

MELANCHOLY DISASTER AND SUFFERINGS AT SEA.

(From the Madras Spectator of July 5.)

On Saturday evening the barque *Melanie*, Capt. Barton, anchored in the Madras Roads, having on board 12 men and the chief and second mates of the barque *Sir Charles Napier*, which foundered at sea off Acheen on the 2d June. The *Sir Charles Napier*, 341 tons, William Balsillie, master, was a British ship, the property of the Messrs. Rutherford, chemists and druggists, Durham, and was bound to England from Rangoon with a cargo of rice, when she sprung a leak and was abandoned by her captain and crew. Mrs. Balsillie, the wife of the captain, at the time in a very delicate state, was on board when the ship was given up, and shared in all the hardships and privations which befel the captain and crew, and with them narrowly escaped being brutally murdered by the semi-savages on the coast of Sumatra. Both Capt. Balsillie and his wife are no more. They died in the *Melanie*, almost within sight of Madras, victims no doubt to the sufferings they underwent before they were rescued from a situation in which their lives were threatened every moment.

The *Sir Charles Napier* left Rangoon on the 17th May on her homeward voyage. The ship was making two inches of water an hour when she sailed, but nothing serious was apprehended, and the captain was advised by the authorities on shore to put into the nearest port if he found that the leak gained upon her. Before leaving Rangoon river the ship struck the ground, but it was not seen that she had sustained any injury, and the captain stood out to sea. From this time up to the 28th of the month, the state of the hold gave rise to no apprehensions, but on the date last mentioned in lat. 4 N., and long. 93 W., it was found that the ship was making hourly 18 inches, and it became necessary to keep all hands at work at the pumps. All the exertions of the crew, however, were of no avail. Night and day for five days did they toil, without taking a moment's rest, to save the ship, but the leak gained on them every hour, and on the 2d of June the water in the hold was found to be six feet. The men were no longer able to work, and there was no alternative but to leave the ship to her fate, and take to the boats. The three boats were lowered, but before the captain finally abandoned her, he tried to bring the ship as near Acheen as possible. They were then about one hundred and thirty miles from land, and by dint of great exertion he succeeded in taking her to within sixty miles of the coast, at which point it became dangerous to remain in her any longer, the water having now reached eight feet; and the captain and crew having filled the boats with water and provisions and such other articles as promised to be useful, among which were the ship's chronometer and a few muskets and cutlasses, pulled stoutly away in the direction of land. The provisions and water were all stowed away in the jolly boat, in which were the captain, his wife, and three men. The chief mate and five men were in the pinnace, while the second officer and the remaining five of the crew took charge of the gig. The three boats got way together. The prospect before them was none of the most cheering. Overhead the sky was dark and lowering, and the wind, which blew in strong gusts, seemed to betoken an approaching gale. It was near evening, and they knew that they were making for an inhospitable coast, where the natives were all of them pirates. There was no help for it, however, and on they sped, the jolly boat which carried a sail keeping in advance of the other two boats, but it was not fated that they should keep together long, for a gale soon sprung up and the jolly boat was carried out of sight of the other two, and was not heard of by them until three or four days afterwards. It was not long, however, before the gig and the pinnace also separated, and as each party has a tale to tell, it would be well perhaps to lose sight of the jolly boat for a moment to follow the fortunes of its two companions. So soon as the gale had passed over, the gig and the pinnace—the three boats having neared land at this time—ran in for shelter off a village under Acheen head. They had neither provisions nor water, and were seen by the villagers, who hailed to them to come on shore, but the men in that boat saw that they were armed with long knives, and their looks and gestures did not promise a kind reception, and they refused to land. Their backwardness did not seem to satisfy the natives, and the uproar and gesticulation were renewed; and while the men in the boats were debating among themselves as to the best course to pursue, to their infinite grief and astonishment two armed praos made their appearance and struck out in the direction of the boats, evidently on hostile thoughts intent. The praos were large and heavily armed; in each there were upwards of fifty or

