

Our Cook's Revenge

BY SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

Early in the summer of 1843 I took passage on board the ship *Hunter*, at Smyrna, intending to run with her as far only as Gibraltar. The crew consisted of twenty-one men, who bunked in the forecabin, and there were eight of us aft in the cabin—the captain and his three mates, the supercargo, and three passengers of us. The captain's name was John Martin. He was a native of the State of Maine, a stout, impulsive, true-hearted sailor, about forty years of age. His three mates were excellent sailors, the supercargo was a perfect gentleman and an extensive traveler, and my two passenger companions were men whose good qualities of heart and head I had long appreciated.

The crew of the ship were mostly good-looking men, but there was one who struck me unfavorably—that was the cook. He was an African, as black as night, and went by the name of Max Condor, a powerfully built fellow, with a breast and arms like the gear of a mill. But it was his head—his face—that most attracted my attention. The base of his skull was large, while the top dwindled away almost to the apex of a cone. His face was also peculiar, possessing all the special African characteristics, but it had a sort of vacant cunning, a recklessness and indifference of look seldom seen. But he was a good cook, and as yet no one had had difficulty with him.

The eighth day out we passed the southern cape of Sicily, Passaro, and before dark had left the land on our starboard quarter. At sundown the wind veered, and soon lulled away almost to a dead calm.

“Mr. Clarke,” said the captain, addressing his first mate, “we are going to have a blow out of this.”

“I think so, sir,” returned the mate. “One of those regular screamers of the gulf. But we've got plenty of sea-room.”

“So we have,” added the captain. “But you may send the light spars on deck, and I think it well to send the top-gallant-masts down.”

“It will be safe enough, I think.”

“Then I would have it done at once.”

All hands were called to shorten sail and prepare the ship for a storm. As the light sails were all taken in, preparations were made for sending down the spars, and the men set to work with a will. The foretop-gallant-mast came down, and then the men went to the main. They bowsed away on the rope, but the heel of the mast had swelled, and they found hard work to raise it so as to draw the lid. The cook sat in his galley as composed as though nothing was going on. One of the men espied him, and the query was at once started, why he could not come out and lend a hand.

“Ah, I forgot the cook,” said the captain, who heard the remarks of the men. “Here, Max, came out and lend a hand to the mast-rope.”

But the negro did not stir.

“Did you hear, Max?” asked the captain, moving nearer to the door of the galley.

“Yes—I heard,” replied the cook, looking coolly up.

“Then bear a hand and man the mast-rope.”

But the cook did not move yet.

“Are you going to obey me?” asked the captain, while blood mounted to his cheeks and temples.

“Tain’t my place to pull an’ haul,” continued Condor.

“It’s your place to obey,” said the captain very calmly, yet with a slight tremulousness in his voice.

“It’s my place to cook, an’ see to your feedin’,” was Condor’s cool response.

“Max Condor, come out here.”

It was just dusk, and there was light enough to see that the captain’s teeth were firmly set and his hands clutched. The negro came out, and with an independent, careless look, faced the commander.

“Max Condor, take hold of that mast-rope.”

The men all stopped their work, and were watching this novel, startling spectacle. They knew the character of Captain Martin, and his prowess, and they also knew the giant strength of the negro.

“Once more—take hold of that mast-rope.”

“Tain’t my business. I didn’t ship for it.”

“Will you obey me?”

“No.”

The captain took one step forward, and then, with one blow of his massive fist, he felled the black to the deck. The fellow soon found his feet, and with an oath moved toward the captain. The latter was prepared for him, and again knocked the negro down. This time the blow took effect on the temple, and the stubborn fool lay for a long while nearly senseless. When he gained

his feet the masts were all down, and the topsails close-reefed. He gazed about him for a moment, and then went into his galley.

The storm came on, as had been anticipated, but we rode it out in safety, and on the second day from that time we had the royals set.

“Once more pleasant,” said the mate, as he came down into the cabin, after having seen the royals put on.

“Yes,” added the captain, “and this blow has just served to sharpen our appetites. Lamson, what are you going to give us for dinner?”

The question was addressed to the supercargo, who acted as caterer for the cabin mess.

