

# THE OCEAN WAVE

BY

AMBROSE BIERCE



NEW YORK & WASHINGTON  
THE NEALE PUBLISHING COMPANY  
1911

**RDP**  
Rosings Digital Publications



2012

## CONTENTS

A SHIPWRECKCOLLECTION

THE CAPTAIN OF "THE CAMEL"

THE MAN OVERBOARD

A CARGO OF CAT

## A SHIPWRECKCOLLECTION

AS I left the house she said I was a cruel old thing, and not a bit nice, and she hoped I never, never *would* come back. So I shipped as mate on the *Mudlark*, bound from London to wherever the captain might think it expedient to sail. It had not been thought advisable to hamper Captain Abersouth with orders, for when he could not have his own way, it had been observed, he would contrive in some ingenious way to make the voyage unprofitable. The owners of the *Mudlark* had grown wise in their generation, and now let him do pretty much as he pleased, carrying such cargoes as he fancied to ports where the nicest women were. On the voyage of which I write he had taken no cargo at all; he said it would only make the *Mudlark* heavy and slow. To hear this mariner talk one would have supposed he did not know very much about commerce.

We had a few passengers—not nearly so many as we had laid in basins and stewards for; for before coming off to the ship most of those who had bought tickets would inquire whither she was bound, and when not informed would go back to their hotels and send a bandit on board to remove their baggage. But there were enough left to be rather troublesome. They cultivated the rolling gait peculiar to sailors when drunk, and the upper deck was hardly wide enough for them to go from the fore-castle to the binnacle to set their watches by the ship's compass. They were always petitioning Captain Abersouth to let the big anchor go, just to hear it plunge in the water, threatening in case of refusal to write to the newspapers. A favorite amusement with them was to sit in the lee of the bulwarks, relating their experiences in former voyages—voyages distinguished in every instance by two remarkable features, the frequency of unprecedented hurricanes and the entire immunity of the narrator from seasickness. It was very interesting to see them sitting in a row telling these things, each man with a basin between his legs.

One day there arose a great storm. The sea walked over the ship as if it had never seen a ship before and meant to enjoy it all it could. The *Mudlark* labored very much—far more, indeed, than the crew did; for these innocents had discovered in possession of one of their number a pair of leather-seated trousers, and would do nothing but sit and play cards for them; in a month from leaving port each sailor had owned them a dozen times. They were so worn by being pushed over to the winner that there was little but the seat remaining, and that immortal part the captain finally kicked overboard—not maliciously, nor in an unfriendly spirit, but because he had a habit of kicking the seats of trousers.

The storm increased in violence until it succeeded in so straining the *Mudlark* that she took in water like a teetotaler; then

it appeared to get relief directly. This may be said in justice to a storm at sea: when it has broken off your masts, pulled out your rudder, carried away your boats and made a nice hole in some inaccessible part of your hull it will often go away in search of a fresh ship, leaving you to take such measures for your comfort as you may think fit. In our case the captain thought fit to sit on the taffrail reading a three-volume novel.

Seeing he had got about half way through the second volume, at which point the lovers would naturally be involved in the most hopeless and heart-rending difficulties, I thought he would be in a particularly cheerful humor, so I approached him and informed him the ship was going down.

“Well,” said he, closing the book, but keeping his forefinger between the pages to mark his place, “she never would be good for much after such a shaking-up as this. But, I say—I wish you would just send the bo’sn for’d there to break up that prayer-meeting. The *Mudlark* isn’t a seamen’s chapel, I suppose.”

“But,” I replied, impatiently, “can’t something be done to lighten the ship?”

“Well,” he drawled, reflectively, “seeing she hasn’t any masts left to cut away, nor any cargo to—stay, you might throw over some of the heaviest of the passengers if you think it would do any good.”

It was a happy thought—the intuition of genius. Walking rapidly forward to the foc’sle, which, being highest out of water, was crowded with passengers, I seized a stout old gentleman by the nape of the neck, pushed him up to the rail, and chucked him over. He did not touch the water: he fell on the apex of a cone of sharks which sprang up from the sea to meet him, their noses gathered to a point, their tails just clearing the surface. I think it unlikely that the old gentleman knew what disposition had been made of him. Next, I hurled over a woman and flung a fat baby to the wild winds. The former was sharked out of sight, the same as the old man; the latter divided amongst the gulls.

I am relating these things exactly as they occurred. It would be very easy to make a fine story out of all this material—to tell how that, while I was engaged in lightening the ship, I was touched by the self-sacrificing spirit of a beautiful young woman, who, to save the life of her lover, pushed her aged mother forward to where I was operating, imploring me to take the old lady, but spare, O, spare her dear Henry. I might go on to set forth how that I not only did take the old lady, as requested, but immediately seized dear Henry, and sent him flying as far as I could to leeward, having first broken his back across the rail and pulled a double-fistful of his curly hair out. I might proceed to state that, feeling appeased, I then stole the long boat and taking the beautiful maiden pulled away from the ill-fated ship to the church of St. Massaker, Fiji,

where we were united by a knot which I afterward untied with my teeth by eating her. But, in truth, nothing of all this occurred, and I can not afford to be the first writer to tell a lie just to interest the reader. What really did occur is this: as I stood on the quarter-deck, heaving over the passengers, one after another, Captain Abersouth, having finished his novel, walked aft and quietly hove me over.