sixty men, all of whom carried muskets and a description of gun which the sailors term "blunderbusses." The shipwrecked men had no chance against these formidable customers, so there was nothing for it but to bolt, which they did, followed by the praos, which gave chase. The praos plied about 40 oars each, and the chase would have been soon decided if darkness did not come to the aid of the ship's boats. The pinnace dropped quietly to and was passed by the praos unnoticed, while the gig, which kept ahead of its antagonists, got considerably in advance, and was enabled to anchor out of the reach of immediate danger. Neither of the boats was captured, but each believed that the other had fallen into the hands of the pirates. And first, as to what befel the gig. The night was passed in the greatest suffering and uneasiness. The men had neither food nor water. Ignorant of the navigation of the place, they had been obliged to anchor in a hostile neighbourhood, and they had no doubt that when morning broke the islanders would not fail to pay them a visit. It proved just as they had surmised. Day had scarcely dawned when the sailors in the gig saw that the praos were almost on their bows. They tried to escape again, and stood out to sea, but the praos gave chase, and the crew of the gig soon became alive to their perilous position. During the six previous days they had had hardly any rest—they had eaten nothing since they left the ship, and to go into the open sea in their broken-down condition and without a morsel of food on board, would be nothing short of madness. They therefore altered their original intention and put about for land, but this brought them near the praos, who were not slow in making the most of the advantages thus gained. The gig was fired into by the pirates. The men say they heard the balls whistle about them like hail; none of them were struck, however, though a ball grazed the carpenter's back. There was only one serviceable musket at hand, but they saw no safety in firing in return. The only course was to surrender, and this the gig did, as it was found that escape was impossible. The pirates boarded the gig and rifled her of everything she contained; broke open the few chests in her, and took all that was in them. They began to banter the crew, who felt that they had very little kindness to expect from them, and took them ashore. Although they did not ill-treat the men, their demeanour was anything but assuring. The shore was made at a great distance from Acheen, and whatever the intentions of the pirates might have been at first with respect to the men in their power, they changed their tune when they found that the other boat had got away, as it was possible that she might have got into Acheen where assistance could be obtained, and the pirates owed submission to the king of Acheen. They gave the prisoners rice, and said they would send the men to Acheen, if they faithfully promised not to report what had happened, and the sailors having done so, on the following morning they were taken to Acheen overland to the residence of the rajah, where they were much cheered to find their chief mate and the crew of the pinnace safely housed and comfortable. The pinnace, it appeared, had been more fortunate than the gig. It will be remembered that she lay to when both boats were chased by the praos on the evening of the 2d June. As the chief mate understood the navigation of the coast well, he made direct for Acheen, and, favoured by the darkness, succeeded in reaching the place. They first met a fisherman in a canoe, and got some rice from him. Then, with the assistance of the same man, they were enabled to land and report themselves to the rajah, an officer, it is said, next in rank to the King. The rajah, who understood a little English, treated them with all kindness, and having first provided them with food, took them to the King, to whose treatment of them all join in bearing the most favourable testimony. The King expressed his deep regret at all that had happened, promised to take measures for the recovery of their stolen property, although he knew he said that the pirates set him frequently at defiance, and directed that they should be taken care of till an opportunity presented itself for sending them to some British port. And the opportunity was not long coming. The day after the crew of the gig had joined the party in the pinnace the French ship *Jean Victor* of Nantes, Captain Petibon, anchored in Acheen roads, and soon learning the story of the rescued mariners, sought them out and offered them an asylum on board his ship, which was about sailing for Penang. Capt. Petibon took them on board his vessel, and the men say that had the gallant Frenchman been of the best of their own countrymen he could not have treated them better than he did. Nothing was then known of the captain of the *Sir Charles Napier* or the jolly boat, but immediately after dinner the same day, Captain Petibon thought he saw something resembling a boat at a distance, and from its colour, which was yellow, he learned from his guests that the boat was none other than the one in which the captain had endeavoured to make his escape. The captain of the *Jean Victor* immediately lowered one of his own boats, and, taking his chief officer with him and the chief and second mates of the *Sir Charles Napier*, made at once for the jolly boat, which they soon reached. There were no Europeans in her; but she was manned by two Madras men, from whom they learned, with much satisfaction, that Captain Balsillie and his party were safe on board the *Melanie*,

