

Literature, &c.

The British Magazines
FOR NOVEMBER.

From Chambers' Edinburgh Journal.

A YARN OVER THE CAPSTAN, IN
THE SECOND DOG-WATCH.

The first few days of an outward bound voyage, as every body knows who has seen blue water, are always detestable both to sailor and landsmen. The disagreeable circumstances are of various kinds—from the lowest physical discomforts, up to the most incommunicable disturbances of feeling. If you are so much accustomed to the undulatory system of things as not to be sick in body, you are at least sick at heart, and that is the harder of the two to bear. I should say sea-sickness is the grand reconciler for the inner repugnance to an element so foreign to our nature. One comes up so exhilarated from a close berth and its accompaniments to the fresh, sharp sea-breeze, that he is prepared to take everything cheerfully, and already thinks of home matters at thought's length, though affording food for many a mood of quiet recollection under the shadow of a sail by the bulwarks, or set to music by the water rippling past his bed at night. Otherwise a thousand feelings, shaken, uprooted, and set loose, have room to dash together, not having got, as it were, their sea fastenings on; what would you have, behind or before—between wishing to be back again by the fireside, amongst that friendly circle, looking out at those green trees, and feeling, on the other hand, that it was necessary to go where your only way of life lies onward—you do not know. The discipline has all to be gone through consciously, which that aforesaid gross nausea would have concealed. It takes some time to make one throw off the weakness, and look with straight forward manliness at the business in hand, getting into the bold free character of winds, waves, and clouds.

Officers and crew, too, after a ruder fashion and less sentimentally, do not find themselves at all at home till towards the end of the first week. You can get little out of them in the way of information or encouragement as long as the former are getting the ship in hand, and the latter have not fallen into each other's habits. For the above mentioned space of time the captain, except at meals, is scarcely seen out of his state-room, and does not appear on deck—although what he is doing but keeping out of the confusion it is hard to conceive. The mate is not conversable until he has got the great atrocities of dock and harbour corrected, and their eyesores somewhat obliterated, by innumerable fine touches, such as the first mate only can administer.

Peering with head aside from bowsprit, stern-boat, maintop, and every possible vantage-point, he has shrouds to bring taut, backstays to set up, masts to get in a line, concessions to the land to be retracted in the shape of sundry coverings and uncoverings; while his subordinates bluster after him, and the merits of the several hands are elicited in this bustling toilet of the ocean beauty, as if she were watched by some secret Presence, or were about to enter on an assembly of old Tritons, and the waste of waters were not growing more and more desolate around her. Meanwhile water-casks are not yet lowered into the hold, spars and booms are in the gangways, long serpent-like bundles of sails are across the deck, the extempore arrangements of departure still subsist, and every now and then, with a lurch of the vessel, some unfastened piece of nautical furniture trundles over to leeward. Till this state of things has subsided, and got into a degree of order, one has no idea of the placid alternation of a ship's routine; watch is confounded with watch, and there is not a leisure hour for man or boy, nor any time when a passenger does not seem to be in the way: a piece of land-lumber he seems to mate and foremast-man, which no fastening can give steadfastness to, as he makes his advance to leeward by successive clutches of rope and sky-light.

Gradually, however, all settles down into tranquil harmony—the obstacles are cleared away into their various receptacles, watch and watch is set, the anchors are got in, and the chain-cables stowed: that most vivid realisation of being fully at sea! When you come upon deck, the sky first bursts calmly overhead, then the broad heaving ocean round; the large white sails, sheet beyond sheet drawn downwards, are full of quiet wind, a faint motion now and then stirring their stately bosoms, the ropes and reef-points lying on them silently, and their long seams and quaint fresh-coloured patches are picturesque as the touches of the woods. Compared with her look in the docks—bare, furled, and rigid—the moving ship is as a shadowy, rustling summer tree to its wintry skeleton. The mate is looking up aloft, while at their separate occupations above and under, upon a solitary yard, or far out on the bowsprit, the sailors are pursuing tasks more genial than those of labourers in the field, moving in the hot meadow or following the dusty plough. While on passes the ball of sparn-yarn round the rope for the other's instrument, remote from hearing, what hints of wonderous things, so lightly seen, do pass between them. The two have come together from all regions of the globe, and will part again after this voyage, yet how coolly do they exchange their confidence, as it were by accident, glancing now and then on the smooth horizon for a speck upon it, the only object that could touch their indifference! The man

