

Note: Britain was in the earliest stages of exploring and colonizing North America around the time that Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest*. Many plot elements and themes in the play reflect the beginning of colonialism in Britain. As well, the following document may very well have inspired the story of shipwrecked nobles that makes up the plot to the play.

A True Reportory of the Wreck and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, Knight, upon and from the Islands of the Bermudas: His Coming to Virginia and the Estate of that Colony Then and After, under the Government of the Lord La Warr, July 15, 1610, written by William Strachey, Esquire

A most dreadful tempest (the manifold deaths whereof are here to the life described), their wreck on Bermuda, and the description of those islands

EXCELLENT LADY, Know that upon Friday late in the evening we brake ground out of the sound of Plymouth, our whole fleet then consisting of seven good ships and two pinnaces, all which, from the said second of June unto the twenty-third of July, kept in friendly consort together, not a whole watch at any time losing the sight each of other. Our course, when we came about the height of between 26 and 27 degrees, we declined to the northward, and according to our governor's instructions, altered the trade and ordinary way used heretofore by Dominica and Nevis in the West Indies and found the wind to this course indeed as friendly, as in the judgment of all seamen it is upon a more direct line, and by Sir George Somers, our admiral, had been likewise in former time sailed, being a gentleman of approved assuredness and ready knowledge in seafaring actions, having often carried command and chief charge in many ships royal of Her Majesty's, and in sundry voyages made many defeats and attempts in the time of the Spaniard's quarreling with us upon the islands and Indies, etc.

We had followed this course so long as now we were within seven or eight days at the most, by Captain Newport's reckoning, of making Cape Henry upon the coast of Virginia, when on St. James' day, July 24, being Monday (preparing for no less all the black night before), the clouds gathering thick upon us and the wind singing and whistling most unusually (which made us to cast off our pinnace, towing the same until then astern), a dreadful storm and hideous began to blow from out the northeast, which swelling and roaring it were by fits, some hours with more violence than others, at length did beat all light from Heaven; which, like an hell of darkness, turned black upon us, so much the more fuller of horror, as in such cases horror and fear use to overrun the troubled and overmastered senses of all, which taken up with amazement, the ears lay so sensible to the terrible cries and murmurs of the winds and distraction of our company, as who was most armed and best prepared was not a little shaken.

For surely, noble Lady, as death comes not so sudden nor apparent, so he comes not so elvish and painful (to men, especially even then in health and perfect habitudes of body) as at sea; who comes at no time so welcome but our frailty (so weak is the hold of hope in miserable demonstrations of danger), it makes guilty of many contrary changes and conflicts. For indeed, death is accompanied at no time nor place with circumstances every way so incapable of particularities of goodness and inward comforts as at sea. For it is most true, there ariseth commonly no such unmerciful tempest, compound of so many contrary and divers motions but that it worketh upon the whole frame of the body and most loathsomely affecteth all the powers thereof. And the manner of the sickness it lays upon the body, being so unsufferable, gives not the mind any free and quiet time to use her judgment and empire; which made the poet say:

[“May the wives and children of our foes be the ones to feel the blind onset of rising Auster and the roaring of the darkling sea, and the shores quivering with the shock!” Horace, Odes]

For four-and-twenty hours, the storm in a restless tumult had blown so exceedingly as we could not apprehend in our imaginations any possibility of greater violence; yet did we still find it not only more

terrible, but more constant, fury added to fury, and one storm urging a second more outrageous than the former, whether it so wrought upon our fears or indeed met with new forces. Sometimes shrieks in our ship amongst women and passengers not used to such hurly and discomforts made us look one upon the other with troubled hearts and panting bosoms, our clamors drowned in the winds, and the winds in thunder. Prayers might well be in the heart and lips, but drowned in the outcries of the officers. Nothing heard that could give comfort, nothing seen that might encourage hope. It is impossible for me, had I the voice of Stentor and expression of as many tongues as his throat of voices, to express the outcries and miseries; not languishing, but wasting his spirits, and art constant to his own principles, but not prevailing.

Our sails wound up, lay without their use, and if at any time we bore but a hullock or half forecourse to guide her before the sea, six and sometimes eight men were not enough to hold the whipstaff in the steerage and the tiller below in the gunner room; by which may be imagined the strength of the storm, in which the sea swelled above the clouds and gave battle unto Heaven. It could not be said to rain: the waters like whole rivers did flood in the air. And this I did still observe: that whereas upon the land, when a storm hath poured itself forth once in drifts of rain, the wind, as beaten down and vanquished therewith, not long after endureth. Here, the glut of water (as if throttling the wind erewhile) was no sooner a little emptied and qualified, but instantly the winds (as having gotten their mouths now free and at liberty) spake more loud and grew more tumultuous and malignant. What shall I say? Winds and seas were as mad as fury and rage could make them.