“I’ll tell you,” he replied. “I’ve ordered the cook to give us a mutton broth and some chop from the sheep we killed yesterday.”

“Good,” returned the captain. And in that sentiment we all coincided, for Condor made the best soups and broths I ever tasted.

Shortly before dinner the supercargo went up to the galley to see how the cook got along with the broth, and when he came back he was wiping his mouth with true epicurean gusto.

“How is it?” asked Martin.

“Glorious. We’ll crack a few bottles of Burgundy with it.”

In due time the table was set in the cabin, and the broth brought on in a large plated tureen. We had taken our places around the board, and the broth had been partly served, when the supercargo, who was dealing out the article, suddenly dropped the ladle and sat back in his chair.

“What is the matter?” quickly asked the captain.

“Oh, I don’t know,” gasped Lamson, clasping his hands over his stomach. “Such a pain in my bowels—and heat all along my throat and stomach. Oh—oh—oh!”

The captain instinctively sprang to his medicine chest for the bottle of ipecacuanha, and quickly preparing a dose, he handed it to the sufferer.

“It won’t hurt you,” he said.

While the supercargo raised the emetic to his lips, an idea of something he had seen in the medicine chest, but at the moment had not time to notice, came to the captain’s mind, and he arose and went back. He gazed an instant into the chest, and then an exclamation of horror escaped from his lips.

“On you lives, gentlemen, touch not a drop of that broth!” he uttered, turning toward us with horror depicted on his countenance. “Do not touch it, if you would live, for it is deadly poison! You ate some in the galley, Lamson?”

“Yes—a little,” groaned the sufferer.

“We can save you. Hold on!”

The captain opened a drawer in the lower part of the chest, and took therefrom a stomach-pump. Then he hastened to the supercargo’s side, and placing him in a proper position, he ran the flexible India-rubber tube down his throat, and pumped away for dear life. Everything was removed that had been taken into the stomach since morning, and it had a peculiar garlicky odor. After this, the captain administered such medicine as he thought proper, and the supercargo felt much relieved.

Of course we were all regarding Captain Martin in blank amazement. He noticed it, and as soon as he had done all he could for Lamson, he turned toward us.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I know you are surprised, but there is nothing now to fear. When I brought the emetic for Lamson, and while he was drinking it, the idea struck me that there was something peculiar in the medicine chest. I went back to look, and I found one of my glass jars was gone. It was a jar of *white arsenic* which was missing—the cook was down here this morning alone! I knew then the symptoms of Lamson’s complaint. He had taken arsenic! And how? Of course, in the broth! If the black demon has put all that arsenic in, there is enough in that tureen to kill a hundred men! Max Condor meant to be revenged for the chastisement I gave him for his insubordination. There is no mistake about it.”

Instinctively we all drew away from the table, and for some moments there was a dead silence in the cabin. At length the second mate spoke.

“By the powers of darkness, what an escape! I noticed the black villain this forenoon in the galley, and once when he looked at me, his eyes gleamed like a serpent’s. I felt half afraid of him then.”

“We’ll secure him and have the truth out of him,” said Martin, as he made a movement toward his bunk and took his pistol, which was a six-barreled revolver. “Follow me, some of you.”

We all followed, and when we reached the deck we found the cook prostrate, and the captain holding him down. Martin had found the fellow close to the companion-way, and he had knocked him down with his fist. We soon had the negro bound, and he made no hesitation in admitting he put the arsenic in the broth, and had meant to kill the captain at any rate—whether the rest of us died or not, he didn’t care! When he said this, he supposed we had eaten of the broth, but when he found we were all safe, his rage and cursing knew no bounds.

The murderous villain was bound, hand and foot, and then placed under the topgallant-forecastle, but during the afternoon he managed to work his way to the bow port, which was open, and

before any one could prevent it, he was overboard. The ship was hove to, but the negro's hands and legs being bound, he sank at once, and we saw no more of him. After watching near the place some minutes, we filled away on our course. A good cook was found among the men, and no one was sorry for the exchange.

The supercargo recovered in a few days. I left the ship at Gibraltar, and have not seen Captain Martin since, but I shall not easily forget him, nor shall I ever forget the startling emotions which I experienced when we first learned the terrible intent of "OUR COOK'S REVENGE."

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