

ART. V.—*A Contemporary Account of the Great Storm at Calcutta in 1737.* By C. R. WILSON, M.A., Indian Education Department.

THE great storm of 1737 is one of the few events still remembered in the early history of Calcutta. The traditional account of the matter is that given by "Asiaticus," which he professes to have derived from the *Gentleman's Magazine*. It is as follows:—"In the night of the 11th October, 1737, there happened a furious hurricane at the mouth of the Ganges, which reached sixty leagues up the river. There was at the same time a violent earthquake, which threw down a great many houses along the river side; in Golgota (i.e. Calcutta) alone, a port belonging to the English, two hundred houses were thrown down, and the high and magnificent steeple of the English Church sunk into the ground without breaking. It is computed that twenty thousand ships, barques, sloops, boats, canoes, etc., have been cast away; of nine English ships then in the Ganges, eight were lost, and most of the crews drowned. Barques of sixty tons were blown two leagues up into land over the tops of high trees; of four Dutch ships in the river, three were lost, with their men and cargoes; 300,000 souls are said to have perished. The water rose forty feet higher than usual in the Ganges." Then follows the story of the voracious crocodile in the hold of the stranded ship.

This account of the great storm was repeated contentedly, without acknowledgment, by historians of Calcutta till 1892, when Mr. H. B. Hyde, in one of his interesting articles<sup>1</sup> on the Bengal Chaplaincy, contributed to the

<sup>1</sup> "Gervase Bellamy, Chaplain of Bengal 1726 to 1756": I.C.Q.R. for July, 1892.

*Indian Church Quarterly Review*; showed that this version of the story only agreed in substance with what had appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, that many of the details were unauthorised additions, and, in particular, that there was nothing at all about the church steeple in the original account.

"On September 30th last,"<sup>1</sup> says the *Gentleman's Magazine*, "happened a furious hurricane in the Bay of Bengal, attended with a very heavy rain, which raised fifteen inches of water in five hours, and a violent earthquake, which threw down abundance of houses; and, as the storm reached 60 leagues up the river, it is computed that 20,000 ships, barks, sloops, boats, canoes, etc., have been cast away. A prodigious quantity of cattle of all sorts, a great many tygers, and several rhinoceroses, were drowned; even a great many caymans were stifled by the furious agitation of the waters, and an innumerable quantity of birds was beat down into the river by the storm. Two English ships of 500 tons were thrown into a village about 200 fathoms from the bed of the river Ganges, broke to pieces, and all the people downed pell mell amongst the inhabitants and cattle. Barks of 60 tons were blown 2 leagues up the land over the tops of high trees. The water rose in all 40 feet higher than usual. The English ships which drove ashore and broke to pieces were the *Decker*, *Devonshire*, and *Newcastle*, and the *Pelham* is missing."<sup>2</sup> Here, too, comes the story of the crocodile in the stranded ship.

On further looking into the official records of the Bengal Council, Mr. Hyde could only find the following meagre notice of the great storm:—"On the 30th September there was a great storm, which drove several ships ashore. The Mohanna flagg-staff at Ballasore was blown down."<sup>3</sup> Mr. Hyde was, therefore, led to the conclusion that the

<sup>1</sup> The difference in the dates is the difference between the old and the new style of reckoning.

<sup>2</sup> *Gent. Mag.*, vol. viii, p. 321.

<sup>3</sup> *Bengal Public Consultations*, vol. xii, p. 323.

story of the cyclone of 1737 was "a curious example of rapid enrichment, by its narrators, of a popular legend"; and was provoked "to discredit even the 40-feet tide."

I am glad to be able to lay before the Royal Asiatic Society a contemporary account of the event which occurs in a letter from Francis Russell, a member of the Calcutta Council, afterwards Sir Francis Russell, Baronet, to his cousin Colonel Charles Russell, dated from "Calcutta the 31st Decem<sup>r</sup> 1737." From this it will be seen that the damage done by the storm was really very considerable, and that the river must have certainly risen to an abnormal height, as there was no ebb tide for twenty-four hours. Nothing is said about any earthquake, and perhaps that part of the traditional account must be given up, though the argument from silence is never safe. The extract has been kindly copied for me by Mr. B. F. Astley and is taken from the papers in the Collection of Manuscripts at Chequers Court, Bucks, with the permission of Mrs. Frankland-Russell-Astley.

"Captain Prince, Crab, Gilbert, and Acton are worthy men of good sense and I believe to much honour to say or do abase thing: the two former lost their Ships in the Dreadful Hurricane we had here the 30th Sept<sup>r</sup> at night, such a Schene of horror as that night was I never saw or heard off Such Terrible gust of wind like the loudest thunder and torrents of rain that I expected every moment the house I live in which is I believe the Strongest in the town wou'd have fallen on my head the noise was so violent above Stairs that myself and family was obliged to go down and stay below till morning with poor Mrs. Wastell and her children who had fled to our house for Shelter the doors and winders of hers being burst from the walls, but good God what Sight was the town and river in the morning not a ship but the *Duke of Dorsett* to be seen in the river were the evening before was above twenty nine sails of vessells great and small many being drove ashore Some broke to pieces and others founder'd and this which is Scarse creditable in a river hardly a mile

wide, there was no ebb tide for near twenty four hours, our church steeple was blown down as also eight or ten English houses and numbers belonging to the black Merchants the whole town looked like a place that had been bombarded by an enemy, Such a havock did it make that tis impossible to find words to express it all our beautifull shady roads laid bare which will not be the like again this twenty years Inclosed is a list of the Shipping with the Damage each Sustained which I forgot to inclose to Captain Gough so you'll taken an opportunity to show it him I thank God I have no greater Share in this calamity than what my proportion of refitting the freight ships drove ashore will amount to which may be about five or six thousands rupees for my part of all additional charges and about half that in Damage done my houses in town and country, I saved all my fine trees in the country that were blown down by replacing them while the earth was soft as they might have done by those on the roads had the same care been taken all our boats and small craft being also distroyed rendered impossible for us to help for some days our distress'd ships who lay ashore by the Governours Garden three miles below the town except the *Newcastle* who lay high ashore and bilged over against the Fort no was the least assistance afforded our own ships till all possible assistance had been first sent the Compy ships and I believe they were the first afloat except the *Hallifax* who cou'd not be got off till her goods was out tho' I reckon this will hardly meet credit in England, and I am sure no men in the world wou'd in the distress we were in have got men and boats and necessarys sooner then we did tho' I believe many thought they were not served soon enough and yet wou'd give no grains of allowance for the Difficulties we labour'd under in being forced to get boat from remote places the Storm had not reached I will [leave] to others to tell you more of this malancholy affair which pray communicate to my Brother and others I have not wrote it too."

I may add that Francis Russell, the writer of the letter, was a great-grandson of Oliver Cromwell, his father being Sir William Russell, who was the eldest son of Sir John Russell and Frances, the youngest and favourite daughter of the great Lord Protector. The house in which Francis Russell lived in Calcutta is marked in the earliest plans of the city as Lady Russell's house. It is still standing in Mission Row, the Rope Walk of earlier times, and was at one time the residence of General Clavering.