at the wheel, now eying the compass, now the trembling corner of a royal through the round-house opening, looks contemplative as a sage. There is no time or place more favourable to pure thought than are a voyage and a ship's weather bulwarks at sea. The foundations of one's opinions, nay, of his character, may naturally undergo a thorough revision—all tends to grow clearer, purer, deeper, and freer too. Then how tenderly and completely do affections, remembrances, afflictions, arrange themselves in that tranquil, spiritual medium, in that resignation of actual possession; and we measure and try everything as 'by a water balance—the standard of just and equal! It is somewhat difficult to say whether seafaring men do acquire from circumstances, confessedly more thoughtful and solemn than those of worldly life, the cast of mind he expected; for of all men, a sailor is the farthest from sentiment or consciousness of anything extraordinary in his experience, as well as the quietest and most difficult to compare with others. But these very peculiarities imply superiority; manly energy and directness of view are the first to be developed in him; and if he reflects it is a thing either kept secret, or revealed only to those who understand him, in a language of his own, in some quiet middle watch, or by the way, in some half-coined story, to the windlass group of hearers. I believe that, in proportion to his education, the seaman is indeed greatly superior to any other class of natural livers, and that nature in this element teaches both forcibly and by calm negotiations.

Somewhat similar to these were my musings on the ninth afternoon since leaving Bristol, as, with studding sails set to a light breeze astern, the Maria, a small West Indiaman, in which I was the only passenger, kept on her course across the Atlantic; slightly rolling as a vessel does, more or less, with a fair wind. Fair white clouds were moving quietly over the sky from east to west, and I fancied their peculiar delicacy and streaky shape already indicated our approach to a new climate. The level ocean-floor was unutterably blue around us, hardly rippling with the slight wind but cool to look upon out of the hot sun, from from the shadow of the towering fabric of sails to the quiet horizon where not a speck appeared to break the spell of solitude. One can hardly believe, amidst the magic circle of the sea, that earth has any other shape save that which, indeed, is not even an outline, and is unapproachable. The glittering flying fish, in showers, darted like swallows from one depth to another, or now and then a single one fell on board; otherwise, no living thing but ourselves was in sight. It was pleasant to yield to the romance of the situation than to moralise, so, lighting an after-dinner cigar, I sat and dreamt, to the influence of its fumes, of verandahs open to the sea breeze through large green palm leaves, of aloes flowering against the Venetians, fields of sugar-cane, mountains rising from odorous woods, of graceful Creole ladies, and all tropical-breathing things, as well as of those I had seen in another region. We were in the track of old Columbus, passing to a new world. I watched the men descending the shrouds from their several occupations, while the ship was beginning to assume the leisurely appearance of evening. The decks were cleared of their signs of work; the sailmaker and a boy, who had been busy near me, began to roll up the topsail they had been repairing, and four bells were struck from beside the wheel—six o'clock commencement of the second dog-watch. At the galley fire the black cook was bailing out the tea for the ship's company into their various tin pots, and a group of the crew, in their red or blue shirts and canvas crowsers! were gathered about the windlass to their evening gossip; while the boys were sweeping the decks fore and aft of rope-yarns and shavings, and coiling up the stray ropes to the belaying pins.

This second dog-watch, by the way, is the most pleasant, easy time in the routine of a ship's twenty-four hours. Unless the sails need to be trimmed, no one, even of the watch on duty, is required to do any thing; it is the interval when sailors may despatch all their own little matters unmolested, join to speculate on the weather, or talk of whatever casts up. Before the mast, all is cheerfulness and quiet abandonment—rest, joke, snapper, and smoking, behind the veil of a sanctury not then to be intruded on by first mate or subordinate.

On the quarter-deck, a like relaxation prevails then: before tea-time, in the quiet evenings, this mysterious captain is seen walking to windward, or smoking a cigar from that side of the capstan, while he chats with the mate, the others having disappeared to enjoy their privacy.

