



"THE --
RATS HAVE EATEN UP HOLLAND"

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(After Drawings by THOMAS RUNCIMAN)

"THE -- RATS HAVE EATEN UP HOLLAND"

TARRING THE MAINMAST STAY

TELLING HIS FORTUNE

A PARTING CHEER TO THE OUTWARD BOUND

RATCLIFFE HIGHWAY: "CARRYING SMALL CANVAS"

A BERWICKSHIRE HAVEN

PREFACE

"I went in at the hawse-hole and came out at the cabin window." It was thus that a certain North Country shipowner once summarised his career while addressing his fellow-townsmen on some public occasion now long past, and the sentence, giving forth the exact truth with all a sailor's delight in hyperbole, may well be taken to describe the earlier life-stages gone through by the author of this book. The experiences acquired in a field of operations, that includes all the seas and continents where commerce may move, live, and have its being, have enhanced in value and completed what came to him in his fore-castle and quarter-deck times. He learned in his youth, from the lips of a race now extinct, what the nature and traditions of seamanship were before he and his contemporaries lived. He has seen that nature and those traditions change and die, whilst he and his generation came gradually under a new order of things, whose practical working he and they have tested in actual practice both on sea and land.

It is on this ground of experience that the author ventures to ask attention to his views in respect of the likeliest means to raise a desirable set of seamen in the English merchant navy. But he also ventures to hope that the historic incidents and characteristics of a class to which he is proud to belong, as set forth in this book, may cause it to be read with interest and charitable criticism. He claims no literary merit for it: indeed, he feels there may be found many defects in style and description that could be improved by a more skilful penman. But then it must be remembered that a sailor is here writing of sailors, and hence he gives the book to the public as it is, and hopes he has succeeded in making it interesting.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

It was a bad day for Spain when Philip allowed the "Holy Office" to throw Thomas Seeley, the Bristol merchant, into a dungeon for knocking down a Spaniard who had uttered foul slanders against the Virgin Monarch of England. Philip did not heed the petition of the patriot's wife, of which he must have been cognisant. Elizabeth refused the commission Dorothy Seeley petitioned for, but, like a sensible lady, she allowed her subjects to initiate their own methods of revenge. Subsequent events show that she had no small share in the introduction of a policy that was ultimately to sweep the Spaniards off the seas, and give Britain the supremacy over all those demesnes. This was the beginning of a distinguished partnership composed of Messieurs John Hawkins and his kinsman Francis Drake, and of Elizabeth their Queen. Elizabeth did not openly avow herself one of the partners; she would have indignantly denied it had it been hinted at; yet it is pretty certain that the cruises of her faithful Hawkins and Drake substantially increased her wealth, while they diminished that of Spanish Philip and that of his subjects too. Long before the Armada appeared resplendent in English waters, commanded by that hopeless, blithering landlubber, the Duke of Medina Sidonia, who with other sons of Spain was sent forth to fight against Britain for "Christ and our Lady," there had been trained here a race of dare-devil seamen who knew no fear, and who broke and vanquished what was reckoned, till then, the finest body of sailors in the whole world. That our sailors have maintained the reputation achieved in the destruction of the great Spanish Armada is sometimes disputed. I am one of those who trust that British seamen would be worthy of British traditions were they even now put to the test by some powerful invader. To suppose that the men who smothered the Armada, or those who broke the fleets of Spain and France at Trafalgar, were more courageous than those of our day would be found in similar circumstances, is arrant folly. In smaller things we can see the same sterling qualities shown by members of our Navy now as their forebears exhibited of old. The impressive yet half comic character of the religion that guided the

lives of seamen during Drake's time has been faithfully handed down like an heirloom to the genuine old salt of our own time.

