

## The Black Hole of Calcutta

Then was committed that great crime, memorable for its singular atrocity, memorable for the tremendous retribution by which it was followed. The English captives were left to the mercy of the guards, and the guards determined to secure them for the night in the prison of the garrison, a chamber known by the fearful name of the Black Hole. Even for a single European malefactor, that dungeon would, in such a climate, have been too close and narrow. The space was only twenty feet square. The air holes small and obstructed. It was the summer solstice, the season when the fierce heat of Bengal can scarcely be rendered tolerable to natives of England by lofty halls and by the constant waving of fans. The number of the prisoners was one hundred and forty-six. When they were ordered to enter the cell, they imagined that the soldiers were joking; and, being in high spirits on account of the promise of the Nabob<sup>1</sup> to spare their lives, they laughed and jested at the absurdity of the notion. They soon discovered their mistake. They expostulated; they entreated: but in vain. The guards threatened to cut down all who hesitated. The captives were driven into the cell at the point of the sword, and the door was instantly shut and locked upon them.

Nothing in history or fiction, not even the story that Ugolino<sup>2</sup> told in the sea of everlasting ice, after he had wiped his bloody lips on the scalp of his murderer, approaches the horrors that were recounted by the few survivors of that night. They cried for mercy. They strove to burst the door. Holwell, who, even in that extremity, retained some presence of mind, offered large bribes to the gaolers. But the answer was that nothing could be done without the Nabob's orders, that the Nabob was asleep, and that he would be angry if anybody woke him. Then the prisoners went mad with despair. They trampled each other down, fought for the places at the windows, fought for the pittance of water with which the cruel mercy of the murderers mocked their agonies, raved, prayed, blasphemed, implored the guards to fire among them. The gaolers in the meantime held lights to the bars, and shouted with laughter at the frantic struggles of their victims. At length the tumult died away in low gaspings and moanings. The day broke. The Nabob had slept off his debauch, and permitted the door to be opened. But it was some time before the soldiers could make a lane for the survivors, by piling up on each side the heaps of corpses on which the burning climate had already begun to do its loathsome work. When at length a passage was made, twenty-three ghastly figures, such as their own mothers would not have known, staggered one by one out of the charnel-house. A pit was instantly dug. The dead bodies, a hundred and twenty-three in number, were flung into it promiscuously and covered up.

--From Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Lord Clive," *Critical and Historical Essays*, 1843.

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<sup>1</sup>Nabob: The leader of the Indian forces rebelling against the British Raj. --KW

<sup>2</sup>Ugolino: Macaulay alludes to the description of an icy layer of hell found in Dante's *Inferno*, Canto 30. In Dante's account, the soul of Ugolino describes how enemy forces locked him in a tower with his children to starve the family to death. Ugolino ended up cannibalizing his offspring, and was condemned to hell along with his persecutors. There, the group spent eternity frozen up to the neck in ice, with Ugolino gnawing on the head of his chief enemy. --KW

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1) How big is the Black Hole of Calcutta? How many prisoners are kept in it?

2) Note the places where Macaulay uses hyperbole to create overblown description. Note the places where he does not use it, but merely states facts. How do these two types of writing both create emotional effects?

3) How does the oxymoron "cruel mercy" have a rhetorical effect as well as a decorative one?