The sensations of a drowning man have been so often related that I shall only briefly explain that memory at once displayed her treasures: all the scenes of my eventful life crowded, though without confusion or fighting, into my mind. I saw my whole career spread out before me, like a map of Central Africa since the discovery of the gorilla. There were the cradle in which I had lain, as a child, stupefied with soothing syrups; the perambulator, seated in which and propelled from behind, I overthrew the schoolmaster, and in which my infantile spine received its curvature; the nursery-maid, surrendering her lips alternately to me and the gardener; the old home of my youth, with the ivy and the mortgage on it; my eldest brother, who by will succeeded to the family debts; my sister, who ran away with the Count von Pretzel, coachman to a most respectable New York family; my mother, standing in the attitude of a saint, pressing with both hands her prayer-book against the patent palpitations from Madame Fahertini's; my venerable father, sitting in his chimney corner, his silvered head bowed upon his breast, his withered hands crossed patiently in his lap, waiting with Christian resignation for death, and drunk as a lord—all this, and much more, came before my mind's eye, and there was no charge for admission to the show. Then there was a ringing sound in my ears, my senses swam better than I could, and as I sank down, down, through fathomless depths, the amber light falling through the water above my head failed and darkened into blackness. Suddenly my feet struck something firm—it was the bottom. Thank heaven, I was saved!

## THE CAPTAIN OF "THE CAMEL"

THIS ship was named the *Camel*. In some ways she was an extraordinary vessel. She measured six hundred tons; but when she had taken in enough ballast to keep her from upsetting like a shot duck, and was provisioned for a three months' voyage, it was necessary to be mighty fastidious in the choice of freight and passengers. For illustration, as she was about to leave port a boat came alongside with two passengers, a man and his wife. They had booked the day before, but had remained ashore to get one more decent meal before committing themselves to the "briny cheap," as the man called the ship's fare. The woman came aboard, and the man was preparing to follow, when the captain leaned over the side and saw him.

"Well," said the captain, "what do you want?"

"What do *I* want?" said the man, laying hold of the ladder. "I'm a-going to embark in this here ship—that's what I want."

"Not with all that fat on you," roared the captain. "You don't weigh an ounce less than eighteen stone, and I've got to have in my anchor yet. You wouldn't have me leave the anchor, I suppose?"

The man said he did not care about the anchor—he was just as God had made him (he looked as if his cook had had something to do with it) and, sink or swim, he purposed embarking in that ship. A good deal of wrangling ensued, but one of the sailors finally threw the man a cork life-preserver, and the captain said that would lighten him and he might come abroad.

This was Captain Abersouth, formerly of the *Mudlark*—as good a seaman as ever sat on the taffrail reading a three volume novel. Nothing could equal this man's passion for literature. For every voyage he laid in so many bales of novels that there was no stowage for the cargo. There were novels in the hold, and novels between-decks, and novels in the saloon, and in the passengers' beds.

The *Camel* had been designed and built by her owner, an architect in the City, and she looked about as much like a ship as Noah's Ark did. She had bay windows and a veranda; a cornice and doors at the waterline. These doors had knockers and servant's bells. There had been a futile attempt at an area. The passenger saloon was on the upper deck, and had a tile roof. To this humplike structure the ship owed her name. Her designer had erected several churches—that of St. Ignotus is still used as a brewery in Hot-bath Meadows—and, possessed of the ecclesiastic idea, had given the *Camel* a transept; but, finding this impeded her passage through the water, he had it removed. This weakened the vessel amidships. The mainmast was something like a steeple. It had a weathercock. From this spire the eye commanded one of the finest views in England.

Such was the *Camel* when I joined her in 1864 for a voyage of discovery to the South Pole. The expedition was under the “auspices” of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Fair Play. At a meeting of this excellent association, it had been “resolved” that the partiality of science for the North Pole was an invidious distinction between two objects equally meritorious; that Nature had marked her disapproval of it in the case of Sir John Franklin and many of his imitators; that it served them very well right; that this enterprise should be undertaken as a protest against the spirit of undue bias; and, finally, that no part of the responsibility or expense should devolve upon the society in its corporate character, but any individual member might contribute to the fund if he were fool enough. It is only common justice to say that none of them was. The *Camel* merely parted her cable one day while I happened to be on board—drifted out of the harbor southward, followed by the execrations of all who knew her, and could not get back. In two months she had crossed the equator, and the heat began to grow insupportable.

Suddenly we were becalmed. There had been a fine breeze up to three o’clock in the afternoon and the ship had made as much as two knots an hour when without a word of warning the sails began to belly the wrong way, owing to the impetus that the ship had acquired; and then, as this expired, they hung as limp and lifeless as the skirts of a claw-hammer coat. The *Camel* not only stood stock still but moved a little backward toward England. Old Ben the boatswain said that he’d never knowed but one deader calm, and that, he explained, was when Preacher Jack, the reformed sailor, had got excited in a sermon in a seaman’s chapel and shouted that the Archangel Michael would chuck the Dragon into the brig and give him a taste of the rope’s-end, damn his eyes!

