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Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
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The Honour of the Flag

W. Clark (William Clark) Russell

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THE HONOUR OF THE FLAG

=*The Honour of the Flag*=.

A THAMES TRAGEDY.

Manifold are the historic interests of the river Thames. There is scarcely a foot of its mud from London Bridge to Gravesend Reach that is not as "consecrated" as that famous bit of soil which Dr. Samuel Johnson and Mr. Richard Savage knelt and kissed on stepping ashore at Greenwich. One of the historic interests, however, threatens to perish out of the annals. It does not indeed rise to such heroic proportions as you find in the story of the Dutch invasion of the river, or in old Hackluyt's solemn narrative of the sailing of the expedition organised by Bristol's noble worthy, Sebastian Cabot; but it is altogether too good and stirring to merit erasure from the Thames's history books by the neglect or ignorance of the historian.

It is absolutely true: I pledge my word for that on the authority of the records of the Whitechapel County Court.

In the year 1851 there dwelt on the banks of the river Thames a retired tailor, whom I will call John Sloper, out of regard to the feelings of his posterity, if such there be. This man had for many years carried on a flourishing trade in the east end of London. Having got together as much money as he might suppose would supply his daily needs, he built himself a villa near the pleasant little town of Erith. His house overlooked the water; in front of it sloped a considerable piece of garden ground.

Mr. Sloper showed good sense and good taste in building himself a little home on the banks of the Thames. All day long he was able, if he pleased, to entertain himself with the sight of as stirring and striking a marine picture as is anywhere to be witnessed. He could

have built himself a house above bridges, where there is no lack of elegance and river beauty of many sorts; but he chose to command a view of the Thames on its commercial side.

In his day there was more life in the river than there is now. In our age the great steamer thrusts past and is quickly gone; the tug runs the sailing-ship to the docks or to her mooring buoys, and there is no life in the fabric she drags. In Sloper's time steamers were few; the water of the river teemed with sailing craft of every description; they tacked across from bank to bank as they staggered to their destination against the wind.

Sloper, sitting at his open window on a fine day, would be able to count twenty different types of rigs in almost as many minutes. That he took a keen interest in ships, however, I do not assert; that he could have told you the difference between a brig and a schooner is barely imaginable. The board on which Sloper had flourished was not shipboard, it had nothing to do with starboard or larboard; he was a tailor, not a sailor, and the friends who ran down to see him were of his own sort and condition.

Sloper was a widower; how many years he had lived with his wife I can't say. She died one Easter Monday, and when Sloper took possession of his new house near Erith he mounted some small cannon on his lawn, and these pieces of artillery he regularly fired every Easter Monday in celebration of what he called the joyfullest anniversary of his life. From which it is to be assumed that Sloper and his wife had not lived together very happily. But though the Whitechapel County Court records have been searched and inquiries made in that part of London where Sloper's shop was situated, it has not been discovered that Mrs. Sloper's end was hastened by her husband's cruelty; that, in short, more happened between them than constant quarrels. Yet it must be said that Sloper behaved as though, in truth (as the old adage would put it), his little figure contained no more than the ninth part of a soul, when he mounted his guns and rudely and noisily triumphed over the dead whom he perhaps might have been afraid of in life, and coarsely emphasised with blasts of gunpowder his annual joy over his release.

Now in the east end of London, not above twenty minutes' walk from Sloper's old shop, there lived a sailor, named Joseph Westlake.

This man had served when a boy under Collingwood, had smelt gunpowder at Navarino under Codrington, had been concerned in several dashing cutting-out jobs in the West Indies, and was altogether as hearty and worthy a specimen of an old English sailor of the vanished school as you could ask to see.

He had been shot in the leg; he carried a great scar over his brow; he was as full of yarns as a piece of ancient ship's biscuit of weevils; he swore with more oaths than a Dutchman; sneered prodigiously at steam; and held the meanest opinion of the then existing race of seamen, who, he said, never could have won the old battles which had been the making of this kingdom, whether under Howe's or gallant Jervis's, or the lion-hearted Nelson's flag.

The country had no further need of his services on his being paid off out of his last ship, and he was somewhat at a loss, until happening to be in the neighbourhood of Wapping, and looking in upon an old shipmate who kept a public house, he learnt that a lawyer had been making inquiries for him. He called upon that lawyer, and was astounded to hear that during his absence from England a fortune of £15,000 had been left to him by an aunt in Australia.

