



THE SALT LEDGER

A Novella

IRIS CALLOWAY

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Lantern Row Press

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual tides, living or drowned, is coincidental.

*For the clerks, who wrote it all down,
and for the few who read it back.*

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Part One: Low Water

The Ninth Entry

The sea keeps no accounts, which is why we keep them for it.

— Harbour Office motto, Skerrow

TAM SIN HALE HAD BEEN THE JUNIOR CLERK OF THE SKERROW Harbour Office for eleven years, and in all that time she had never once been asked what she thought of a number. Numbers were not for thinking about. They were for copying, ruling off, and blotting.

The ledgers lived in the long room behind the customs counter, a hundred and four of them, shelved by decade and smelling of lamp oil and damp rope. Each page recorded the same four things: the hour of high water, its height in feet, the wind, and the clerk's initials. Tamsin's initials were everywhere after 2015. Before that, they were the initials of a dead man named Pellam, whose handwriting leaned like a gull in a gale.

On the first Monday of March she was asked to total the heights for the year 1923, because an insurance firm in the city wanted a figure by Friday.¹ She laid the ledger flat, uncapped her pen, and began to add.

The ninth entry of October made her stop.

"Six feet, two inches," she read aloud, to the empty room. "Wind, south-easterly, light."

There was nothing wrong with it. That was the trouble. She had added up a hundred thousand such lines and her fingers knew the

shape of a plausible tide the way a pianist's know a scale. This one was plausible, and it was wrong, and she could not have said how she knew.



SHE FETCHED THE ALMANAC, BECAUSE THE ALMANAC DID NOT HAVE opinions either. The almanac for 1923 gave the ninth of October a high water at 11:52 in the evening, a spring tide, eight feet and a little over. Pellam's predecessor, a clerk whose initials were only *R.W.*, had written six feet two, at ten past midnight.

"Eighteen minutes late and two feet short," Tamsin said. "On a spring tide. In a south-easterly."

The room did not answer. Outside, a halcyon slapped a mast in the harbour, patiently, like a clock with one tick.

She told herself it was a slip of the pen. Clerks made errors; that was why blotting paper was a civilised invention. She wrote the figure on a slip, tucked the slip into her cuff, and went on adding until the lamps needed trimming.

At six o'clock she locked the long room. At twenty past, she unlocked it again, and carried the ledger home under her coat.

Notes

1. Insurance firms always want a figure by Friday. It is the only constant in the history of commerce, older than the tide tables themselves. ↩

R.W.

THE INITIALS BELONGED TO A MAN CALLED RUFUS WEND, AND THE town had mostly forgotten him, which Tamsin found suspicious in a place that remembered everything else.

She learned this at the Mariners' Rest, where the barman, Odo, kept a memory the way other men kept a cellar: stocked, dated, and rarely opened for strangers. She was not a stranger, exactly, but she was not a regular either. She ordered a pot of tea, and Odo's eyebrows made a small speech about it.

"Wend," he said eventually. "Clerk before Pellam. Left in a hurry."

"When?"

"Winter of '23. Went out on the evening train with one case and no hat." He wiped a glass that did not need wiping. "My grandfather said the harbourmaster paid for the ticket himself. Generous, for a man who counted the gas."

"Why would he pay?"

"That's the question you came in to ask, isn't it?" Odo set the glass down. "Funny. Nobody has asked it in a hundred years. You'd think someone would have been curious."

Tamsin turned her cup in its saucer. "People aren't curious about clerks."

"No," Odo agreed. "That's what makes you dangerous."



THE HARBOURMASTER OF 1923 HAD BEEN A MAN CALLED JOSIAH Crane, whose portrait still hung in the Harbour Office stairwell. He had a magnificent moustache and the expression of someone who had never been contradicted by weather.¹

She stood in front of him that evening with the ledger under her arm.

“Mr Crane,” she said, because it seemed rude not to address him, “what did you do on the ninth of October?”

The portrait declined to comment. But on the frame, at the bottom corner where the varnish had cracked, someone had scratched three letters with a pin, long ago and very small: S.S.

She copied them onto the slip in her cuff. Two initials and a wrong tide. It was not much. It was, she reflected, more than the harbour had ever given her to work with.

Notes

1. Weather, for its part, had contradicted him frequently, and in writing. ↩

The Shape of Water

A tide is a promise the moon makes and the coast must keep.

— Pellam, margin note, 1931

THERE IS A METHOD FOR PREDICTING TIDES, AND TAMSIN KNEW IT well enough to be bored by it. You take the pull of the moon and the pull of the sun, you add the lesser pulls of their eccentricities, and you sum the lot as a handful of waves, each with its own period and amplitude. The sea, being obliging, mostly agrees.

She worked through that night at the kitchen table with a pot of tea, a pencil, and a sheet of squared paper. By two in the morning she had fitted the harmonic constants for Skerrow from the ledgers of 1920 to 1925, leaving out the suspect entry. By three she had a curve.

