gray the day remained; there were mad bursts of lashing rain. Evening brought a sinister apparition, looming through a cloud-rent (opening) in the west—a scarlet sun in a green sky. His sanguine (bloody) disk, appallingly magnified, seemed barred (with stripes) like the body of a belted planet. A moment, and the crimson specter vanished, and the moonless night came.

Then the wind grew weird. It ceased being a breath; it became a voice moaning across the world, hooting, uttering nightmare sounds—Whoo! Whoo! Whoo!—and with each stupendous owl-cry the moaning of the waters seemed to deepen, more and more abysmally, through all the hours of darkness. From the north-west the breakers of the bay began to roll high over the sandy slope into the salines (salt water ponds); the village bayou broadened to a bellowing flood. So the tumult swelled and the turmoil heightened until morning—a morning of gray gloom and whistling rain. Rain of bursting clouds, and rain of wind-blown brine from the great spuming (foaming) agony of the sea.

The steamer Star was due from St. Mary's³ that fearful morning. Could she come? No one really believed it – no one. And nevertheless, men struggled to the roaring beach to look for her, because hope is stronger than reason. ...

“Great God!” shrieked a voice above the shouting storm —“*she is coming!*”. ...It was true. Down the Atchafalaya (river), and thence through strange mazes of bayou, lakelet, and pass, by a rear route familiar only to the best of pilots, the frail river-craft had toiled into Chaillou Bay, running close to the main shore—and now she was heading right for the island, with the wind aft, over the monstrous sea. On she came, swaying, rocking, plunging, with a great whiteness wrapping her about like a cloud, and moving with her moving—a tempest-whirl of spray—ghost-white and like a ghost she came, for her smoke-stacks exhaled no visible smoke—the wind devoured it! The excitement on shore became wild—men shouted themselves hoarse; women laughed and cried. Every telescope and opera-glass was directed upon the coming apparition; all wondered how the pilot kept his feet; all marveled at the madness of the captain.

But Captain Abraham Smith was not mad. A veteran American sailor, he had learned to know the great Gulf as scholars know deep books by heart; he knew the birthplace of its tempests, the mystery of its tides, the omens of its hurricanes. While laying at Morgan City he felt the storm had not yet reached its highest, vaguely foresaw a mighty peril, and resolved to wait no longer for a lull. “Boys,” he said, “we’ve got to take her out in spite of the storm!” And they “took her out.” Through all the peril, his men stayed by him and obeyed him. By mid-morning the wind had deepened to a roar—lowering sometimes to a rumble, sometimes bursting upon the ears like a measureless and deafening crash. Then the captain knew that the Star was running a race with Death. “She’ll win it,” he muttered; “she’ll stand it. ... Perhaps they’ll have need of me tonight.”

She won! With a sonorous steam-chant of triumph the brave little vessel rode at last into the bayou, and anchored hard by her accustomed resting place, in full view of the hotel, though not near enough to shore to lower her gang-plank.... But she had sung her swan-song. Gathering in from the north-east, the waters of the bay were already marbling in over the salines and half across the island; and still the wind increased its paroxysmal power.

Cottages began to rock. Some slid away from the solid props upon which they rested. A chimney tumbled. Shutters were wrenched off; verandas demolished. Light roofs lifted, dropped again, and flipped into ruin. Trees bent their heads to the earth. And still the storm grew louder and blacker with each passing hour.

The Star rose with the rising of the waters, dragging her anchor. Two more anchors were put out, and still she dragged—dragged in with the flood—twisting, shuddering, careening in her agony. Evening fell—the sand began to move with the wind, stinging faces like a continuous fire of fine shot; and frenzied blasts came to buffet the steamer forward, sideward. Then one of her hog-chains⁴ parted with a clang like the boom of a big bell. Then another! ...

Then the captain bade his men to cut away all her upper works, clean to the deck. Overboard into the seething went her stacks, her pilot house, her cabins, and whirled away. And the naked hull of the Star, still dragging her three anchors, labored on through the darkness, nearer and nearer to the immense silhouette of the hotel, whose hundred windows were now all aflame. The vast timber building seemed to defy the storm. The wind, roaring round its broad verandas—hissing through every crevice with the force of steam—appeared to waste its rage. And in the half-lull between two terrible gusts there came to the Captain's ears a sound that seemed strange in that night of multitudinous terrors...a sound of music!...