We lay in this woeful state for the better part of a year, when, growing impatient, the crew deputed me to look up the captain and see if something could not be done about it. I found him in a remote cobwebby corner between-decks, with a book in his hand. On one side of him, the cords newly cut, were three bales of “Ouida”; on the other a mountain of Miss M.E. Braddon towered above his head. He had finished “Ouida” and was tackling Miss Braddon. He was greatly changed.

“Captain Abersouth,” said I, rising on tiptoe so as to overlook the lower slopes of Mrs. Braddon, “will you be good enough to tell me how long this thing is going on?”

“Can’t say, I’m sure,” he replied without pulling his eyes off the page. “They’ll probably make up about the middle of the book. In the meantime old Pondronnummus will foul his top-hamper and take out his papers for Looney Haven, and young Monshure de Boojower will come in for a million. Then if the proud and fair Angelica doesn’t luff and come into his wake after pizenning that

sea lawyer, Thundermuzzle, I don't know nothing about the deeps and shallers of the human heart."

I could not take so hopeful a view of the situation, and went on deck, feeling very much discouraged. I had no sooner got my head out than I observed that the ship was moving at a high rate of speed!

We had on board a bullock and a Dutchman. The bullock was chained by the neck to the foremast, but the Dutchman was allowed a good deal of liberty, being shut up at night only. There was bad blood between the two—a feud of long standing, having its origin in the Dutchman's appetite for milk and the bullock's sense of personal dignity; the particular cause of offense it would be tedious to relate. Taking advantage of his enemy's afternoon siesta, the Dutchman had now managed to sneak by him, and had gone out on the bowsprit to fish. When the animal waked and saw the other creature enjoying himself he straddled his chain, leveled his horns, got his hind feet against the mast and laid a course for the offender. The chain was strong, the mast firm, and the ship, as Byron says, "walked the water like a thing of course."

After that we kept the Dutchman right where he was, night and day, the old *Camel* making better speed than she had ever done in the most favorable gale. We held due south.

We had now been a long time without sufficient food, particularly meat. We could spare neither the bullock nor the Dutchman; and the ship's carpenter, that traditional first aid to the famished, was a mere bag of bones. The fish would neither bite nor be bitten. Most of the running-tackle of the ship had been used for macaroni soup; all the leather work, our shoes included, had been devoured in omelettes; with oakum and tar we had made fairly supportable salad. After a brief experimental career as tripe the sails had departed this life forever. Only two courses remained from which to choose; we could eat one another, as is the etiquette of the sea, or partake of Captain Abersouth's novels. Dreadful alternative!—but a choice. And it is seldom, I think, that starving sailormen are offered a shipload of the best popular authors ready-roasted by the critics.

We ate that fiction. The works that the captain had thrown aside lasted six months, for most of them were by the best-selling authors and were pretty tough. After they were gone—of course some had to be given to the bullock and the Dutchman—we stood by the captain, taking the other books from his hands as he finished them. Sometimes, when we were apparently at our last gasp, he would skip a whole page of moralizing, or a bit of description; and always, as soon as he clearly foresaw the *dénoûement*—which he generally did at about the middle of the second volume—the work was handed over to us without a word of repining.

The effect of this diet was not unpleasant but remarkable. Physically, it sustained us; mentally, it exalted us; morally, it made us but a trifle worse than we were. We talked as no human beings ever talked before. Our wit was polished but without point. As in a stage broadsword combat, every cut has its parry, so in our conversation every remark suggested the reply, and this necessitated a certain rejoinder. The sequence once interrupted, the whole was bosh; when the thread was broken the beads were seen to be waxen and hollow.

We made love to one another, and plotted darkly in the deepest obscurity of the hold. Each set of conspirators had its proper listener at the hatch. These, leaning too far over would bump their heads together and fight. Occasionally there was confusion amongst them: two or more would assert a right to overhear the same plot. I remember at one time the cook, the carpenter, the second assistant-surgeon, and an able seaman contended with handspikes for the honor of betraying my confidence. Once there were three masked murderers of the second watch bending at the same instant over the sleeping form of a cabin-boy, who had been heard to mutter, a week previously, that he had "Gold! gold!" the accumulation of eighty—yes, eighty—years' piracy on the high seas, while sitting as M.P. for the borough of Zaccheus-cum-Down, and attending church regularly. I saw the captain of the foretop surrounded by suitors for his hand, while he was himself fingering the edge of a packing-case, and singing an amorous ditty to a lady-love shaving at a mirror.

Our diction consisted, in about equal parts, of classical allusion, quotation from the stable, simper from the scullery, cant from the clubs, and the technical slang of heraldry. We boasted much of ancestry, and admired the whiteness of our hands whenever the skin was visible through a fault in the grease and tar. Next to love, the vegetable kingdom, murder, arson, adultery and ritual, we talked most of art. The wooden figure-head of the *Camel*, representing a Guinea nigger detecting a bad smell, and the monochrome picture of two back-broken dolphins on the stern, acquired a new importance. The Dutchman had destroyed the nose of the one by kicking his toes against it, and the other was nearly obliterated by the slops of the cook; but each had its daily pilgrimage, and each constantly developed occult beauties of design and subtle excellences of execution. On the whole we were greatly altered; and if the supply of contemporary fiction had been equal to the demand, the *Camel*, I fear, would not have been strong enough to contain the moral and aesthetic forces fired by the maceration of the brains of authors in the gastric juices of sailors.