On this same evening the captain of the Maria, with whom I had already got pretty well acquainted, emerged from the cabin companion soon after the bell had struck; and for the first time I found myself along with him and his first mate—a good-looking, fresh coloured young man, leaning on the capstan, disposed apparently for an easy conversation. The round flat top of that piece of naval furniture lay between us, covered with its green-painted canvas envelope—a table across which many more dialogues and professional anecdotes had been exchanged than over that down stairs. It has so confidential a look, and yet so business like that narrow circle of green canvass, and seems made to relax the strict forms of seafaring etiquette that are preserved apart from it, as much so to tighten the topsails halliards, when it swings round amidst the bars to the chant of the after-guard. Our captain was a hale, weather-worn, elderly man,

with hair grayer than his years alone, as I found, would have made him; and as much like a respectable grave country practitioner who had ridden at all hours to see his patients, or a retired lieutenant who still talked to his neighbours of old sea matters, as he was like an acting merchant skipper. Save for his Manila straw hat, you might even have taken him for a parson. However, be that as it may, we now gradually fell into a strain of dialogue which led to the worthy old man's relating to us a portion of his biography; not, as he remarked for anything extraordinary in it, but merely by way of a capstan yarn of a fine night, when the dog-vane was making a parallel with the taffrail. The mate had never sailed in the Maria before, so that the recital was as new to him as to me.

'It's thirty-six years now,' said the captain, 'since I first went to sea; and the more I look back on it, the more I wonder why I went at all, or what port I shipped for at last. The truth is, we're every one of us steering in this life by a sort of compass which tells us what we need only by our wishes shifting from it; as for the chart, that's in the Master's hands, and He gives us the course, a point at a time. There's one book I am very fond of myself, amongst the few I have below there—it's "the Pilgrim's Progress;" but I've thought, often as I've read it over, some one that knows the sea should write another like it, only more proper to sailors, and call it "the Mariner's Progress." Here I am, at last, fifty-two, and old for my years: the forty voyages or so of various kinds I've made seem like one long one, in which I've touched land, no doubt, but a strange one, and begin to weary for the same I left. I do think at times, now, I feel the air more homelike, although they haven't yet hailed land from the mast-head; and I've sought latterly to get the anchor out, and see all clear, as well as painting the vessel, before coming into harbour. How it is I don't certainly know, that one should be coming back when he has seemingly been sailing all the while straight on; and so painful as it is to think that the old happiness of home is gone for ever from the earth, unless it be that the world's round, and one may come into port without ever once wearing about.

'When I was a boy, I can't say I had any particular fancy for the sea. Many take up the notion out of books, and keep a hold of it in spite of all that can be said or done, thinking of the adventures they have read about, or longing to see foreign countries, and something out of the common way. For my part I didn't read much, nor did I ever set any object before my mind more than another. The thing was in me; a sort of restlessness that kept me from settling to one occupation, led me into mischief. I couldn't help it, it appeared to me; for even after I had vowed to keep clear of scrapes in future, when my spirits rose again I found myself in the middle of another before I knew it. Far from troubling my head about the sea and ships for the romance of them, I ordinarily cared not a straw for the particular scheme of amusement in hand, for it seemed only to rise like a natural vent to the wild pleasure of standing and feeling life. I never lived long enough on land to experience the admiration for scenery I have read of; but I do believe now, that many a time, as we were breaking into some orchard at night for the fruit, even while I scrambled over the pales after my companions, there shot into my heart a secret feeling of the beauty of the trees and grass covered with dew, or the harvest corn fields out beyond; since I sometimes start at such recollections, and seem at that very period to have had delight in the things, and they waiting all this while to be reflected on, as it were the echo of one's voice after he had given up expecting it. I fancy boys and common folks have the same pleasure in natural things as writers and poets, only they take a round-about way to come at it, and see them more beautiful when they are doing something else.

The place we lived in was a very little country town, where my father lived independent, although he farmed some acres of ground and our house stood on the outskirts of the town, looking out over a front flower-plot to the street, and beyond to the open country. My father was the least of all characters likely to guide me right: he was a stern man, and hated any thing of wild spirits; he was upright and religious withal, but his religion was too formal, and he did not make it come down to children. The smallest prank was rated as a crime; and my mother, a mild, gentle woman, would not interfere to make his authority less, although herself she treated us far otherwise, and my worst grief has been that I minded her precepts too little. The consequence of my father's sternness was, that my younger brother and I feared him, and made all our plans of enjoyment secret as much as we could, which was a habit that led us farther astray than if we had been allowed to be open. I however, was the worst, chiefly in wild tricks of mischief with my schoolfellows; for Ned was a year younger, and naturally less boisterous, and he often stayed to play with our little sister when I was heading the band to plunder an orchard or destroy some of the neighbours' cats, if nothing less innocent was preferable. An elder brother, by a previous marriage on my father's side, was grown up, and engaged in business: he was the most disagreeable of the family, being of a tyrannical disposition, without my father's uprightness, and I even hated him at that time, while fearing him as much; for if the least provoked, he did not let the difference of age prevent him from using me as ill as I believe my father had done him when he was the only boy. This