which was lying lower down the coast. It was not long before the whole party met. The men of the gig and pinnace had the satisfaction of seeing their captain and his wife safe and sound again, but the trials the jolly boat had undergone were even more severe and more dangerous than were those which they themselves had suffered. It appeared that, having been separated from his companions, the captain reached the island of Pulo Brass and had scarcely beached his boat on some coral reefs, when hundreds of the villagers came to the shore and asked him to land. It was the only course open to him, and so with the assistance of the islanders the whole party got safely ashore. In fact the islanders brought them away on their backs, as the surf raged furiously, and in every way evinced the most favourable disposition towards the white men. Having landed them safely, they led them to a hut, where they brought them rice, and after this act of hospitality, their friendly intentions, if they ever entertained any, seemed to have vanished, for they positively refused to do anything more. The fatigued people were allowed to rest a few hours. When they awoke, the natives refused to do anything without payment, and the clothes the sailors wore seemed to attract their particular attention. A shirt was given for six eggs, with which some kind of breakfast was knocked up for the lady, and other necessaries were purchased in a similar manner. This doubtful behaviour of the natives did not last long. One of them took a fancy to the rings Mrs. Balsillie had on her fingers, and drew his knife across her hand, which was understood to mean that he would cut the hand off if they were not given up quietly. These ornaments were accordingly given up excepting the wedding ring, which, after some explanation, Mrs. Balsillie was permitted to retain. A few fowls were purchased with clothes, and all that day was passed in a dreadful state of suspense and anxiety. Towards evening the islanders attacked the jolly boat, broke open the boxes, and carried away almost everything, not excepting the captain's chronometer. The attitude of the natives was not the most friendly. The surf was too strong for the party to get to the boat without assistance, and this the natives refused to give. The captain offered them large rewards, to take him to Acheen, but they agreed to do so at one moment, and refused at another. Things were in this state, the captain and his party being entirely at the mercy of upwards of 100 armed savages, when, to their great relief, two Europeans were seen approaching them on land, fighting their way through the natives, who were evidently not disposed to allow them to join the shipwrecked party. The captain thought that they were some of his own men, but he was soon undeceived, as they were strangers, and proved to be Captain Barton of the *Melanie* and Mr. Thompson, his chief mate. These two brave men had heard at Acheen there were Europeans in distress at Pulo Brass, and, guided by the Malay from whom they got the information, set out to the rescue, carrying their swords with them. As has been seen, some opposition was offered by the natives. One man got behind Captain Barton, and, drawing his knife, was near dealing him a blow which must have proved fatal, but Captain Barton luckily turned round in the nick of time, and so escaped unhurt. He and his chief officer both drew their swords, and, knowing the language of the people, made them understand that he was determined to go to the sufferers at all hazards. If they assisted him in removing them to his ship, he would reward them handsomely. If they offered the least opposition, himself and the chief officer had agreed to fight to the last, for they could not leave the place without their countrymen. This firm behaviour of the captain had the desired effect. The natives gave up the chronometer and other articles which they had plundered, and Capt. B. had the happiness of conveying Captain Balsillie and his party to the *Melanie*, where Mrs. Barton took charge of the lady, and the captain and crew were treated with all kindness. Very little remains to be told. As the *Melanie* was coming to Madras, the offer of Captain Petibon to take them to Penang was not accepted, and the captain and crew of the *Sir Charles Napier* took leave of the *Jean Victor*, deeply impressed with the kindness and hospitality of Captain Petibon and all on board, and left Acheen for Madras in the *Melanie*. All the sufferers were in the highest spirits, but it was not fated that the captain and his wife should see land again. On the 22d June Mrs. Balsillie was delivered of a girl, which did not live many hours, and although Mrs. Barton was all kindness and attention, the shock she had sustained was too much for her weak frame, and she began to sink. On the 25th Captain Balsillie himself succumbed to the dreadful sufferings he had undergone. He died before he could finish a narrative of his experiences, intended no doubt for the press, from which some of the facts mentioned above are taken, and it is only just to Captain and Mrs. Barton to say that Captain Balsillie speaks in the highest terms of the kind treatment they experienced on board the *Melanie*. On Thursday the 30th June, while within only a few miles from Madras, Mrs. Balsillie died, and was consigned to the deep.

The following officers and men of the ship are now in the Sailors' Home, with nothing that they could call their own, excepting the clothes on their backs. They have heard what the liberal Madras public is capable of doing for shipwrecked seamen, and we are persuaded that their expectations will be met to the fullest extent.

Alexander Greig, chief mate; Robert Balsillie, second mate; Martin Gardiner, carpenter; William Henry Dickson, Alexander Mackintosh, Charles Morgan, Alexander Powell, John Browne, James Johnstone, William Miller, John Chemist, and Thomas Wilson, seamen; Thomas Smith, apprentice.

[The wife of Captain Balsillie was a daughter of the late Captain Peter Willes, formerly of Dunbar, late of Glasgow.]