Joe Westlake on this took a little house in the Stepney district, and endeavoured to settle down as an east-end gent; but his efforts to ride to a shore-going anchor were hopeless. His mind was always roaming. He had followed the sea man and boy for hard upon fifty years, and the cry of his heart was still for water – water without rum! – water fresh or salt! it mattered not what sort of water it was so long as it *was* – water.

So as Joe Westlake found that he couldn't rest ashore he looked about him, and, after a while, fell in with and purchased a smart little cutter, which he re-christened the *Tom Bowling*, out of admiration of the song which no sailor ever sang more sweetly than he. It was perfectly consistent with his traditions as a man-of-wars man that, having bought his little ship, he should arm her. He equipped her with four small carronades and a pivoted brass six-pounder on the forecastle. He then went to work to man her, but he did not very easily find a crew. Joe was fastidious in his ideas of seamen, and though some whom he cast his eye upon came very near to his

taste, it cost him a great deal of trouble to discover the particular set of Jacks he wanted.

Three at last he found: Peter Plum, Bob Robins, and Tom Tuck. Joe was admiral; Plum, coming next, combined a number of grades. He was captain, first lieutenant, and boatswain. Robins was the ship's working company, and Tom Tuck cooked and was the all-round handy man of the *Tom Bowling*.

It was Mr. Joe Westlake's intention to live on board his cutter; he furnished his cabin plainly and comfortably, and laid in a plentiful stock of liquor and tobacco. As he was to cruise under his own flag, and was indeed an admiral on his own account, he conferred with his first lieutenant, Peter Plum, on the question of a colour: what description of flag should he fly at his masthead? They both started with the understanding that nothing under a fathom and a half in length was worth hoisting. After much discussion it was agreed that the device should consist of a very small jack in the top corner, and in the middle a crown with a wooden leg under it—the timber toe being in both Westlake's and Plum's opinion the most pregnant symbol of Britannia's greatness that the imagination could devise.

Within a few months of his landing from the frigate out of which he had been paid, Mr. Joseph Westlake was again afloat, but now in a smart little vessel of his own. She had been newly sheathed with copper, and when she heeled over from the breeze as she stretched through the winding reaches of the river the metal shone like gold above the wool-white line of foam through which the cutter washed, and lazy men in barges would turn their heads to admire her, and red-capped cooks in the cabooses of "ratching" colliers would step to the rail to look, and sometimes a party of gay and gallant Cockneys, male and female, taking their pleasure in a wherry, would salute the passing *Tom Bowling* with a flourish of hands and pocket handkerchiefs.

Never had old Joe been so happy in all his life. Of a night he'd bring up in some secure nook, and after having seen everything all safe, he'd go below with Peter Plum, and in the cosy interior of the little cabin, whose atmosphere was rendered speedily fragrant with the perfume of rum punch, which Joe, whilst in the West Indies, had learnt the art of brewing to perfection, the two sailors would sit

smoking their yards of pipe-clay whilst they discoursed on the past, one incident recalling another, one briny recollection prompting an even salter memory, until their eyes grew moist and their vision dim in their balls of sight; whereupon they would turn in and make the little ship vocal with their noses.

It happened, according to the usual methods of time, that an Easter Monday came round, which, as we know, was the joyful anniversary of the death of the wife of the retired tailor, Sloper, whose villa, called Labour's Retreat, stood upon the banks of the Thames near Erith. To fitly celebrate this happy day Mr. Sloper had invited three friends to dine with him. It was in the year 1851, when the class of society in which Mr. Sloper belonged was not so genteel in its habits as it has since become; in other words, Sloper dined at two o'clock. Had he survived into this age he would not have dreamt of dining at an earlier hour than seven.

His friends were of his own sex. Sloper did not like the ladies. His friends' calling matters not. They did business in the east end of London, and were all three thoroughly respectable tradesmen in a small way, wanting, perhaps, in the muscle and depth of chest and hurricane lungs of Joe Westlake and Peter Plum, but all of them able to pay twenty shillings in the pound, to give good value for prompt cash, and desirous not only of fresh patronage, but determined to a man to merit the continuance of the same.