The great Admiral had inconsistencies of character, and conduct that would seem to live on in more or less elevated examples up till now. He conducted himself in regal style on his long voyages, dressing in an imposing way for dinner, during which he commanded fine music to be played—for at that day England was the home *par excellence* of music—and no food was eaten at his table until the blessing of the Almighty had been asked upon it, and "thanks" was solemnly offered ere rising. The Holy Sacrament was partaken by him with Doughty the Spanish spy. The latter, after being kissed by Drake, was then made to lay his head on the block, and thereafter no more was heard of him. Afterwards the Admiral gave forth a few discourses on the importance of unity and obedience, on the sin of spying into other people's affairs; and then proceeded, with becoming solemnity and in the names of God and the Icy Queen, to plunder Spanish ports and Spanish shipping. Drake believed he was by God's blessing carrying out a divinely governed destiny, and so perhaps he was; but it is difficult somewhat to reconcile his covetousness with his piety. But what is to be said of his Royal mistress whose crown and realm were saved to her by free sacrifices of blood and life on the part of thousands of single-minded men, whom the Royal Lady calmly allowed, after they had secured her safety and that of England, to starve in peace on Margate Sands? Times have changed. Were such reward to be meted to the sailors of to-day after some great period of storm, stress and national peril had been passed through by virtue of their prowess, the wrath of the nation might break forth and go near to sweep away such high-placed callousness for good and all.

The modern austere critic of the condition of the seamen of the mercantile marine is somewhat of an infliction. He slays the present-day sailor with virulent denunciation, and implores divine interposition to take us back to the good old days of Hawkins, Drake, Howard, Blake and the intrepid Nelson. He craves a resurrection of the combined heroism and piety of the sixteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. The seaman of those periods is, to his mind, a lost ideal. And without doubt the men trained and disciplined by Hawkins and Drake *were* the glory of Britain and the

terror of other nationalities. Their seamanship and heroism were matchless. They had desperate work to do, and they did it with completeness and devotion. And the same credit may be given to the sailors of still later times under altered conditions. But Nelson's and Collingwood's men did great deeds in different ways from those of Hawkins and Drake. Both sets of seamen were brave and resourceful, but they were made use of differently, and were drafted from different sources. The latter were seamen and piratical rovers by choice, and warriors very often by necessity. They were willing, however, to combine piety, piracy, and sanguinary conflict in the effort to open out new avenues of commercial enterprise for the mutual benefit of themselves and the thrifty lady who sat upon the throne, and who showed no disinclination to receive her share of the booty valiantly acquired by her nautical partners.

The race of men which followed the Trans-Atlantic, Pacific, and Mexican buccaneers of Cadiz, San Juan and Armada fame has been different only in so far as transitional circumstances have made it so. Indeed, the period which elapsed from the time of the destruction of the Armada up to the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century had evolved innumerable changes in modes of commerce which changed our seamen's characteristics as well. But although the circumstances of the sailors' avocation had changed, and they had to adapt themselves to new customs, there is no justification for the belief that the men of the sixteenth were any more capable or well behaved than those of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Nor is it justifiable to assume that because of the rapid changes which have taken place during the last fifty years by the introduction of steamers, the seamen who man the steamers are inferior to those who, a generation before, manned sailing vessels, or who man what is left of sailing vessels now. The steamer seamen of to-day are mentally, physically and mechanically as competent to do the work they are engaged to do as were any previous race of seamen, and, taking them in the aggregate, they are better educated than their predecessors and quite as sober. Their discipline may not be all that could be desired, but that is not the fault of, nor need it even be considered a defect in, the seaman himself. It is a defect of the system they live under, the responsibility for which must rest with those whose duty it is to train them. It often