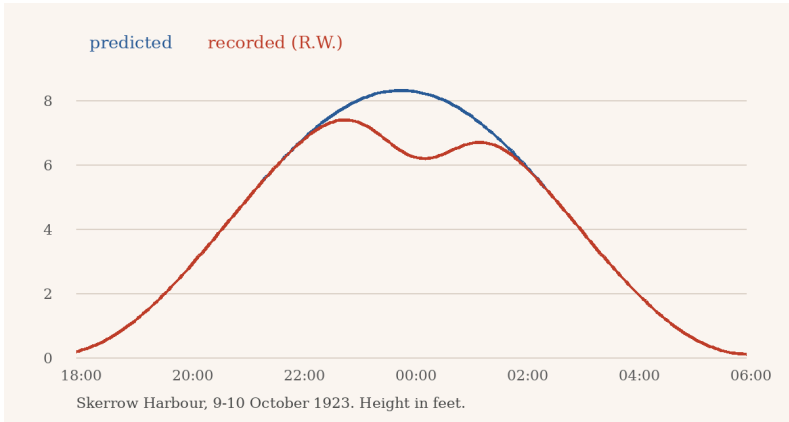


Figure 1. The predicted tide, the recorded tide, and the gap between them.

The predicted curve rose cleanly to a crest of eight feet three at 11:49 p.m. The recorded figure sat below it like a pebble under a coat.

“You were right to be late,” she told the squared paper. “You were *wrong* to be that small.”

The difference, she realised, was a height of two feet and one inch of water that had either not arrived or had been somewhere else. Water does not simply decline to arrive. It goes somewhere, and it takes the wind with it.



TOWARD DAWN SHE WENT BACK TO THE BEGINNING, AS CLERKS DO, and read the *neighbouring* entries. The eighth of October was ordinary. The tenth was ordinary. The ninth was a single bruise on a clean page.

Unless the tide had been recorded correctly. Unless R.W. had written, honestly, what the gauge had shown, because something had been in the way of the water at the harbour mouth that night: a hull,

say, a big one, grounded on the bar where it should never have been, damming the channel by a few critical inches.

Tamsin put down her pencil. In the grey light, the squared paper looked suddenly like a chart of something that had happened to real people.

She went to find out what had been on the bar.

Part Two: High Water

Salvage

THE WRECK REGISTER FOR 1923 WAS KEPT IN THE LIFEBOAT HOUSE, IN a tin box, under a coil of rope that had not been moved since the Coronation.^[^1] The keeper, an old woman named Bridie Orme, let Tamsin in with the dry resignation of someone who had been expecting this for decades.

“You’re the first,” Bridie said. “I always thought it would be a policeman.”

“I’m only a clerk.”

“Yes. That’s how I knew it would work.”

The register recorded a single wreck that autumn: the *Marguerite Dane*, a collier out of the north, lost with all hands on the night of the ninth of October. There was a line for the cargo, coal, and a line for the owner, a Crane Shipping Company.

“Crane,” Tamsin said.

“The harbourmaster’s brother,” said Bridie. “Insured for four times her worth. Sailed half-empty, with a crew of men who owed money in three ports.” She sat down heavily on an upturned bucket. “My mother said they were told the bar was safe. And the gauge said so, the gauge said six feet two, plenty of water, no trouble at the mouth. That was Wend’s reading.”

“It wasn’t what the gauge said.”

“No,” said Bridie. “I know.”



SHE TOLD IT PLAINLY, BECAUSE IT WAS A PLAIN STORY. CRANE HAD needed the *Marguerite Dane* to go down in a place that looked like an accident. He had needed the evening tide to appear low enough that nobody would ask why a coal ship was crossing the bar at all, and high enough that no one would be blamed for the crossing. He had made the clerk write a lie that satisfied both constraints.

And Rufus Wend, who had only wanted to be allowed to add up numbers in peace, had written it. Then he had taken the evening train.

“He left you a note,” Bridie said, and fetched a flat parcel from the same tin box. It was a single sheet, folded small, and on it in a hand that leaned like a gull in a gale were four words:

The gauge was right.

What Pellam Knew

PELLAM, IT TURNED OUT, HAD KNOWN EVERYTHING, AND HAD SPENT thirty years annotating it in the margins of the ledgers where nobody would think to read.

Tamsin spent a week with a magnifying glass. The marginalia were small and dry, the commentary of a man who disagreed with the universe and had chosen the safest possible medium. *Wind SE, light* had become, in his hand, *Wind SE, light, and so was the truth*. A neap tide in 1927 was glossed *Honest*. A storm surge in '31 earned *Crane's weather again*.

She assembled them in order on the kitchen table, and read them as a story.

"He never said it outright," she told Odo at the Mariners' Rest, when he finally agreed to listen. "Not once. Thirty years, and not one plain sentence."

"Because a plain sentence would have got him sacked." Odo poured her something that was not tea. "Or worse."

"But he wanted someone to find it."