When Sloper and his friends had dined, and the bottle had circled until, like quicksilver in the eye of a hurricane, the contents had sunk out of sight, the party went on to the lawn to fire off the guns there in completion of the triumphant celebration of the ever-memorable anniversary of Sloper's release.

It was precisely at this hour that the *Tom Bowling*, with Plum at the helm and Joe Westlake in full rig, marching up and down the quarter-deck, came leisurely rounding down Halfway Reach before a pleasant northerly breeze of wind blowing over the flat, fat levels of Barking. The *Tom Bowling*, opening Jenningtree Point, ported her helm and floated in all her pride of white canvas and radiant metal and fathom and a half of shining bunting at her masthead into Erith Reach.

Just as she came abreast of Labour's Retreat a gun was fired; the white powder-smoke clouded the tailor's lawn; the thunder of the ordnance smote the ear of Joe Westlake, who, dilating his nostrils and directing his eyes at Sloper's villa, bawled out: "Peter! that's meant for us, my heart! Down hellum! slacken away fore and aft! pipe all hands for action!"

A second gun roared upon the lawn that sloped from the tailor's house; and almost as loud was the shout that Westlake delivered to all hands to look alive and bring the guns to bear. The Tom Bowling was thrown into the wind and brought to a stand abreast of Labour's Retreat; Plum took a turn with the helm and went to help at the guns, and in a few minutes the three of a crew, with Westlake continuously bawling out orders to bear a hand and load again, were actively engaged in firing blank at the enemy on the lawn.

It might have been that Mr. Sloper and his friends were a little tipsy; it might have been that they were irritated by their *feu de joie* being interrupted and complicated, so to speak, by the cutter's artillery; it is certain that they continued to load and discharge their guns as fast as they could sponge them out; whilst from the river the cutter maintained a rapid fire at Labour's Retreat. In an evil moment, temper getting the better of Sloper's judgment, he loaded one of his pieces with stones, and the gun was so well aimed that on Joe Westlake looking aloft he beheld his beautiful flag of a fathom and a half in holes.

For some moments the old man-of-wars man stood staring up at his wounded flag, idle with wrath and astonishment. He then in a voice of thunder shouted: "Plum—Robins—Tuck! D' ye see what that there fired little tailor's been and done? Why, junk me if he ha' n't shot our colour through! Boys, load with ball; d' ye hear? Suffocate me, but he shall have it back. Quick, my hearts, and go for him."

With ocean alacrity some round shot were got up, a gun was fired point-blank at Labour's Retreat, and down came a chimney-stack, amidst the cheers of the crew of the *Tom Bowling*.

"Now, then," roared old Joe, "over with our boat, lads, and board 'em!

Tommy, stay you here and let go the anchor"; and in a very few

minutes

Plum and Robins were pulling Joe Westlake ashore.

Sloper and his party saw them coming and manfully stood their ground. The three seamen, securing their boat, forced their way on to the lawn and marched up to the tailor and his friends.

"What do you mean by firing at my cutter?" roared old Joe.

"What do you mean by knocking down my chimneys?" cried the tailor, who was exceedingly pale.

"Who began it?" bawled Joe. "Who fired first? Who's bin and made holes in that there flag of mine? Why, that's the flag of a British sailor, you little withered thimble you; and durn ye, if you don't make me instantly an humble apology and stump up with the cost of what ye've injured, I'll skin ye!" and he threw himself into a very menacing posture.

At this point one of the tailor's friends slunk off.

"My chimney-stack is worth more than your twopenny flag," shrieked Sloper, maddened even into some temporary emotion of courage by the insults of the old man-of-warsman.

"Say that again, will 'ee," said Joe. "Just sneer at that there flag again, will 'ee."

The tailor was idiotic enough to repeat the affront, on which, and as though a perfect understanding as to what was to be done subsisted among the three sailors, old Joe, Plum, and Robins fell upon Sloper, and, lifting him up in their arms, ran with him to the boat, into which they flung him, paying not the least heed whatever to his cries for help and for mercy, and instantly headed for the cutter, leaving the tailor's friends white as milk and speechless with alarm near the cannon upon the lawn.