happens that those who declaim so cynically against the shortcomings of the present-day sailor are incompetent to make a suitable selection of captains and officers who may be entrusted with the task of establishing proper discipline and training aboard their vessels. Very frequently the seamen are blamed when the captain and officers ought to be held responsible. If captains and officers are not trained properly in their graduating process themselves, and have not the natural ability to make up for that misfortune when given the opportunity of control, it is inevitable that disorder must follow. There are, however, exceptional cases where, for example, an officer may have been reared in a bad, disorderly school, and yet has become a capable disciplinarian. An instance of this kind seldom occurs; but the merchant service is all the richer for it when it does. It must not be supposed that I have any intention of defending the faults of our seamen. I merely desire that some of the responsibility for their faults and training should be laid on the shoulders of those critics who shriek unreasonably of their weaknesses, while they do nothing to improve matters. Many of these gentlemen complain of Jack's drunken, insubordinate habits, while they do not disapprove of putting temptation in his way. They complain of him not being proficient, and at the same time they refuse to undertake the task of efficient training. They cherish the memory of the good old times. They speak reverently of the period of flogging, of rotten and scanty food allowance, of perfidious press-gangs, and of corrupt bureaucratic tyranny that inflicted unspeakable torture on the seamen who manned our line of battleships at the beginning of the century—seamen who were, for the most part, pressed away from the merchant service.

In my boyhood days I often used to hear the old sailors who were fast closing their day of active service say that there were no sailors nowadays. They had all either been "drowned, killed, or had died at home and been decently buried." I was impressed in those days with the opinions of these vain old men, and thought how great in their profession they must have been. As a matter of fact, they were no better nor any worse than the men against whom a whimsical vanity caused them to inveigh. Many years have passed since I had the honour of sailing with them and many, if not all of them, may be long since dead; but I sometimes think of them as amongst the

finest specimens of men that ever I was associated with. Their fine manhood towered over everything that was common or mean, in spite of their wayward talk.

CHAPTER II

PECULIAR AND UNEDUCATED

The average seaman of the middle of the nineteenth century, like his predecessor, was in many respects a cruel animal. To appearance he was void of every human feeling, and yet behind all the rugged savagery there was a big and generous heart. The fact is, this apparent or real callousness was the result of a system, pernicious in its influence, that caused the successive generations of seafaring men to swell with vanity if they could but acquire the reputation of being desperadoes; and this ambition was not an exclusive possession of those whose education had been deplorably neglected. It was proudly shared by some of the best educated men in the service. I do not wish it to be supposed, however, that many of them had more than a very ordinary elementary education; but be that as it may, they got along uncommonly well with the little they had. Mr. Forster's Educational Bill of 1870, together with Wesleyan Methodism, have done much to nullify that cultivation of ignorance, once the peculiar province of the squire and the parson. Amongst other influences, Board Schools have revolutionised (especially in the villages and seaport towns) a condition that was bordering on heathenism, and no class of workmen has benefited more than seamen by the propaganda which was established by that good Quaker who spent his best years in hard effort to make it possible that every English child, no matter how poor, should have an education.

At the time of the passing of the Education Act there were thousands of British lads who were absolutely illiterate (this does not apply so much to Scottish boys); and there were hundreds of master-mariners who could neither read nor write, and who had a genuine contempt for those who could. They held the notion that learning, as they called it, always carried with it nautical ignorance and general deterioration; and in some instances the old salts' opinions seemed amply borne out by palpable blunders in practical seaman-

ship which were not uncommonly made when the theoretic seaman or navigator was at work. These shortcomings of the "learned" were never forgotten or forgiven by the practical though illiterate seamen.

Until well into the 'fifties the north-east coast collier brigs and schooners were usually commanded by this type of illiterates, and innumerable stories might be told of their strange methods and grotesque beliefs. The following is a fair example. The London trade once became congested with tonnage, and a demand sprang up for Holland, whereupon a well-known brig was chartered for Rotterdam. She had been so long employed running along the coast with the land aboard that the charts became entirely neglected. When the time came to say farewell there was more than ordinary affection displayed by the relatives of the crew whose destiny it was to penetrate what they conceived to be the mysteries of an unexplored East. There were not a few females who regarded the undertaking as eminently heroic. With characteristic carelessness the trim craft was rollicked along the Yorkshire coast until abreast of Flamborough Head, when it became necessary to take a departure and shape a course for Rotterdam. She scampered along at the rate of six to seven knots an hour amid much anxiety among the crew, for a growing terror had possessed the captain and his mate as they neared the unknown dangers that were ahead of them. The captain went below and had begun to unroll the chart which indicated the approaches to his destination, when he became horrorstruck, and rushing up the cabin stairs called out, "All hands on deck! Hard, a port!" The mate excitedly asked, "What's the matter?" "The matter?" said the infuriated and panic-stricken skipper, "Why the b— —y rats have eaten Holland! There is nee Rotterdam for us, mister, *this* voyage." But in spite of a misfortune which seemed serious, the mate prevailed upon this distinguished person to allow *him* to have a share in the navigation, with the result that the vessel reached the haven to which she was bound without any mishap whatever.