state of things was not quiet so bad when I was near fifteen, and had been at school a year or two, when I learnt some Latin or Greek, and used even to read pieces of Homer, and I had begun to sober down a little. But at that age I was artful to an attorney in the place for three years, and soon began to tire most thoroughly of copying deeds and law-papers at a high desk all day, and to wish for some other course of life. There was another lad of my own age in the office, with whom I got intimate, and he being of as frolicsome turn as myself, we contrived, every way we could, to make the burden light. We were fond of shooting, and he and Ned and I frequently of a Saturday afternoon went out together to enjoy the sport. As my father allowed us no money to ourselves, however, in connexion with this amusement, we were put to great shifts for obtaining materials; and although our mother often supplied us with small sums, we, along with our companion, gradually got into considerable debt, which we had no means of paying. The shopkeeper having threatened to send in our share of the account to my father, we were in great error; but it only hastened our carrying out the plan of running away from our apprenticeship, which my companion and I had several times started with no purpose I know of but just to escape.

The situation was growing irksome enough to us though we had always put off her scheme, since it could be managed at any time, till this circumstance capped matters. We contrived to raise a few shillings between us, and appointed the day, fixing to leave early in the morning, and give ourselves a safe start. We had a good deal of work to persuade my brother Ned, poor little fellow, to join us; but at last he yielded, for he was terribly afraid of the discovery by my father, and maybe more of the disgrace to his mother's eyes of whom he was very fond, as she made him a favourite. That night I thought my father was much kinder than ordinary; he was in a good-humour, and had promised to take us all a jaunt next day; and though this made it more disagreeable to think of his anger, I own it cost me a sore struggle to bid him good night when we went out of the parlour to bed. If he had spoken another word, or only looked at me, I would have told him all; but he was looking down at the newspaper, and somehow I didn't like the thought of seeing him look up and say, 'What is it?' I never saw him again.

The light was just breaking over the woods as Ned and I stole out at the front door in the morning to meet our friend at the corner of a lane which led into the high road. I glanced up at the window to see if anybody would notice us when we should get into the street but not one soul was stirring, and the white blind of my father and mother's bedroom was down. My heart smote me at taking advantage of their sleep; but I plumed myself on never going back from what I had begun, and I cheered Ned in whispers as we hastened down the street.

I cannot remember looking back again, yet the house is before me now, and often has been; although when I came back there three years after, there was a new canal made right through where it stood, and across the green garden. I think I see it, standing so still and grey in the dawn, with all its window blinds down, and the flowers within the rails drooping with dew, and the edges of the fruit trees behind stretched over the garden hedge above the field, without moving a leaf. I little knew or cared what I was leaving it for; but I daresay, if I had thought it was for a brig's fore-castle, the bare sea, and such tyranny as one could not conceive till he knew it, I should have turned round in time, and slipped up stairs with Ned into bed again, come what would. However, it's no use talking, here I am, no doubt; and I am more certain than I was then as to a wiser head than mind that's working the traverses, and making the course though I can't see him. The log shows a good deal of lee-way, but a skilful navigator knows how to meet that too. Mr. Adams' said the captain here, in a different tone, 'I think this wind's shifting a point already; you'd better get those lower stunsails in, and take in the slack of your starboard braces. The dog-vane on the taffrail was evidently slanting a little inboard and the lower sails fluttered on their one edge; so the mate left us to alter their trim, the captain of course pausing in his narrative till that duty should have been performed.

'Haul down the lower stunsails,' called out the former to the group on the fore-castle in a few moments those large dark sheets of canvas were coming flapping in from the booms. 'Brace round the foreyard,' said the mate, 'and lie aft here, the larboard watch, to trim sails. Take a pull there on the starboard main-brace.' In a short time all was right, and we were together at the capstan again; while the lamp in the pinnacle was lighted, casting upward a warm glow on the steerman's rough face, as he kept the vessel a point away from 'sou'-west-by-south,' in his silent communion with mysterious pole and its magical witness.

The azure vault of heaven was deepening above into intense, unutterable blue, and a star or two had come forth imperceptibly into its empty amplitude. The men forward were already at their confabulation again by the windlass, and the cap ain resumed, leaving in thought the ocean for those scenes which were written secretly in his heart.

To be Concluded.

There is a volume contained in a few words of Shakespeare, when he says 'Drunkennes is an egg from which all vices may be hatched.'