"Aye. He wanted someone who'd read the ledgers like a book instead of a bill."

She drank. It tasted of peat and bad decisions, and she found, to her surprise, that she approved of both.



THE DIFFICULTY WAS PROOF. A HUNDRED-YEAR-OLD TIDE IS NOT evidence of anything except that the sea has habits. The insurers were long dissolved; Crane Shipping was a name on a brass plate, now a shop that sold lobster pots. The *Marguerite Dane* lay somewhere under the sand of the bar, and her crew lay with her.

What Tamsin had was a clerk's arithmetic: a prediction, a record, and a gap of two feet and one inch between them. It was not a confession. It was something older and quieter. It was a correction.

"You could just publish it," Odo said.

"As what? A footnote?"

"There are worse things to be." He pushed the glass toward her. "Some of us have lived in them."

High Water

What the tide takes, the ledger returns, eventually, in a smaller hand.

— Skerrow proverb

IN THE END SHE DID PUBLISH IT AS A FOOTNOTE, THOUGH A LONG one.¹

The Harbour Office printed a small centenary booklet every year, a dull thing with tide tables and a photograph of the new dredger. Tamsin was asked, as always, to proof the figures. She proofed them. And on page nine, under the entry for the ninth of October, she added an asterisk and a note in the neatest copperplate she owned:

Recorded height 6 ft 2 in, as written by R. Wend, clerk. Predicted 8 ft 3 in. The difference corresponds to the draught of a laden collier aground on the bar. The gauge was right.

Nobody read it, naturally. Nobody reads the notes. But the booklet went to the library, and the library gave a copy to the county archive, and in the county archive it was found, in due course, by a woman writing a history of the northern coal trade.



THE WOMAN WROTE TO THE HARBOUR OFFICE IN JUNE. SHE WROTE A second time in July. By September there was a small, cold ceremony

at the lifeboat house, with a brass plate and a list of eleven names, and Bridie Orme, who was ninety-one, was asked to unveil it.

“About time,” Bridie said, and pulled the cord.

Tamsin stood at the back with the other clerks. The harbourmaster of the day, a cheerful man who had never contradicted a tide in his life, made a speech about remembrance. She did not listen. She was watching the water at the harbour mouth, where the bar showed pale beneath the swell, and counting.

A clerk always counts. It is the only form of prayer the trade allows.

That night she opened the current ledger, uncapped her pen, and entered the high water in her own hand: the hour, the height, the wind, and her initials. Then, below it, in the margin, where no one would think to look, she wrote four small words.

The gauge was right.

For a long while she sat there with the lamp, and listened to the sea keeping no accounts at all.

Notes

1. The method she used is set out in Appendix: Predicting a Tide, for readers who like to check a clerk's arithmetic. ↩

Appendix: Predicting a Tide

TAMSIN'S METHOD IS THE HARMONIC ONE: A TIDE IS THE SUM OF A few cosine waves, one per astronomical cause. The sketch below predicts the height of water at a given hour for a harbour whose constants have already been fitted.

The constituents

EACH CONSTITUENT HAS A PERIOD IN HOURS, AN AMPLITUDE IN FEET, and a phase in degrees. The two big ones are the principal lunar semidiurnal (M2) and the principal solar semidiurnal (S2).

The program

```

import math

CONSTITUENTS = {
    # name: (period in hours, amplitude in feet, phase in
    # degrees)
    "M2": (12.4206, 3.10, 112.0),
    "S2": (12.0000, 1.05, 140.0),
    "N2": (12.6583, 0.62, 95.0),
    "K1": (23.9345, 0.41, 201.0),
}
MEAN_LEVEL = 4.2

def height(hours_since_epoch: float) -> float:
    """Predicted water height in feet."""
    total = MEAN_LEVEL
    for period, amplitude, phase in CONSTITUENTS.values():
        angle = 2 * math.pi * hours_since_epoch / period -
        math.radians(phase)
        total += amplitude * math.cos(angle)
    return total

if __name__ == "__main__":
    for hour in range(0, 25, 3):
        print(f"{hour:02d}:00 {height(hour):5.2f} ft")

```

RUN IT FOR A SPRING TIDE AND THE SUM SWELLS: M2 AND S2 FALL into step, and the sea rises further than either would manage alone. That alignment is what Tamsin saw missing from the ninth entry.

Acknowledgements

THIS NOVELLA EXISTS BECAUSE OF LONG AFTERNOONS IN HARBOUR offices and the patient people who unlocked their ledger rooms for a stranger with a notebook.

Thanks to the first readers of the manuscript, who caught three impossible tides and one impossible moustache; and to everyone who has ever blotted a page so the next person could read it.

Any remaining errors are the author's, and are recorded here in the margin.

About the Author

IRIS CALLOWAY WRITES QUIET MYSTERIES ABOUT ORDINARY workplaces. She lives near the sea, keeps a tide table pinned above her desk, and has never once been late for high water.

The Salt Ledger is her first novella, and the sample book shipped with **bookforge**.