When the boat reached the cutter, Plum jumped aboard and received little Sloper from the hands of old Joe, making no more of the burthen than had the tailor been a parcel, say, of a coat and waistcoat, or a pair of trousers. Old Joe then actively got over the rail. He lifted the little main-hatch, and Mr. Sloper was dropped into the

space below, where the darkness was so great that he could not see, and where there was nothing to sit upon but Thames ballast.

"In boat, up anchor, and away with us!" said Joe Westlake.

The breeze was fresh, the cutter was always an excellent sailer, and in a very short space of time she was running down Long Reach with Erith and its adjacent shores out of sight, past the round of land where Dartford creek is to be found. Joe Westlake then called a council. Robins was at the tiller; Plum and Tuck came aft, and the four debated at the helm.

"I've heerd," said old Joe, "of this tailor afore. His name's Sloper. I've never larnt why he mounted them guns, or where the little rooting hog got his pluck from to fire 'em. But there can be no shadder of a doubt, mates, that his object in firing to-day was to insult that there flag."

He pointed with an immensely square forefinger to the masthead.

"Ne'er a shadder," said Plum.

"For why," continued old Joe, "did the smothered rag of a chap wait for us to come right abreast afore firing?"

"Ah! that's it, ye see," exclaimed Bob Robins. "There ye've hit it, Mr. Westlake."

"The little faggot's game," old Joe went on, "is as clear as mud in a wineglass. He fires with blank cartridge; like as he'd say 'What'll *you* do?' What did he want? That we should return his civility with grape? Of course; that if it should come to a difficulty he'd have the law on his side. Not being able to aggravate us into shotting our guns, what must he turn to and do but load with stone—and look at that flag! Riddled, mates. I'll not speak of it as spiled, though a prettier and a better bit of bunting was never mastheaded. Spiled ain't the word: disgraced it is."

"Degraded," said Plum, in a deep voice.

"Ay, and degraded," cried old Joe, with a surly, dangerous nod. "That there little tailor has degraded the honour of our flag. What's to be done to him?"

After a pause, Plum said: "Bring him up and sit in examination on him.

Try him fairly, and convict him."

They opened the hatch and pulled little Sloper off the Thames ballast into daylight. He was exceedingly white, and trembled violently, and cut, indeed, a very pitiful figure as he stood on the quarter-deck of the *Tom Bowling*, surveyed by her owner and crew. He was a short man and spare, and Tom Tuck grinned as he looked at him.

"I suppose you're aweer," said old Joe, "that in shooting at my flag and wounding her you've degraded the honour of it? Are you aweer of that?"

"You came in my way; I was shooting for my hentertainment," answered Mr. Sloper.

"You're a retired tailor, ain't ye?" said Joe.

Sloper sulkily answered "Yes."

"Have ye any acquaintance with the laws which are made and purwided for British seamen when it happens that their flag's degraded by the haction of a retired tailor?" said old Joe.

Mr. Sloper, instead of answering, cast a languishing eye at the river banks, which were fast sliding past, and requested to be set ashore.

"It don't answer his purpose to speak to the pint," said Plum.

"Listen, now," said old Joe, shaking his forefinger close into the face of little Sloper. "When a retired tailor degrades the honour of a seaman's flag by a shooting at it and a riddling of it, the law 'as made and purwided sets forth this: that the insulted sailor shall collect his crew and in the presence of all hands pass sentence after giving an impartial hearing to what the culprit may have to say in his defence. Now, you durned little powder-burner, speak up, and own what made you do it, and then I'll pass judgment."

"What's your game? What d' yer mean to do with me? Where are you carryin' me to?" cried the owner of Labour's Retreat. "None of yer nonsense, you know. This is what's called kidnappin'. It's indictable. You may find yourself in a very unpleasant predicament over this business, I can tell yer. You profess to know who I am. D'yer want to know what I'm worth? Yer'd better put me ashore, I say, and stop this nonsense. I don't mind a joke, but this is carrying a lark too far. Why," he shrieked, "here we are a-drawing on to Northfleet! Yer 'd better let me go." And so he went on.

