

AHOY THERE!

JOHN MUETER

It was perfectly calm out on the open ocean, hardly a breath of wind. Adrian was very grateful for that. He was seated, cross-legged, in a fiberglass dinghy, hardly the vessel to be sailing in if seas were rough. Sensible or not, it was the boat provided by Dr. Vijay Ramachandra, the brilliant, if not endearingly eccentric genius who ran a clandestine time travel operation out of his university office. Well, his house, to be exact, but with heavy borrowings from university assets, especially in the area of personnel. He had been sending individuals, staff and students, into the past for years now. Exploring the future held no interest for him. "If you want to go to Alderaan," he would say if the subject of time travel to the future came up, "get in touch with Luke Skywalker."

It did occur to Adrian, gliding along in his rowboat, that Ramachandra could have gotten careless in his planning. The professor was a bit barmy to begin with. Everybody knew that. If this little excursion didn't go according to plan, Adrian would be stuck up the creek without a paddle, figuratively speaking, but in reality in the middle of the friggin' Indian Ocean, hundreds of miles off the coast of India, in a flimsy boat. But the professor had proven his prowess in prognostication more often than not. Adrian trusted in it. Until this moment, anyway. His own previous "launch", back to France in 1765, had been straightforward. He was re-incorporated in a field by a road outside of Rouen, as planned, and in five minutes the promised carriage had shown up. The only qualification he had for that gig was that he knew some French. The rest of it did not go well--but that's another story.

He was surprised to be asked to go on this launch, as a second choice, filling in for someone who backed out at the last moment. Adrian didn't blame the designated traveler for getting cold feet. Everybody who knew about Rama's secret program was aware that, in the previous year, one of the travelers never returned from ancient Rome. That was not a propitious sign. *Maybe he was assassinated in the Senate House? Ha! I'll permit myself some dark humor*, mused Adrian, who had been rowing vigorously the whole time. He gave up on that, placed the oars back in the boat and stretched out his long legs the best he could. The dinghy was not built for a 6'3" person.

When Rama had verified a location and time there was no stopping him. The launch had to take place. Adrian could not fathom how Rama was

able to see into a specific point in the past and foretell what was about to happen. Rama declared he wanted to try something different this time, transporting an object as well--in this instance the dinghy. He had bought it used from a private owner who, he admitted, was a bit shady. Adrian felt like a laboratory monkey being launched into outer space in a homemade rocket.

He would have the luxury of contemplating these matters until the promised ship turned up (if it actually did). He took his jacket off and wiped his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. The early morning sun was getting hotter by the minute, *and if that damn tub doesn't show up soon, I'll be a hard-boiled egg*, he reflected, rearranging his cramped legs.

He scoured the horizon to the west and squinted. There was something out there, a small object--and it was moving! It had to be the three-masted barque, the *Aberdeen*. What a fine sight it was to behold. *Three cheers for Rama who got it right yet again!* Adrian breathed a sigh of relief. Unfortunately, there hadn't been enough opportunity for Adrian to properly prepare for this blast into the past and his grasp of European history was a bit sketchy. He was a grad student in sociology, not history. It was June in the year 1853, that much he had been told, along with a few other basic facts about the ship that was to pick him up, like her name and the name of the Captain. He tried hard to remember what was going on in the world in the middle of the nineteenth century. Victoria was on the throne in England and Albert was her consort--that much he knew for sure. Anyway, he had some time to think about history before the *Aberdeen* would be near him.

Nearly an hour later he was relieved to perceive the ship slowing down as it approached. He began waving his arms even though he was sure he had been seen. It gave him a chance to exercise his limbs. He began to brace himself for the inevitable awkward first meeting. How would he explain himself? First of all, there was the problematic fact of his being a time traveler, then the most unlikely circumstance of his being adrift in a dinghy in the middle of the ocean. He realized he should have given the details of his situation more thought. Rama didn't seem to have given them much thought either. Too late now. The *Aberdeen* had reefed nearly all her sails and had decreased her speed considerably. A skiff was being lowered from the side. Adrian could see many spectators at the rails, what must have been the entire crew of the *Aberdeen* and her passengers, no doubt curious about the spectacle before them of a flimsy boat with a single individual in it.