For my own part, I had been in some storms before, as well upon the coast of Barbary and Algiers, in the Levant, and once, more distressful, in the Adriatic gulf in a bottom of Candy, so as I may well say: *Ego quid sit ater Hadriae novi sinus et quid albus peccet lapyx*. [“Full well I know what Hadria’s (the Adriatic’s) black gulf can be and what the sins of clear lapyx (the northwest wind)” Horace, Odes] Yet all that I had ever suffered gathered together might not hold comparison with this. There was not a moment in which the sudden splitting or instant oversetting of the ship was not expected.

Howbeit this was not all. It pleased God to bring a greater affliction yet upon us; for in the beginning of the storm we had received likewise a mighty leak. And the ship, in every joint almost, having spewed out her oakum before we were aware (a casualty more desperate than any other that a voyage by sea draweth with it), was grown five foot suddenly deep with water above her ballast, and we almost drowned within whilst we sat looking when to perish from above. This, imparting no less terror than danger, ran through the whole ship with much fright and amazement, startled and turned the blood, and took down the braves of the most hardy mariner of them all, insomuch as he that before happily felt not the sorrow of others, now began to sorrow for himself when he saw such a pond of water so suddenly broken in and which he knew could not (without present avoiding) but instantly sink him.

So as joining (only for his own sake, not yet worth the saving) in the public safety there might be seen master, master's mate, boatswain, quartermaster, coopers, carpenters, and who not, with candles in their hands, creeping along the ribs viewing the sides, searching every corner and listening in every place if they could hear the water run. Many a weeping leak was this way found and hastily stopped, and at length one in the gunner room made up with I know not how many pieces of beef. But all was to no purpose; the leak (if it were but one) which drunk in our greatest seas and took in our destruction fastest could not then be found, nor ever was, by any labor, counsel, or search. The waters still increasing and the pumps going, which at length choked with bringing up whole and continual biscuit (and indeed all we had, ten thousand weight), it was conceived as most likely that the leak might be sprung in the bread room, whereupon the carpenter went down and ripped up all the room, but could not find it so.

I am not able to give unto Your Ladyship every man’s thought in this perplexity to which we were now brought; but to me this leakage appeared as a wound given to men that were before dead. The Lord

knoweth, I had as little hope as desire of life in the storm, and in this: it went beyond my will (because beyond my reason) why we should labor to preserve life. Yet we did, either because so dear are a few lingering hours of life in all mankind, or that our Christian knowledges taught us how much we owed to the rites of nature, as bound not to be false to ourselves or to neglect the means of our own preservation, the most despairful things amongst men being matters of no wonder nor moment with Him Who is the rich fountain and admirable essence of all mercy.

Our governor upon the Tuesday morning (at what time, by such who had been below in the hold, the leak was first discovered) had caused the whole company (about 140, besides women) to be equally divided into three parts, and opening the ship in three places (under the forecastle, in the waist, and hard by the binnacle), appointed each man where to attend; and thereunto every man came duly upon his watch, took the bucket or pump for one hour, and rested another. Then men might be seen to labor, I may well say, for life; and the better sort (even our governor and admiral themselves), not refusing their turn and to spell each the other, to give example to other. The common sort, stripped naked as men in galleys, the easier both to hold out and to shrink from under the salt water which continually leapt in among them, kept their eyes waking and their thoughts and hands working with tired bodies and wasted spirits three days and four nights, destitute of outward comfort and desperate of any deliverance, testifying how mutually willing they were yet by labor to keep each other from drowning, albeit each one drowned whilst he labored.

Once so huge a sea brake upon the poop and quarter upon us as it covered our ship from stern to stem like a garment or a vast cloud; it filled her brim full for a while within, from the hatches up to the spar deck. The source or confluence of water was so violent as it rushed and carried the helmsman from the helm and wrested the whipstaff out of his hand, which so flew from side to side that when he would have seized the same again it so tossed him from starboard to larboard as it was God's mercy it had not split him. It so beat him from his hold and so bruised him, as a fresh man hazarding in by chance fell fair with it, and by main strength, bearing somewhat up, made good his place, and with much clamor encouraged and called upon others, who gave her now up, rent in pieces and absolutely lost. Our governor was at this time below at the capstan, both by his speech and authority heartening every man unto his labor. It struck him from the place where he sat and groveled him and all us about him on our faces, beating together with our breaths all thoughts from our bosoms else than that we were now sinking. For my part, I thought her already in the bottom of the sea; and I have heard him say, wading out of the flood thereof, all his ambition was but to climb up above-hatches to die outside and in the company of his old friends. It so stunned the ship in her full pace that she stirred no more than if she had been caught in a net, or than as if the fabulous remora had stuck to her forecastle. Yet without bearing one inch of sail, even then she was making her way nine or ten leagues in a watch.

