The Red Mark

John Russell

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s of Noumea before
!"

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if I had touched

perhaps a little —
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l without exploring
Bibi-Ri was the last
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had found him. A
st, with a droll face
wink and grimace

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"He got hisself shook in his wits," said the captain, breaking a silence. "Is that how you make it?"

"Something of the kind," I agreed, and recalled a lad from Milford Haven I once was shipmates with who took a clip over the head from a falling block and for a month thereafter was dumb, though otherwise hale enough.

"It'd be an almighty clip over the head would strike the chief dumb," said Raff simply —"or anything like it."

Sutton said nothing.

Meanwhile we went plunging on through rain-swept darkness. I never knew the course nor the place where we left our gharri and took to narrower ways afoot, but here the nightmare closed in upon us. We breathed an air heavy with mortality, on pavements made slimy by countless naked feet, in a shaft, in a pit, between dank walls. Shapes drifted by like sheeted corpses, peering, floating up, melting away; from pools and eddies of lamplight sinister faces started out and fingers pointed after us. For we had come to strange waters, the teeming backwaters of the city.

Port Said has its tide rips if you like, is wickeder perhaps in its hectic way; you need to keep to soundings in Singapore, and parts of Macao and Shanghai you do well to navigate with an extra lookout and pressing business somewhere else. But Calcutta at night is the Sargasso Sea. There you wander among the other derelicts, helpless, hopeless, moving always

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deeper down lost channels, uncharted, fetid, clogged with infinite suggestions of dim horrors —

To top our bewilderment, the captain and I found ourselves being piloted swiftly through this welter, without pause or fault, by alleys and reeking courts, doubling and twisting. We dived into a lurid, crowded cavern that echoed with some dismal merrymaking of string and drum. We jostled the loungers in a low-caste drinking shop and pushed on to a dark stair that rose like the ladder of a dovecote. The place was alive with twitterings and shufflings. Steps fled before us and half-naked bodies caromed against us from the void until a last rush landed us on the floor above the street.

There was a dusky room hung with blue stuffs where dragons black and gold crawled and ramped. It ran along the front of the house as a gallery, but it had no windows — only a row of shallow cells, so to say, divided by the hangings. Down at the far end low lights burned hot and small under wreaths of greasy incense, and a big, green joss grinned from a niche. He was fat and crass and ugly, that joss, a fit deity for such a den, and he seemed to nod and to listen!

Perhaps because we were listening! . . .

"Whaur's that W[illegible] that pipe? Boy, you smoke walla[illegible] r's [illegible]e?" A voice to send the chill in[illegible] ma[illegible] and dreary and overlaid, but [illegible] asp[illegible] knew and woul[illegible] have known a[illegible]on [illegible]nder. "*Not* si[illegible] one, ye[illegible] lim[illegible]

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