It was not unusual for those old-time brigs, when bound to the North in ballast, to be blown off the land by strong westerly gales, and these occasions were dreaded by the coasting commander whose geographical knowledge was so limited that when he found himself drifting into the German Ocean beyond the sight of land,

his resources became too heavily taxed, and perplexity prevailed. It was on one of those occasions that a skipper, after many days of boisterous drifting, remarked to his mate, "I wish our wives knew where we are this terrible night!"

"Yes," replied the shrewd officer, with comic candour; "and I wish to heaven we knew where we are ourselves!"

Such was the almost opaque ignorance, in spite of which a very large carrying trade was successfully kept going for generations.

The writing of the old-time skipper was so atrocious that it brought much bad language into the world. One gentleman used to say that his captain's letters used to go all over the country before they fell into his hands, and when they did, they were covered over with "try here" and "try there." Their manners, too, were aboriginal; and they spoke with an accent which was terrible. They rarely expressed themselves in a way that would indicate excessive purity of character. They thought it beneath the dignity of a man to be of any other profession than that of a sailor. They disdained showing soft emotion, and if they shook hands it was done in an apologetic way. The gospel of pity did not enter into their creed. Learning, as they called it, was a bewilderment to them; and yet some of those eccentric, half-savage beings could be entrusted with valuable property, and the negotiation of business involving most intricate handling. Sometimes in the settlement of knotty questions they used their own peculiar persuasiveness, and if that was not convincing, they indicated the possibility of physical force—which was usually effectual, especially with Levantines. Here is an instance: one of the latter plethoric gentlemen, with an air of aggrieved virtue, accused a captain of unreasonableness in asking him to pay up some cash which was "obviously an overcharge." The skipper in his rugged way demanded the money and the clearance of his vessel. The gentlemen who at this time inhabited the banks of the Danube could not be made to part with money without some strong reasons for doing so. The Titanic and renowned captain, having exhausted a vocabulary that was awful to listen to, proceeded to lock the office door on the inside. That having been satisfactorily done, he proceeded to unrobe himself of an article of apparel; which movement, under certain conditions, is always suggestive of coming trouble.

The quick brain of the Levantine gentleman saw in the bellicose attitude assumed possibilities of great bodily harm and suffering to himself; on which he became effusively apologetic, and declaimed with vigorous gesticulation against the carelessness of his "account clerk who had committed a glaring error, such as justified his immediate dismissal!" That stalwart hero of many rights had not appealed in vain. He got his money and his clearance, and made a well-chosen and impressive little speech on the wisdom of honest dealing. His convert for the time being became much affected, declaring that he had never met with a gentleman whose words had made such a strange impression on him!

This then was the kind of creature who wrought into its present shapes and aspects England's Mercantile Marine. In carrying out his destiny he lashed about him with something of the elemental aimlessness of his mother the sea. The next chapter will show how the captain of to-day grew up and, literally, got licked into his present form at the rough and cruel hands of the old-time skipper.