One thing: it is not without his wonder (whether it were the fear of death in so great a storm, or that it pleased God to be gracious unto us), there was not a passenger, gentleman or other, after he began to stir and labor, but was able to relieve his fellow and make good his course. And it is most true, such as in all their lifetimes had never done hour's work before (their minds now helping their bodies) were able twice forty-eight hours together to toil with the best.

During all this time the heavens looked so black upon us that it was not possible the elevation of the Pole might be observed; nor a star by night, nor sunbeam by day, was to be seen. Only upon the Thursday night, Sir George Somers, being upon the watch, had an apparition of a little round light, like a faint star, trembling and streaming along with a sparkling blaze, half the height upon the main mast and shooting sometimes from shroud to shroud, 'tempting to settle, as it were, upon any of the four shrouds. And for three or four hours together, or rather more, half the night it kept with us, running sometimes along the main yard to very end and then returning; at which Sir George Somers called divers about him and showed them the same, who observed it with much wonder and carefulness. But upon a sudden, toward the morning watch they lost the sight of it and knew not what way it made.

The superstitious seamen make many constructions of this sea fire, which nevertheless is usual in storms, the same (it may be) which the Grecians were wont in the Mediterranean to call Castor and Pollux, of which if one only appeared without the other they took it for an evil sign of great tempest. The Italians and such who lie open to the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian Sea call it (a sacred body) *corpo sancto*; the Spaniards call it St. Elmo and have an authentic and miraculous legend for it. Be it what it will, we laid other foundations of safety or ruin than in the rising or falling of it. Could it have served us now miraculously to have taken our height by, it might have stricken amazement and a reverence in our devotions according to the due of a miracle. But it did not light us any whit the more to our known way, who ran now (as do hoodwinked men) at all adventures, sometimes north and northeast, then north and by west, and in an instant again varying two or three points, and sometimes half the compass. East and by south we steered away as much as we could to bear upright, which was no small carefulness nor pain to do, albeit we much unrigged our ship, threw overboard much luggage, many a trunk and chest (in which I suffered no mean loss), and staved many a butt of beer, hogsheads of oil, cider, wine, and vinegar, and heaved away all our ordnance on the starboard side, and had now purposed to have cut down the main mast, the more to lighten her, for we were much spent and our men so weary as their strengths together failed them with their hearts, having travailed now from Tuesday till Friday morning, day and night, without either sleep or food; for the leakage taking up all the hold, we could neither come by beer nor fresh water; fire we could keep none in the cook room to dress any meat; and carefulness, grief, and our turn at the pump or bucket were sufficient to hold sleep from our eyes.

And surely, madam, it is most true, there was not any hour (a matter of admiration) all these days, in which we freed not twelve hundred barricos of water, the least whereof contained six gallons, and some eight; besides three deep pumps continually going, two beneath at the capstan and the other above in the half deck, and at each pump four thousand strokes at the least in a watch. So as I may well say, every four hours we quitted one hundred tons of water, and from Tuesday noon till Friday noon we bailed and pumped two thousand ton; and yet, do what we could, when our ship held least in her (after Tuesday night second watch), she bore ten foot deep; at which stay our extreme working kept her one eight glasses, forbearance whereof had instantly sunk us. And it being now Friday, the fourth morning, it wanted little, but that there had been a general determination to have shut up hatches, and commending our sinful souls to God, committed the ship to the mercy of the sea. Surely that night we must have done it, and that night had we then perished, but see the goodness and sweet introduction of better hope by our merciful God given unto us: Sir George Somers, when no man dreamed of such happiness, had discovered and cried land.

Indeed the morning, now three quarters spent, had won a little clearness from the days before, and it being better surveyed, the very trees were seen to move with the wind upon the shore side; whereupon our governor commanded the helm-man to bear up. The boatswain, sounding at the first, found it thirteen fathom, and when we stood a little, in seven fathom; and presently, heaving his lead the third time, had ground at four fathom; and by this we had got her within a mile under the southeast point of the land, where we had somewhat smooth water. But having no hope to save her by coming to an anchor in the same, we were enforced to run her ashore as near the land as we could, which brought us within three quarters of a mile of shore; and by the mercy of God unto us, making out our boats, we had ere night brought all our men, women, and children, about the number of one hundred and fifty, safe into the island.

We found it to be the dangerous and dreaded island, or rather islands, of the Bermuda...