“Ahoy there!” he yelled, a gesture as superfluous as waving his arms had been.

“Sir, are you quite all right?” asked one of the sailors in the approaching skiff, apparently the one in charge. He had expected to discover a half-starved wreck of a man, dying of thirst. He was astonished to find a young lad, bright as a penny, clean shaven, neatly dressed, exhibiting no distress whatsoever.

“I’m fine, thank you. I’ll be even better once we’re aboard the ship.” He didn’t want to provide any further explanations as he knew he would have to repeat them all over again anyway.

“Climb in, sir, and do watch your step.” The sailor helped Adrian aboard then gave the dinghy a once over, puzzled by the look of it. It didn’t seem to be made of any kind of recognizable material. He attached a rope to the bow and tied the other end to the aft of the skiff.

The short distance to the *Aberdeen* passed quickly. Adrian felt conspicuous sitting in the bow, and the rowers eyed him suspiciously. He had attempted to dress in as neutral a style as he could—blue cotton pants, a plain white shirt, a simple light jacket—but he must have looked outlandish anyway. Maybe the Converse high-tops weren’t the best choice after all. And the Polo Ralph Lauren logo on the shirt pocket, and . . . too many details that must have stuck out like a Rolex watch on a flop house hobo.

The *Aberdeen* was a British ship, a merchant/passenger vessel in service to the East India Company. He climbed the rope ladder up the side without any difficulty, having been an Eagle Scout not so many years ago. He gave a crisp salute but immediately regretted having done so. After all, this was not a military vessel, not a “ship of the line”, and he was no seaman. The Captain, surrounded by the other officers, a bevy of gaping seamen and passengers, ignored his gaffe. Adrian towered over everybody. He must have seemed a giant. People back then were much smaller in stature.

“How do you do, Captain Fenwick,” blurted out Adrian, without thinking. He regretted that too, as soon as he mentioned the name. If Adrian’s appearance and size were not cause enough for the Captain to be schocked, the fact that a total stranger, fished out of the middle of the ocean, could know his name, left Fenwick momentarily speechless. He slowly took Adrian’s offered hand, looking him over from head to foot.

“H-h-how do you do, sir. Welcome aboard. May I ask your name—and how you happen to know mine? And how you came to be drifting here?”

“I’m Adrian Connor, from the United States of America. So happy to meet you. I was beginning to fry under that hot sun. It’s a long story, trust me. Could I bother you for something to drink?” He looked around, as if expecting to find the pool-side bar open for business.

Fenwick was taken aback at the brusqueness and casual manner of the stranger, but he kept his composure. The man was clearly an American, and quite young. That would explain a lot. “Well, of course. Please join me in my cabin. Indeed, I am all anticipation to hear your story.”

They were alone in the Captain’s quarters except for Bobrick, his steward. It was a small but well-lit room in the stern of the ship. Captain Fenwick, his well-trimmed beard streaked with a touch of grey, took a seat and indicated that Adrian should do likewise.

“Bobrick, bring us some barley water immediately, then a pot of tea.” The steward was not eager to leave the room as he was as curious as anyone else aboard the ship to hear the story of the mystery passenger. He ambled toward the exit *molto lento*.

Fenwick sat upright in his chair, not at all relaxed. He was a seasoned ship’s Captain, not one to be easily rattled. But the stranger’s physical appearance and manner, not to mention his mysterious origin—all this made him uneasy. “So, Mr. Connor, once again let me welcome you aboard. I must say that, in all of my years at sea, I have never come across a situation such as this one—an individual drifting alone in a not very sea-worthy craft, no provisions, no distress . . . well, how can that be explained? And I am even more astonished that you should know my name, as if you were expecting the *Aberdeen* to come sailing over the horizon.” He looked at his guest intently, inviting him to respond.