"A dance!" he muttered. "If that wind whips round south, there'll be another dance! ... But I guess the Star will stay."...

Half an hour might have passed; still the lights flamed calmly, and the violins trilled, and the perfumed whirl went on. ...And suddenly the wind veered!

Again the Star reeled and shuddered and turned, and began to drag all her anchors. But now she dragged away from the great building and all its lights—away from the voluptuous thunder of the grand-piano, with its marvelous musical swing.

"Waltzing!" cried the captain. "God help them! God help us all now! ...The Wind waltzes tonight, with the Sea for his partner!"

Someone shrieked in the midst of the revels—some girl who found her pretty slippers wet. What could it be? Thin streams of water were spreading over the level planking, curling about the feet of the dancers ...What could it be? ...

For a moment there was a ghastly hush of voices, and through that hush there burst upon the ears of all a fearful and unfamiliar sound as of a colossal cannonade, rolling up from the south, with volleying lightnings. Vastly and swiftly, nearer and nearer it came—a ponderous and unbroken thunder-roll, terrible as the long muttering of an earthquake.

The nearest mainland—across mad Chaillou Bay to the sea marshes—lay twelve miles north; west, by the Gulf, the nearest

solid ground was twenty miles distant. There were boats, yes; but the stoutest swimmer might never reach them now! ...

There rose a frightful cry—the hoarse, hideous, indescribable cry of hopeless fear—the despairing animal-cry man utters when suddenly brought face to face with Nothingness, without preparation, without consolation, without possibility of respite. ...Some wrenched down the doors; some clung to the heavy banquet tables, to the sofas, to the billiard tables. During one terrible instant—against fruitless heroisms, against futile generousities—raged all the frenzy of selfishness, all the brutalities of a panic. And then—then came, thundering through the blackness, the giant swells, boom on boom! ... One crash! the huge frame building rocks like a cradle, seesaws, crackles. What are human shrieks now?—the tornado is shrieking. Another!—the chandeliers splinter; lights are dashed out; a sweeping cataract hurls in; the immense hall rises, oscillates, twirls as on a pivot, crepitates, crumbles into ruin. Crash again! the swirling wreck dissolves into the wallowing of another monstrous billow; and a hundred cottages overturn, spin in sudden eddies, quiver, disjoint, and melt into the seething....

So the hurricane passed—tearing off the heads of the prodigious waves to hurl them a hundred feet in air, heaping up the ocean against the land, upturning the woods. Bays and passes were swollen to abysses, rivers regorged (vomited), the sea marshes were changed to raging wastes of water ... Lakes strove to burst their boundaries. Far-off river steamers tugged wildly at their cables, shivering like tethered creatures that hear by night the approaching howl of destroyers. ...

But the Star remained; and captain Abraham Smith, with a long, good rope around his waist, dashed again and again and again into that awful surging to snatch victims from death, clutching at passing hands, heads, garments, in the cataract-sweep of the seas—saving, aiding, cheering, though blinded by spray and battered by drifting wreck, until his strength failed in the unequal struggle at last, and his men drew him aboard senseless, with some beautiful, half-drowned girl safe in his arms. But wellnigh two-score (forty) souls had been rescued by him, and the Star stayed on through it all.

Harper's Fifth Reader, 1889

*Hearn was born in Greece of Greek and Irish parents. He came to the United States and established a career as a writer. Quite a bit of his American writings revolve around New Orleans. Later in life, he moved permanently to Japan and became best known as a translator of Japanese and Chinese literature.

1. This selection, abridged, describes the Great Hurricane of 1856, and its destruction of Last Island, properly Isle Dernière, a small barrier island, part of a chain stretching from just west of the mouth of the Mississippi River almost to Galveston. The last island in the chain proceeding east from Galveston, it was a popular resort for the wealthy of Louisiana during the oppressive summers. The hurricane swept over the Island leaving only a remnant in five smaller, almost bare isles, and the wreck of the *Star*. Estimates of the casualties range upwards of two hundred to over six hundred, as well as wreaking havoc in New Orleans.

2. Bayou Têche, a main channel of the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana.

3. Heavy chains connecting the front and back of ships to keep the hull from flexing as waves pass under.