Having now got the ship's literature off his mind into ours, the captain went on deck for the first time since leaving port. We were

still steering the same course, and, taking his first observation of the sun, the captain discovered that we were in latitude 83° south. The heat was insufferable; the air was like the breath of a furnace within a furnace. The sea steamed like a boiling cauldron, and in the vapor our bodies were temptingly parboiled—our ultimate meal was preparing. Warped by the sun, the ship held both ends high out of the water; the deck of the forecastle was an inclined plane, on which the bullock labored at a disadvantage; but the bowsprit was now vertical and the Dutchman's tenure precarious. A thermometer hung against the mainmast, and we grouped ourselves about it as the captain went up to examine the register.

"One hundred and ninety degrees Fahrenheit!" he muttered in evident astonishment. "Impossible!" Turning sharply about, he ran his eyes over us, and inquired in a peremptory tone, "who's been in command while I was runnin' my eye over that book?"

"Well, captain," I replied, as respectfully as I knew how, "the fourth day out I had the unhappiness to be drawn into a dispute about a game of cards with your first and second officers. In the absence of those excellent seamen, sir, I thought it my duty to assume control of the ship."

"Killed 'em, hey?"

"Sir, they committed suicide by questioning the efficacy of four kings and an ace."

"Well, you lubber, what have you to say in defense of this extraordinary weather?"

"Sir, it is no fault of mine. We are far—very far south, and it is now the middle of July. The weather is uncomfortable, I admit; but considering the latitude and season, it is not, I protest, unseasonable."

"Latitude and season!" he shrieked, livid with rage—"latitude and season! Why, you junk-rigged, flat-bottomed, meadow lugger, don't you know any better than that? Didn't yer little baby brother ever tell ye that southern latitudes is colder than northern, and that July is the middle o' winter here? Go below, you son of a scullion, or I'll break your bones!"

"Oh! very well," I replied; "I'm not going to stay on deck and listen to such low language as that, I warn you. Have it your own way." The words had no sooner left my lips, than a piercing cold wind caused me to cast my eye upon the thermometer. In the new regime of science the mercury was descending rapidly; but in a moment the instrument was obscured by a blinding fall of snow. Towering icebergs rose from the water on every side, hanging their jagged masses hundreds of feet above the masthead, and shutting us completely in. The ship twisted and writhed; her decks bulged upward, and every timber groaned and cracked like the report of a pistol. The *Camel* was frozen fast. The jerk of her sudden stopping snapped the bullock's chain, and sent both that animal and the

Dutchman over the bows, to accomplish their warfare on the ice.

Elbowing my way forward to go below, as I had threatened, I saw the crew tumble to the deck on either hand like ten-pins. They were frozen stiff. Passing the captain, I asked him sneeringly how he liked the weather under the new regime. He replied with a vacant stare. The chill had penetrated to the brain, and affected his mind. He murmured:

“In this delightful spot, happy in the world’s esteem, and surrounded by all that makes existence dear, they passed the remainder of their lives. The End.”

His jaw dropped. The captain of the *Camel* was dead.

## THE MAN OVERBOARD

### I

THE good ship *Nipple-duck* was drifting rapidly upon a sunken coral reef, which seemed to extend a reasonless number of leagues to the right and left without a break, and I was reading Macaulay's "Naseby Fight" to the man at the wheel. Everything was, in fact, going on as nicely as heart could wish, when Captain Abersouth, standing on the companion-stair, poked his head above deck and asked where we were. Pausing in my reading, I informed him that we had got as far as the disastrous repulse of Prince Rupert's cavalry, adding that if he would have the goodness to hold his jaw we should be making it awkward for the wounded in about three minutes, and he might bear a hand at the pockets of the slain. Just then the ship struck heavily, and went down!

Calling another ship, I stepped aboard, and gave directions to be taken to No. 900 Tottenham Court Road, where I had an aunt; then, walking aft to the man at the wheel, asked him if he would like to hear me read "Naseby Fight." He thought he would: he would like to hear that, and then I might pass on to something else—Kinglake's "Crimean War," the proceedings at the trial of Warren Hastings, or some such trifle, just to wile away the time till eight bells.

All this time heavy clouds had been gathering along the horizon directly in front of the ship, and a deputation of passengers now came to the man at the wheel to demand that she be put about, or she would run into them, which the spokesman explained would be unusual. I thought at the time that it certainly was not the regular thing to do, but, as I was myself only a passenger, did not deem it expedient to take a part in the heated discussion that ensued; and, after all, it did not seem likely that the weather in those clouds would be much worse than that in Tottenham Court Road, where I had an aunt.

It was finally decided to refer the matter to arbitration, and after many names had been submitted and rejected by both sides, it was agreed that the captain of the ship should act as arbitrator if his consent could be obtained, and I was delegated to conduct the negotiations to that end. With considerable difficulty, I persuaded him to accept the responsibility.

He was a feeble-minded sort of fellow named Troutbeck, who was always in a funk lest he should make enemies; never reflecting that most men would a little rather be his enemies than not. He had once been the ship's cook, but had cooked so poisonously ill that he had been forcibly transferred from galley to quarter-deck by the dyspeptic survivors of his culinary career.