“That you came ‘sailing over the horizon’ was a bit of good luck, wasn’t it?” He laughed uncomfortably. Adrian had decided that telling the truth, that he was a time traveler, was too outlandish a fact to reveal. He would have to invent something as an explanation.

“First of all, I am very grateful to you for rescuing me. The ocean is a lonely place for a small boat.” The Captain nodded in agreement. “Where to begin . . .” He looked up at the ceiling, as if he could find an answer there. “I was vacationing in the Sindh after a visit to the Punjab. Several days ago I boarded a pleasure boat in Karachi, a vessel owned by a wealthy businessman,

the friend of a friend. We planned to cruise around for a few days and then return to the same port.”

“A pleasure boat?” inquired the Captain. “What kind of ship was that? I have never heard of such an excursion being organized in India.”

“Well, it was. That’s all I can say.” Adrian couldn’t explain further because he knew little of early nineteenth century sailing ships in India. He did know that the Raj, British India, included what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan, so Karachi as his point of departure was feasible. And Karachi was in Sindh province. At least he got that right. His brain went into overdrive: “On the third night out we were rammed, hit by an unknown force—a whale, perhaps? The ship capsized. I am apparently the lone survivor.” It all sounded a bit ridiculous, even to him.

Captain Fenwick remained silent as Bobrick had returned with the refreshments. He waited until the steward exited the room, which he did once again indolently, shuffling to the door.

“That is quite an extraordinary account, Mr. Connor. You are the only survivor? How did you manage to get into the dinghy? And I have never heard of whales inhabiting these waters, not to mention ramming a larger vessel. They are not aggressive creatures unless provoked.” He paused, looking puzzled. “And there is the matter of you being familiar with my name. Kindly explain that to me.”

This was indeed a tough question. Beads of sweat appeared on Adrian’s brow, this time not from the heat. He had to come up with something plausible.

“Oh, that,” he said, shifting in his seat. “I was looking through the list of current sailing vessels in the service of the East India Company and must have come across your name.”

“Really?” Fenwick asked, incredulously. “You came across my name and remembered it? Why, there are hundreds of vessels in the service of the E.I.C. and an equal number of captains! How could you remember my name?”

“I have photographic memory.”

“You have a photo what?”

Oops!, thought Adrian. Of course the term is unknown—photography has barely been invented.

“I . . . er . . . have the capacity to commit entire pages to memory. It’s an odd talent I have.” He fervently hoped that the Captain would not test it further.

“Odd? I’ll say it is,” commented the Captain. He didn’t know what to make of this stranger, a collection of improbabilities and oddments. And what was he wearing on his feet?

From the skeptical look on Fenwick’s face, Adrian could tell that he wasn’t buying it. Captain Fenwick had treated him decently so far and was worthy of respect. He felt ashamed and decided to come clean. Lowering his head, he spoke more softly. “I am very sorry, Captain Fenwick, but I haven’t been entirely forthright with you. Not honest at all, actually.” He sighed and sank into his chair. “And you deserve to hear the truth. But that is even more improbable than the story I just told you. I wasn’t on a pleasure cruise and there was no accident, the ship didn’t sink.” Here he paused, unsure of how to proceed.

“Well? I am waiting for your explanation.” The Captain leaned forward.

“The fact is, believe it or not, I am a time traveler.” Adrian paused to let this sink in. “I have come from the beginning of the twenty-first century, from the year 2024. That’s, let me see, 167 years in the future.”

There was a long silence. The Captain looked as if he had just been sideswiped by an errant boom in a gale. Finally he spoke, quietly and deliberately. “Mr. Connor, I don’t know if I’ve brought a lunatic on board or not. You’re a ‘time traveler’ you say? Never heard of such a thing. I will need to ponder on this for a while. In the meantime it is best, I think, that we not share this information with anyone else. Are you in agreement?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Adrian was relieved that the Captain hadn’t ordered him to be thrown overboard. “Do have a look at my dinghy. It’s made out of fiberglass. That will bolster my claim, I think.” *I hope*, he muttered to himself.