Old Joe and the others listened to him with stern faces; in fact, they received his protests and threats as his defence. When he had made an end Joe Westlake spoke thus:

"Sloper—I dunno your Christian name and I won't demean myself by asking of it,—four of your countrymen—and sorry they are that you should be a countrymen of their'n—have patiently listened to what ye've had to say. And all that ye've said amounts to nothen at all. The haccusation made against ye is one of the very gravest as can be brought agin a retired tailor. You're charged with degrading the honour of my flag, and ye 've been found guilty, and my sentence is that after a sufficient time's been granted you for prayer and meditation, ye be brought up to the place of hexecution, aboard this here cutter the *Tom Bowling*, and hanged by the neck till you're dead."

"Murder!" screamed Sloper, and here (so he afterwards swore in court) the unhappy little tailor fell down upon his knees and begged Joe Westlake to grant him his life.

"Clap him under hatches," exclaimed the old man-of-warsman, and Plum and another, lifting the hatch cover, popped Mr. Sloper down among the ballast again.

By this time the afternoon had very considerably advanced, the wind had dropped, and it was already dark when the *Tom Bowling* let go her anchor off Gravesend. The cabin lamp was lighted, and old Joe and Plum sat down to a hearty meal, after which they smoked their pipes and dipped a ladle into a silver bowl of rum punch of Westlake's own brewing.

"D' ye mean, captain," said Plum, "that the little chap in the hold shall have any supper?"

"Well, Peter," answered old Joe, "I've bin a-turning of it over in my mind, and spite of his 'rageous conduct I dunno, after all, that it would be right to let him lie all night without a bite of something. Call Bob."

This man, whose surname was Robins, arrived. Joe told him to get a lantern and cut a plate of beef and bread and mix a small mug of rum and water.

"Ye can tell the little chap, Bob," said old Joe, speaking with one eye shut, "that we're only a-feeding of him up so as to get more satisfaction out of his hexecution to-morrow morning. You can say that sailing is a rather monotonous life, and that if he'll die game we shall all feel obliged for the hentertainment he'll afford us."

Whether Bob Robins communicated this speech to Sloper I cannot say. It is certain, however, that he took the lantern and the tailor's supper into the hold and stood over the little man whilst he ate and drank. When the retired tailor had finished his repast he asked Robins if he was to be kept locked up in that black hole all night without anything to lie on but shingle.

"What did you fire at us for?" said Bob.

"I never fired at you. I was firing for my own diversion," answered Mr. Sloper.

"D' ye load with stones for your divarsion, as ye call it?" said Bob.

"There was no stones when you came along," cried the tailor. "Why did you aggravate me by firing in return?"

"What did you want to fire at all for?" said Bob, almost pitying the trembling little creature as he showed by the lantern light in the cutter's small black hold.

"I was celebrating a hanniversary," answered Mr. Sloper, who maltreated his *h's* as badly as old Westlake.

"And what sort of a hanniversary calls for gun firing?" said Bob, holding up the lantern to the tailor's face.

"It was the hanniversary of my wife's death," said Mr. Sloper, "and a day of rejoicing with me and my friends."

Bob, who himself was a married man, loving his wife and two little girls with the warm affection of the genuine sailor's heart, looked for some moments speechless with disgust at the white shadowy countenance of Mr. Sloper, and without deigning another word, rose through the hatch, which he carefully secured, and then went aft to old Joe and Plum to report what had passed.

"Smite me," cried the old man-of-warsman, after listening to Bob; "but if this was furrin parts instead of Lunnon river, poisoned if I wouldn't yard-arm the little faggot in rale earnest. What! make a joyful hanniversary of his wife's death, and fire off guns that the whole blooming country may know what a little beast it is. Sit ye down, Bob, there's a glass—help yourself. This is what we mean to do," and he forthwith related his scheme for the morning to Robins and Plum.

They smoked hard and roared out in great peals of laughter. The bulkheads of a little ship such as the *Tom Bowling* are not, as may be supposed, of very formidable scantling; there is no doubt that Sloper in the hold heard these wild shouts of laughter which the muffling of the bulkhead and his own terrors would render awful to him, and we may be sure that as he lay in the blackness harkening to those horrid notes of merriment, he feared and perspired exceedingly.