The little captain went aft with me to listen to arguments of the

dissatisfied passengers and the obstinate steersman, as to whether we should take our chances in the clouds, or tail off and run for the opposite horizon; but on approaching the wheel, we found both helmsman and passengers in a condition of profound astonishment, rolling their eyes about towards every point of the compass, and shaking their heads in hopeless perplexity. It was rather remarkable, certainly: the bank of cloud which had worried the landsmen was now directly astern, and the ship was cutting along lively in her own wake, toward the point from which she had come, and straight away from Tottenham Court Road! Everybody declared it was a miracle; the chaplain was piped up for prayers, and the man at the wheel was as truly penitent as if he had been detected robbing an empty poor-box.

The explanation was simple enough, and dawned upon me the moment I saw how matters stood. During the dispute between the helmsman and the deputation, the former had renounced his wheel to gesticulate, and I, thinking no harm, had amused myself, during a rather tedious debate, by revolving the thing this way and that, and had unconsciously put the ship about. By a coincidence not unusual in low latitudes, the wind had effected a corresponding transposition at the same time, and was now bowling us as merrily back toward the place where I had embarked, as it had previously wafted us in the direction of Tottenham Court Road, where I had an aunt. I must here so far anticipate, as to explain that some years later these various incidents—particularly the reading of “Naseby Fight”—led to the adoption, in our mercantile marine, of a rule which I believe is still extant, to the effect that one must not speak, to the man at the wheel unless the man at the wheel speaks first.

## II

IT is only by inadvertence that I have omitted the information that the vessel in which I was now a pervading influence was the *Bonnyclabber* (Troutbeck, master), of Malvern Heights.

The *Bonnyclabber's* reactionary course had now brought her to the spot at which I had taken passage. Passengers and crew, fatigued by their somewhat awkward attempts to manifest their gratitude for our miraculous deliverance from the cloud-bank, were snoring peacefully in unconsidered attitudes about the deck, when the lookout man, perched on the supreme extremity of the mainmast, consuming a cold sausage, began an apparently preconcerted series of extraordinary and unimaginable noises. He coughed, sneezed, and barked simultaneously—bleated in one breath, and cackled in the next—sputteringly shrieked, and chatteringly squealed, with a bass of suffocated roars. There were desolatory vocal explosions, tapering off in long wails, half

smothered in unintelligible small-talk. He whistled, wheezed, and trumpeted; began to sharp, thought better of it and flatted; neighed like a horse, and then thundered like a drum! Through it all he continued making incomprehensible signals with one hand while clutching his throat with the other. Presently he gave it up, and silently descended to the deck.

By this time we were all attention; and no sooner had he set foot amongst us, than he was assailed with a tempest of questions which, had they been visible, would have resembled a flight of pigeons. He made no reply—not even by a look, but passed through our enclosing mass with a grim, defiant step, a face deathly white, and a set of the jaw as of one repressing an ambitious dinner, or ignoring a venomous toothache. For the poor man was choking!

Passing down the companion-way, the patient sought the surgeon's cabin, with the ship's company at his heels. The surgeon was fast asleep, the lark-like performance at the masthead having been inaudible in that lower region. While some of us were holding a whisky-bottle to the medical nose, in order to apprise the medical intelligence of the demand upon it, the patient seated himself in statuesque silence. By this time his pallor, which was but the mark of a determined mind, had given place to a fervent crimson, which visibly deepened into a pronounced purple, and was ultimately superseded by a clouded blue, shot through with opalescent gleams, and smitten with variable streaks of black. The face was swollen and shapeless, the neck puffy. The eyes protruded like pegs of a hat-stand.

Pretty soon the doctor was got awake, and after making a careful examination of his patient, remarking that it was a lovely case of *stopupagus aesophagi*, took a tool and set to work, producing with no difficulty a cold sausage of the size, figure, and general bearing of a somewhat self-important banana. The operation had been performed amid breathless silence, but the moment it was concluded the patient, whose neck and head had visibly collapsed, sprang to his feet and shouted:

“Man overboard!”

That is what he had been trying to say.

There was a confused rush to the upper deck, and everybody flung something over the ship's side—a life-belt, a chicken-coop, a coil of rope, a spar, an old sail, a pocket handkerchief, an iron crowbar—any movable article which it was thought might be useful to a drowning man who had followed the vessel during the hour that had elapsed since the initial alarm at the mast-head. In a few moments the ship was pretty nearly dismantled of everything that could be easily renounced, and some excitable passenger having cut away the boats there was nothing more that we could do, though the chaplain explained that if the ill-fated gentleman in the

wet did not turn up after a while it was his intention to stand at the stern and read the burial service of the Church of England.

Presently it occurred to some ingenious person to inquire who had gone overboard, and all hands being mustered and the roll called, to our great chagrin every man answered to his name, passengers and all! Captain Troutbeck, however, held that in a matter of so great importance a simple roll-call was insufficient, and with an assertion of authority that was encouraging insisted that every person on board be separately sworn. The result was the same; nobody was missing and the captain, begging pardon for having doubted our veracity, retired to his cabin to avoid further responsibility, but expressed a hope that for the purpose of having everything properly recorded in the log-book we would apprise him of any further action that we might think it advisable to take. I smiled as I remembered that in the interest of the unknown gentleman whose peril we had overestimated I had flung the log-book over the ship's side.