The Captain continued, “Well, we shall not dwell on this any further for the moment. You are welcome to stay on the *Aberdeen* until we arrive in Bombay, four days from now. We can find some appropriate accommodation for you as a guest. There is nearly a full complement of passengers on board, but Mr. Thomas Torville is occupying a double cabin. I am sure he won’t mind the company. And you will enjoy meeting him, I’m sure. Now for tea. Please tell me a bit about yourself, Mr. Connor.”

While Fenwick poured the tea Adrian told him that he was a student, enrolled in a prestigious university, in the state of Connecticut, studying sociology (a term he had to explain), that he had visited India once before and wanted to see it in the nineteenth century. Fenwick raised his eyebrows at that, an indication that he was not ready to explore the time travel element of Adrian's life. When they had finished drinking their tea Fenwick stood up and gave a small bow, indicating an end to the interview.

"Bobrick will show you to your cabin, Mr. Connor. Until later." As soon as he turned, Bobrick came in. He had no doubt been listening at the door.

Thomas Torville was a pleasant enough fellow--friendly, not too inquisitive, talkative. He was a textile dealer, on his way to Allahabad to purchase stock for his Liverpool firm, Lauren & Boss, Ltd. The cabin was cramped, although furnished only with bunk beds, a writing table and a small chair. As Adrian had no baggage, there was no unpacking to do. Tom (as he preferred to be addressed) appeared puzzled at first at Adrian's appearance but made no comment. "Welcome to the ship, old man. Let me take you up on deck and show you the glories of the *Aberdeen*," he said, with a smile. "There really isn't much to see. No end of water, of course!" He laughed heartily at his own feeble wit. "And you will want to meet the other passengers. I know they are eager to meet you."

Back on deck, Adrian was introduced to each one of the passengers. They were polite enough and very curious about him, but too polite to ask any questions. The crew cast sideways glances his way. Lunch was about to be served, it was announced. They all descended to the dining room together, just one deck below.

Meanwhile, on the main deck, some of the crew had been examining the curious sailing vessel that the new passenger had arrived in. Hauled up out of the water, it was deposited at the stern of the ship, ironically situated just above the captain's quarters, where Adrian was spinning his absurd tales and finally confessing to the truth of his situation. Indeed, the dinghy was not made of wood, but of some material unknown to them, strong and inexplicably light. One man alone could pick it up. What kind of wood was this? And what were these nearly weightless oars made of? Some kind of metal, to be sure, but nothing these men had ever encountered. Their amazement and curiosity slowly turned to incredulity. When one of the men pointed out that the name

of the craft was *Little Devil*, neatly lettered on each side of the prow, there was a collective gasp. Even more scandalous, they discovered the figure of a female painted on the stern, an alluring, bare-breasted mermaid with flowing golden blond hair, and flashing a lascivious grin. "It's a creature of the devil," muttered one of the older seamen, quickly crossing himself. Sailors are notoriously superstitious and this lot was no exception.

There were twelve at lunch. The Captain excused himself, with regrets, to the passengers. Conversation began with remarks about the quality of the repast which, after so many weeks at sea, had become repetitive and tedious. The comments had become so as well. Eventually, one of the party addressed Adrian, inquiring about his origins.

Mrs. Ethel Crapston-Bigge introduced herself and her husband. She was an ample woman, swathed in yards of drab brown muslin, with an unmistakably imperious air. Her husband, the Reverend Samuel Crapston-Bigge, was a frail, sickly man, content to sit quietly and wordlessly.

"Mr. Connor--do I have the name right?—how does it happen that a person of your young age can travel the world?"