CHAPTER III

A CABIN-BOY'S START AT SEA

During recent years I have had the opportunity of listening to many speeches on nautical subjects. Some of them have not only been instructive but interesting, inasmuch as they have often enabled me to get a glimpse into the layman's manner of thinking on these questions. It invariably happens, however, that gentlemen, in their zeal to display maritime knowledge, commit the error of dealing with a phase of it that carries them into deep water; their vocabulary becomes exhausted, and they speedily breathe their last in the oft-repeated tale that the "old-fashioned sailor is an extinct creature," and, judging from the earnest vehemence that is thrown into it, they convey the impression that their dictum is to be understood as emphatically original. Well, I will let that go, and will merely observe how distressingly superficial the knowledge is as to the rearing, training, and treatment which enabled those veterans to become envied heroes to us of the present day. Much entered into their lives that might be usefully emulated by the seamen of our own time. Their unquestionable skill and hardihood were acquired

by a system of training that would have out-matched the severity of the Spartan, and they endured it with Spartan equanimity. A spasmodic growl was the only symptom of a rebellious spirit. The maritime historian who undertakes to write accurately the history of this strange society of men will find it a strain on the imagination to do them all the justice they deserve. Their lives were illuminated with all that is manly and heroic and skilful. They had no thought of cruelty, and yet they were very cruel—that is, if they are to be judged by the standard of the present age; but in this let us pass sentence on them with moderation, and even with indulgence. The magnitude of the deeds they were accustomed to perform can never be fully estimated now, and these should excuse to some extent many of their clumsy and misguided modes of operation. It must not be supposed that all these men were afflicted by a demoniac spirit. It was their training that blanketed the sympathetic side of them, until they unconsciously acquired all the peremptory disposition of Oriental tyrants. But the stories I am about to relate of child-life aboard ship will show how difficult it is entirely to pardon or excuse them. The blood runs chilly at the thought of it, and you feel your mind becoming impregnated with the spirit of murder.

No personage ever attracted so much attention and sympathy outside the precincts of his contracted though varied sphere of labour as the cabin-boy who served aboard the old sailing brigs, schooners, and barques, and I must plead guilty to having a sentimental regret that the romance was destroyed through this attractive personality being superseded by another, with the somewhat unattractive title of "cook and steward." The story of how poor boys of the beginning and middle of the century and right up to the latter part of the 'sixties started sea-life is always romantic, often sensational, and ever pathetic. They were usually the sons of poor parents living for the most part in obscure villages or small towns bordering on the sea, which sea blazed into their minds aspirations to get aboard some one of the numerous vessels that passed their homes one way or the other all day long. The notion of becoming anything but sailors never entered their heads, and the parents were usually proud of this ambition, and quite ready to allow their offspring to launch out into the world while they were yet little more than children. It very frequently happened, however, that boys left

their homes unknown to their families, and tramped to the nearest seaport with the object of engaging themselves aboard ship, and they nearly always found some skipper or owner to take them. Swarms of Scotch and Norfolk boys were attracted to the Northumberland ports by the higher rate of wages. Many of them had to tramp it all the long way from home, and quite a large number of them became important factors in the shipping trade of the district. It was a frequent occurrence to see a poor child-boy passing through the village where I was brought up, on his way from Scotland to Blyth, or the Tyne, his feet covered with sores, and carrying a small bundle containing a shirt, a pair of stockings, and flannel pants. This was his entire outfit. My mother never knowingly allowed any of these poor little wanderers to pass without bringing them to our home. They were promptly supplied with bread and milk while the big tub was got ready so that they might be bathed. They were then provided with night clothing and put to bed while she had their own clothes washed, and mended if need be (they always required washing); they were then sent on their journey with many petitions to God for their safety and welfare. Some of the villagers were curious to know why this gratuitous hospitality was given to unknown passers-by, and my mother satisfied their curiosity by pointing to her own children, and remarking, "Don't we live within the sound of the sea? and I wish to do by these poor children that which I should like some one to do by mine if it ever should come to pass that they need it." Little did she suspect when these words were uttered that one of her own sons was so soon to be travelling in an opposite direction in quest of a cabin-boy's berth.

One of the most touching memories of sweetness comes to me now. It was a chill winter afternoon; a little boy stood out on the common fronting our house; the customary bundle was under his arm, and he was singing in a sweet treble these words, with a strong Scotch accent:—

"A beggar man came over the lea
Wi' many a story to tell unto me.
'I'm asking for some charitie,
Can ye lodge a beggar man?"