Soon afterward I felt suddenly inspired with one of those great ideas that come to most men only once or twice in a lifetime, and to the ordinary story teller never. Hastily reconvening the ship's company I mounted the capstan and thus addressed them:

“Shipmates, there has been a mistake. In the fervor of an ill-considered compassion we have made pretty free with certain movable property of an eminent firm of shipowners of Malvern Heights. For this we shall undoubtedly be called to account if we are ever so fortunate as to drop anchor in Tottenham Court Road, where I have an aunt. It would add strength to our defence if we could show to the satisfaction of a jury of our peers that in heeding the sacred promptings of humanity we had acted with some small degree of common sense. If, for example, we could make it appear that there really was a man overboard, who might have been comforted and sustained by the material consolation that we so lavishly dispensed in the form of buoyant articles belonging to others, the British heart would find in that fact a mitigating circumstance pleading eloquently in our favor. Gentlemen and ship's officers, I venture to propose that we do now throw a man overboard.”

The effect was electrical: the motion was carried by acclamation and there was a unanimous rush for the now wretched mariner whose false alarm at the masthead was the cause of our embarrassment, but on second thoughts it was decided to substitute Captain Troutbeck, as less generally useful and more undeviatingly in error. The sailor had made one mistake of considerable magnitude, but the captain's entire existence was a mistake altogether. He was fetched up from his cabin and chucked over.

At 900 Tottenham Road Court lived an aunt of mine—a good

old lady who had brought me up by hand and taught me many wholesome lessons in morality, which in, my later life have proved of extreme value. Foremost among these I may mention her solemn and oft-repeated injunction never to tell a lie without a definite and specific reason for doing so. Many years' experience in the violation of this principle enables me to speak with authority as to its general soundness. I have, therefore, much pleasure in making a slight correction in the preceding chapter of this tolerably true history. It was there affirmed that I threw the *Bonnyclabber's* log-book into the sea. The statement is entirely false, and I can discover no reason for having made it that will for a moment weigh against those I now have for the preservation of that log-book.

The progress of the story has developed new necessities, and I now find it convenient to quote from that book passages which it could not have contained if cast into the sea at the time stated; for if thrown upon the resources of my imagination I might find the temptation to exaggerate too strong to be resisted.

It is needless to worry the reader with those entries in the book referring to events already related. Our record will begin on the day of the captain's consignment to the deep, after which era I made the entries myself.

"June 22nd.—Not much doing in the way of gales, but heavy swells left over from some previous blow. Latitude and longitude not notably different from last observation. Ship laboring a trifle, owing to lack of top-hammer, everything of that kind having been cut away in consequence of Captain Troutbeck having accidentally fallen overboard while fishing from the bowsprit. Also threw over cargo and everything that we could spare. Miss our sails rather, but if they save our dear captain, we shall be content. Weather flagrant.

"23d.—Nothing from Captain Troutbeck. Dead calm—also dead whale. The passengers having become preposterous in various ways, Mr. Martin, the chief officer, had three of the ringleaders tied up and rope's-ended. He thought it advisable also to flog an equal number of the crew, by way of being impartial. Weather ludicrous.

"24th.—Captain still prefers to stop away, and does not telegraph. The 'captain of the foretop'—there isn't any foretop now—was put in irons to-day by Mr. Martin for eating cold sausage while on look-out. Mr. Martin has flogged the steward, who had neglected to holy-stone the binnacle and paint the deadlights. The steward is a good fellow all the same. Weather iniquitous.

"25th.—Can't think whatever has become of Captain Troutbeck. He must be getting hungry by this time; for although he has his fishing tackle with him, he has no bait. Mr. Martin inspected the entries in this book to-day. He is a most excellent and humane officer. Weather inexcusable.

“26th.—All hope of hearing from the Captain has been abandoned. We have sacrificed everything to save him; but now, if we could procure the loan of a mast and some sails, we should proceed on our voyage. Mr. Martin has knocked the coxswain overboard for sneezing. He is an experienced seaman, a capable officer, and a Christian gentleman—damn his eyes! Weather tormenting.

“27th.—Another inspection of this book by Mr. Martin. Farewell, vain world! Break it gently to my aunt in Tottenham Court Road.”

In the concluding sentences of this record, as it now lies before me, the handwriting is not very legible: they were penned under circumstances singularly unfavorable. Mr. Martin stood behind me with his eyes fixed on the page; and in order to secure a better view, had twisted the machinery of the engine he called his hand into the hair of my head, depressing that globe to such an extent that my nose was flattened against the surface of the table, and I had no small difficulty in discerning the lines through my eyebrows. I was not accustomed to writing in that position: it had not been taught in the only school that I ever attended. I therefore felt justified in bringing the record to a somewhat abrupt close, and immediately went on deck with Mr. Martin, he preceding me up the companion-stairs on foot, I following, not on horseback, but on my own, the connection between us being maintained without important alteration.

Arriving on deck, I thought it advisable, in the interest of peace and quietness, to pursue him in the same manner to the side of the ship, where I parted from him forever with many expressions of regret, which might have been heard at a considerable distance.