Adrian was again put on the spot, having to improvise and weave a web of fantasies. He had a wealthy aunt, he explained, who provided him with the means of traveling. That much was not entirely untrue.

"And why do you come to India, of all places?" she inquired further, putting down her fork and focusing a penetrating gaze on him. "You could go to Rome or Paris. Isn't that where young American men prefer to dally?" Spending evenings at the *Moulin Rouge*, ogling chorus girls dancing the cancan and such?"

"Now, now," interjected Tom Torville who was fed up with the woman's sour attitude, having endured her disagreeable comments for many weeks already. "Just because he is a young American doesn't mean he is dissolute. And how do you even know of the *Moulin Rouge*?"

"I know plenty about the vile ways of the world, Mr. Torville, more than I care to," she responded.

Adrian was surprised to hear this not very amiable exchange and chose to ignore it. "I am fascinated with Indian culture and want to explore the marvelous places I have read about, especially the temples and the exotic

landscapes. And one must experience the Taj Mahal, don't you agree? I have even dabbled in studying Sanskrit."

"Learning Sanskrit? Whatever for? It is the language of a backward and barbarous culture. Are you acquainted with suttee, Mr. Connor, the ritual where widows are expected to fling themselves onto the lit funeral pyres of their departed spouses? What do you say to that?"

"That is only one small aspect of Indian life. The country has an ancient culture offering many wonders. There is a lot more to India than that bizarre practice. Besides, suttee has been legally outlawed." His studies in sociology came in handy, for once.

"That may be the case, but little good has it done. These Indians are stuck in their primitive ways." She glared at him disapprovingly. "We are on our way to India, returning for the third time, to our mission in Hyderabad," she went on, "in order to continue converting the heathen from their idolatrous ways. Behind the wonders you speak of is the work of Satan. All those idols and the impenetrable hocus pocus . . ." She broke off and huffed disdainfully.

"Other cultures can have much to teach us," countered Adrian, attempting to soften the tone of the conversation.

"I wonder if you are even a Christian, to speak like that."

"Well, I was actually brought up as a Methodist, but I ditched the whole business as soon as I could."

"There we have it!" she proclaimed, banging a hand on the table. "So you're a godless atheist! I suspected as much."

With that the subject was clearly closed. Adrian was astonished at the blatant ignorance and prejudice of the woman. He had read about people like her, and seen them portrayed in films, but actually meeting one was a bit of a shock. This was the Victorian missionary mentality come to life.

Silence descended on the company like a wet blanket. Adrian's thoughts wandered and he could hardly suppress a smile when they turned to the reigning monarch, Queen Victoria, and the rumor that circulated even then that the Royal Consort Prince Albert sported what has come to be known since as a Prince Albert piercing. He imagined asking Mrs. Crapston-Bigge if she knew what that was, and then having to explain it to her. What euphemism would he employ to mention the male body part Of the Royal Prince, to Victorian sensibilities all but unmentionable: his banana? his plonker? his

chopper? She surely wouldn't know what a schlong was, he thought. And with that absurdity he inadvertently laughed out loud.

"You find this amusing, do you?" She was working herself into a lather. "We are bringing salvation to the heathen masses of the subcontinent of India and you see fit to laugh!"

"Oh no, I wasn't laughing at that, I was thinking of . . ."

She plowed on indignantly, "Well, with your strange dress and permissive attitudes we can only wonder if you yourself are not an instrument of the devil." With that she arose from her chair and flung her napkin onto her plate. "You are not fit company for any Christian, Mr. Connor. Come along, Samuel." The poor Reverend left his place at table, his meal only half-eaten, and meekly followed her out of the dining room. If she only knew what Adrian had actually been thinking about . . .

Mr. Torville broke the ensuing tension caused by the unexpected and dramatic departure of the couple: "I say, the old bat knows how to make a scene!"