Somewhere at about eight o'clock next morning the *Tom Bowling* was got under way, and when all hands had breakfasted, Joe Westlake took the tiller, and Plum, Robins, and Tuck went to work to construct the machinery for the retired tailor's execution. They filled a big tub with water and covered it loosely with a tarpaulin. Close against this tub they placed a three-legged stool; alongside this stool upon the deck was a tar-bucket with a tar-brush sticking up in it; they also procured and placed beside this tar-bucket a piece of rough iron hoop. At the time that these preparations were completed the cutter was running through the Warp, which is some little distance past the Nore Light. The river had widened into the aspect of an ocean, and over the bows of the craft the water stretched boundless and blue as the horizon of the Pacific.

They opened the hatch and brought the tailor on deck. Needless to say, he had not slept a wink all night. Who, accustomed to a feather-bed, could snatch even ten minutes' sleep when his couch is Thames ballast? Sloper's eyes were bloodshot, and his countenance haggard. He looked inconceivably grimy and forlorn, and Bob Robins felt sorry for the little creature till he recollected on a sudden the man's reason for letting off his cannons. Tuck took the helm, and old Joe with a solemn countenance and slow gait rolled forward to where the apparatus was stationed.

"Now, you see your fate," he exclaimed, lifting up his eyes as though he beheld a rope with a noose dangling from the masthead, "and since no good can come of cautioning a corpse, why then, sorry I am that there are n't a company of people arter your kind assembled aboard this craft to witness the hexecution of my sentence upon ye. Last night I heard that the reason of your firing off your guns were to celebrate the hanniversary of your wife's death. I dunno, I'm sure, whether such a practice wouldn't be considered as more criminal and worthy of a fearfuller punishment than even the shooting at a man's flag and degrading the honour of it. But to say more 'ud only be a-wasting of breath. My lads, do your duty."

Robins, with powerful arms, grasped the tailor, who shrieked murder and struggled hard. His struggles were as the throes and convulsions of a mouse in the teeth of a cat. He was dumped down on the three-legged stool. In an instant Plum lathered his jaws with the tar-brush, and picking up the piece of broken iron hoop scraped little Sloper's cheeks till the lather was as much blood as tar. Then, lifting his leg, he tilted the stool and Mr. Sloper fell backwards on to the tarpaulin, which, yielding to his weight, soused him into the water. They left him to kick and splash awhile, then pulled him out and ran him forward into the head, where they secured him to the windlass till the sun should have somewhat dried him.

But long before the sun had had time to comfort the shivering little creature Herne Bay had hove into sight. The helm was shifted, and the cutter ran close into the land, where they hove her to whilst Plum and Robins got the boat over.

Mr. Sloper was then dropped over the side into the boat, which pulled ashore, landed him, and returned; and a few minutes later

the cutter was standing for the mouth of the river, leaving the tailor on the Herne Bay beach, forty miles from home without a farthing in his pocket.

This is the historic incident of the Thames which I desire to rescue from the oblivion that has overtaken many greater matters. Mr. Sloper, on his return to Labour's Retreat, and when he was somewhat recovered in nerves and health, sued Joe Westlake in the Whitechapel County Court, in action of tort, laying his damages at the moderate sum of fifty pounds. Mr. G.E. Williams, for the defendant, contended that the plaintiff deserved the treatment which he had brought on himself, and the Judge, after hearing the evidence, said that although the plaintiff, Sloper, had acted most improperly in loading his guns, the defendant, Westlake, had retaliated too severely, but, under the circumstances, he should award only five pounds' damages, without costs.

Cornered!

"I don't see no signs of the tug, do you, Tom?" said the old skipper, John Bunk, rolling up to me from the companion hatchway. He was fresh from the cabin, and was rather tipsy, with a fixed stare and a stately manner, though his legs would have framed the lower part of an egg. His hat was tall, and brushed the wrong way. He wore a thick shawl round his neck and was wrapped up in a long monkey-jacket, albeit we were in the dog-days. In a word, Bunk was a skipper of a type that is fast perishing off our home waters.

"No," said I, "there's no sign of the tug."

"Then bloomed," said he, "if I don't work her up myself. Who's afraid? I know the ropes. Get amidships in the fair-way and keep all on, and there y' are. And mubbe the tug'll pick us up as we go."

"It's all one to Tom," said I.

Our brig was the *Venus*, of Rye, a stump topgallantmast coaster, eighty years old. We were in a big bight of the coast, heading for a