Of the subsequent fate of the *Bonnyclabber*, I can only say that the log-book from which I have quoted was found some years later in the stomach of a whale, along with some shreds of clothing, a few buttons and several decayed life-belts. It contained only one new entry, in a straggling handwriting, as if it had been penned in the dark:

“July 2th foundered sivors rescude by wale wether stuffy no nues from capting trowtbeck Sammlle martin cheef Ofcer.”

Let us now take a retrospective glance at the situation. The ship *Nupple-duck*, (Abersouth, master) had, it will be remembered, gone down with all on board except me. I had escaped on the ship *Bonnyclabber* (Troutbeck) which I had quitted owing to a misunderstanding with the chief officer, and was now unattached. That is how matters stood when, rising on an unusually high wave, and casting my eye in the direction of Tottenham Court Road—that is, backward along the course pursued by the *Bonnyclabber* and toward the spot at which the

*Nupple-duck* had been swallowed up—I saw a quantity of what appeared to be wreckage. It turned out to be some of the stuff that we had thrown overboard under a misapprehension. The several articles had been compiled and, so to speak, carefully edited. They were, in fact, lashed together, forming a raft. On a stool in the center of it—not, apparently navigating it, but rather with the subdued and dignified bearing of a passenger, sat Captain Abersouth, of the *Nupple-duck*, reading a novel.

Our meeting was not cordial. He remembered me as a man of literary taste superior to his own and harbored resentment, and although he made no opposition to my taking passage with him I could see that his acquiescence was due rather to his muscular inferiority than to the circumstance that I was damp and taking cold. Merely acknowledging his presence with a nod as I climbed aboard, I seated myself and inquired if he would care to hear the concluding stanzas of “Naseby Fight.”

“No,” he replied, looking up from his novel, “no, Claude Reginald Gump, writer of sea stories, I’ve done with you. When you sank the *Nupple-duck* some days ago you probably thought that you had made an end of me. That was clever of you, but I came to the surface and followed the other ship—the one on which you escaped. It was I that the sailor saw from the masthead. I saw him see me. It was for me that all that stuff was hove overboard. Good—I made it into this raft. It was, I think, the next day that I passed the floating body of a man whom I recognized as my old friend Billy Troutbeck—he used to be a cook on a man-o’-war. It gives me pleasure to be the means of saving your life, but I eschew you. The moment that we reach port our paths part. You remember that in the very first sentence of this story you began to drive my ship, the *Nupple-duck*, on to a reef of coral.”

I was compelled to confess that this was true, and he continued his inhospitable reproaches:

“Before you had written half a column you sent her to the bottom, with me and the crew. But *you*—you escaped.”

“That is true,” I replied; “I cannot deny that the facts are correctly stated.”

“And in a story before that, you took me and my mates of the ship *Camel* into the heart of the South Polar Sea and left us frozen dead in the ice, like flies in amber. But you did not leave yourself there—you escaped.”

“Really, Captain,” I said, “your memory is singularly accurate, considering the many hardships that you have had to undergo; many a man would have gone mad.”

“And a long time before that,” Captain Abersouth resumed, after a pause, more, apparently, to con his memory than to enjoy my good opinion of it, “you lost me at sea—look here; I didn’t read anything but George Eliot at that time, but I’m told that you lost

me at sea in the *Mudlark*. Have I been misinformed?"

I could not say he had been misinformed.

"You yourself escaped on that occasion, I think."

It was true. Being usually the hero of my own stories, I commonly do manage to live through one, in order to figure to advantage in the next. It is from artistic necessity: no reader would take much interest in a hero who was dead before the beginning of the tale. I endeavored to explain this to Captain Abersouth. He shook his head.

"No," said he, "it's cowardly, that's the way I look at it."

Suddenly an effulgent idea began to dawn upon me, and I let it have its way until my mind was perfectly luminous. Then I rose from my seat, and frowning down into the upturned face of my accuser, spoke in severe and rasping accents thus:

"Captain Abersouth, in the various perils you and I have encountered together in the classical literature of the period, if I have always escaped and you have always perished; if I lost you at sea in the *Mudlark*, froze you into the ice at the South Pole in the *Camel* and drowned you in the *Nipple-duck*, pray be good enough to tell me whom I have the honor to address."

It was a blow to the poor man: no one was ever so disconcerted. Flinging aside his novel, he put up his hands and began to scratch his head and think. It was beautiful to see him think, but it seemed to distress him and pointing significantly over the side of the raft I suggested as delicately as possible that it was time to act. He rose to his feet and fixing upon me a look of reproach which I shall remember as long as I can, cast himself into the deep. As to me—I escaped.

## A CARGO OF CAT

ON the 16th day of June, 1874, the ship *Mary Jane* sailed from Malta, heavily laden with cat. This cargo gave us a good deal of trouble. It was not in bales, but had been dumped into the hold loose. Captain Doble, who had once commanded a ship that carried coals, said he had found that plan the best. When the hold was full of cat the hatch was battened down and we felt good. Unfortunately the mate, thinking the cats would be thirsty, introduced a hose into one of the hatches and pumped in a considerable quantity of water, and the cats of the lower levels were all drowned.