The steward Bobrick, who loved to gossip, had indeed been listening at the door of the Captain's quarters during his interview with Adrian. Having heard only bits and pieces of the conversation, his imagination filled in what he had missed. And what he subsequently reported to crew and passengers was the extravagant, muddled concoction of an over-active mind. The crew members who had inspected the dinghy, in their turn, spread the notion that the stranger, plucked out of the sea just hours earlier, was a bringer of bad luck--the most ominous epithet in their nautical world.

Captain Fenwick soon heard all these opinions, some whispered in hushed tones, and they disturbed him greatly. The last thing any captain wants is restiveness on his ship, a mood that can get out of hand all too easily. Fenwick was a peaceful man and he strove to run a happy ship.

Mrs. Crapston-Bigge came to him first, vociferously protesting the presence of Adrian Connor aboard the *Aberdeen*, then the Second Officer nervously presenting the conclusions of the deck crew, that the stranger's presence was bad luck for the ship. It did not help at all that Adrian had made such an alarming account of himself. "*A time traveler--just what the hell was that anyway?*" thought the captain.

After lunch Adrian went up on deck again. He remained alone at the rail, eschewed by everyone, passengers and crew alike. The sea was still calm, vast and empty. The Captain approached him and immediately cut to the chase.

“Mr. Connor, I am sorry to say that I will have to renege on my offer to let you stay on board the *Aberdeen*. The passengers and crew are in an uproar and I can’t have that on my ship. I regret to tell you this, but we are putting you back in your boat.” He paused for a moment, observing Adrian with pity and regret. “I don’t know who you really are or where you are from. Frankly, I can make no sense at all of this whole episode. We will furnish you with some provisions, enough to last a few days. Perhaps you can make it to wherever you are sailing. I wish you well.” Captain Fenwick offered his hand and Adrian shook it, not completely surprised by this turn of events. The Captain’s words were the last anyone would speak to him aboard the ship.

The *Little Devil* was again lowered into the water. The crew scowled as Adrian climbed down the rope ladder. He seated himself as before. The aluminum oars were in place. The passengers and crew watched silently from the rails as the dinghy drifted away from the *Aberdeen*. There were no goodbyes, only a half-hearted wave from Tom Torville. Mrs. Ethel Crapston-Bigge turned her back to him.

A brass band and colored streamers would have been a nice gesture, mused Adrian. He wasn’t too put out by his removal from the ship. It had been awkward and unpleasant to be banished, but it wasn’t catastrophic. He had options. He activated the special device, Ramachandra’s time travel invention, that was safely secured on a chain around his neck. It sent the signal that he was ready to return. He hoped that Rama would be able to find him and re-transport him back to the twenty-first century before too long. Rowing to Bombay was not an appealing prospect. If there was one distinction in this whole sorry affair, it was that this would be the shortest launch into the past in the entire history of Ramachandra’s time travel experiments. He had been on board the *Aberdeen* for only a few hours.

Drifting in the solitude at sea he ruminated on his recent experience. He was amused at the thought of Mrs. Ethel Crapston-Bigge. He could imagine her as the matron of a women’s penitentiary for the incorrigible, or as the abbess of a secluded convent dedicated to the Order of the Sisters of Perpetual Misery. It made him laugh out loud to imagine her being flung off a

cliff onto a blazing funeral pyre. *Take that, Mrs. Big Crap!* A fit of uncontrollable mirth overcame him. He laughed at the ridiculous woman, at himself for attempting to pass off such a ludicrous story to the Captain, at his absurd predicament, that he was all alone and helpless in the middle of nowhere.

He slowly settled down again and stretched his legs out, making himself as comfortable as a person his size could get in a row boat. He watched the *Aberdeen* gradually disappear over the eastern horizon. A slight but refreshing breeze had come up from the north. Adrian Connor breathed in deeply, inhaling the clean sea air. There was nothing else to do now but wait.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Mueter, now retired, was previously professor of Opera and Vocal Coaching/Accompanist at the UMKC Conservatory for 25 years, then adjunct at the University of Kansas School of Music for 5 years.