You have seen a dead cat in a pond: you remember its circumference at the waist. Water multiplies the magnitude of a dead cat by ten. On the first day out, it was observed that the ship was much strained. She was three feet wider than usual and as much as ten feet shorter. The convexity of her deck was visibly augmented fore and aft, but she turned up at both ends. Her rudder was clean out of water and she would answer the helm only when running directly against a strong breeze: the rudder, when perverted to one side, would rub against the wind and slew her around; and then she wouldn't steer any more. Owing to the curvature of the keel, the masts came together at the top, and a sailor who had gone up the foremast got bewildered, came down the mizzenmast, looked out over the stern at the receding shores of Malta and shouted: "Land, ho!" The ship's fastenings were all giving way; the water on each side was lashed into foam by the tempest of flying bolts that she shed at every pulsation of the cargo. She was quietly wrecking herself without assistance from wind or wave, by the sheer internal energy of feline expansion.

I went to the skipper about it. He was in his favorite position, sitting on the deck, supporting his back against the binnacle, making a V of his legs, and smoking.

"Captain Doble," I said, respectfully touching my hat, which was really not worthy of respect, "this floating palace is afflicted with curvature of the spine and is likewise greatly swollen."

Without raising his eyes he courteously acknowledged my presence by knocking the ashes from his pipe.

"Permit me, Captain," I said, with simple dignity, "to repeat that this ship is much swollen."

"If that is true," said the gallant mariner, reaching for his tobacco pouch, "I think it would be as well to swab her down with liniment. There's a bottle of it in my cabin. Better suggest it to the mate."

"But, Captain, there is no time for empirical treatment; some of the planks at the water line have started."

The skipper rose and looked out over the stern, toward the

land; he fixed his eyes on the foaming wake; he gazed into the water to starboard and to port. Then he said:

“My friend, the whole darned thing has started.”

Sadly and silently I turned from that obdurate man and walked forward. Suddenly “there was a burst of thunder sound!” The hatch that had held down the cargo was flung whirling into space and sailed in the air like a blown leaf. Pushing upward through the hatchway was a smooth, square column of cat. Grandly and impressively it grew—slowly, serenely, majestically it rose toward the welkin, the relaxing keel parting the mastheads to give it a fair chance. I have stood at Naples and seen Vesuvius painting the town red—from Catania have marked afar, upon the flanks of AEtna, the lava’s awful pursuit of the astonished rooster and the despairing pig. The fiery flow from Kilauea’s crater, thrusting itself into the forests and licking the entire country clean, is as familiar to me as my mother-tongue. I have seen glaciers, a thousand years old and quite bald, heading for a valley full of tourists at the rate of an inch a month. I have seen a saturated solution of mining camp going down a mountain river, to make a sociable call on the valley farmers. I have stood behind a tree on the battle-field and seen a compact square mile of armed men moving with irresistible momentum to the rear. Whenever anything grand in magnitude or motion is billed to appear I commonly manage to beat my way into the show, and in reporting it I am a man of unscrupulous veracity; but I have seldom observed anything like that solid gray column of Maltese cat!

It is unnecessary to explain, I suppose, that each individual grimalkin in the outfit, with that readiness of resource which distinguishes the species, had grappled with tooth and nail as many others as it could hook on to. This preserved the formation. It made the column so stiff that when the ship rolled (and the *Mary Jane* was a devil to roll) it swayed from side to side like a mast, and the Mate said if it grew much taller he would have to order it cut away or it would capsize us.

Some of the sailors went to work at the pumps, but these discharged nothing but fur. Captain Doble raised his eyes from his toes and shouted: “Let go the anchor!” but being assured that nobody was touching it, apologized and resumed his revery. The chaplain said if there were no objections he would like to offer up a prayer, and a gambler from Chicago, producing a pack of cards, proposed to throw round for the first jack. The parson’s plan was adopted, and as he uttered the final “amen,” the cats struck up a hymn.

All the living ones were now above deck, and every mother’s son of them sang. Each had a pretty fair voice, but no ear. Nearly all their notes in the upper register were more or less cracked and disobedient. The remarkable thing about the voices was their

range. In that crowd were cats of seventeen octaves, and the average could not have been less than twelve.

Number of cats, as per invoice	127,000
Estimated number dead swellers	6,000
Total songsters	121,000
Average number octaves per cat	12
Total octaves	1,452,000

It was a great concert. It lasted three days and nights, or, counting each night as seven days, twenty-four days altogether, and we could not go below for provisions. At the end of that time the cook came for'd shaking up some beans in a hat, and holding a large knife.

“Shipmates,” said he, “we have done all that mortals can do. Let us now draw lots.”

We were blindfolded in turn, and drew, but just as the cook was forcing the fatal black bean upon the fattest man, the concert closed with a suddenness that waked the man on the lookout. A moment later every grimalkin relaxed his hold on his neighbors, the column lost its cohesion and, with 121,000 dull, sickening thuds that beat as one, the whole business fell to the deck. Then with a wild farewell wail that feline host sprang spitting into the sea and struck out southward for the African shore!

The southern extension of Italy, as every schoolboy knows, resembles in shape an enormous boot. We had drifted within sight of it. The cats in the fabric had spied it, and their alert imaginations were instantly affected with a lively sense of the size, weight and probable momentum of its flung bootjack.