

Literature, &c.

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TALES OF THE COAST GUARD.

ALLY SOMERS.

WHEN I joined the *Scorpion* sloop of war then (1810) on the West India station, there were a father and son amongst the crew whose names, as borne on the ship's books, were John Somers and John *Alice* Somers. The oddity in this country of giving a boy a female baptismal name had been no doubt jestingly remarked upon by those who were aware of it, but with the sailors the lad passed as *Ally* Somers. The father was approaching fifty, the son could not have been more than seventeen years of age. The elder Somers who had attained to the rating of a boatswain, was a stern, hard, silent man, with a look as cold and clear as polished steel, and a cast-iron mouth, indicative of inflexible, indomitable firmness of will and resolution. The son, on the contrary, though somewhat resembling his father in outline of feature, had a mild, attractive, almost feminine aspect, and a slight graceful frame. I was not long in discovering that, obdurate and self-engrossed as the man appeared, the boy was really the idol image in which his affections and his hopes were centred. His eye constantly followed the motions of the lad, and it appeared to be his unceasing aim and study to lighten the duties he had to perform, and to shield him from the rough usage to which youngsters in his position were generally subjected by the motley crews of those days. One day a strong instance in proof of this master feeling occurred. *Ally* Somers some time previously, when on shore with a party despatched to obtain a supply of water, had, during the temporary absence of the officer in command, been rather severely reprimanded by one of the seamen for some trifling misconduct, and a few slight marks were left on the lad's back. The rage of the father, when informed of the circumstance, was extreme, and it was with difficulty that he was restrained from inflicting instant chastisement on the offender. An opportunity for partially wreaking his boarded vengeance occurred about six weeks afterwards, and it was eagerly embraced. The sailor who had ill-used young Somers was sentenced to receive two dozen lashes for drunkenness and insubordination. He was ordered to strip, placed at the gratings, and the punishment began. Somers the boatswain, iron or sour-tempered as he might be, was by no means harsh nor cruel in his office, and his assistants, upon whom the revolting office of flogging usually devolved, influenced by him, were about the gentlest-handed boatswain's mates I ever saw practise. On this occasion he was in another and very different mood. Two blows only had been struck when Somers, with an angry rebuke to the mate for not doing duty, snatched the cat from his hand, and himself lashed the culprit with a ferocity so terribly effective, that Captain Boyle a merciful and just officer, instantly remitted half the number of lashes, and the man was rescued from the unsparring hands of the vindictive boatswain.

Other instances of the intensity of affection glowing within the stern man's breast for his comparatively weak and delicate boy manifested themselves. Once in action, when the lad, during a tumultuous and murderous struggle, in beating off a determined attempt to carry the sloop by boarding, chanced to stumble on the slippery deck, he was overtaken before he could recover himself, and involved in the fierce assault which at the fore-castle was momentarily successful. I was myself hotly engaged in another part of the fight; but attention being suddenly called to the forepart of the ship by the enemy's triumphant shouts, I glanced round just in time to see the boatswain leap, with the yell and bound of a tiger, into the melee, and strike right and left with such tremendous ferocity and power as instantly to check the advancing rush. Our men promptly rallied, and the deck was in a few minutes cleared of every living foe that had recently profaned it. *Ally* Somers, who had received a rather severe flesh wound, and tainted from loss of blood, was instantly caught up by his father, and carried with headlong impatience below. When the surgeon, after a brief look at the hurt, said: 'There is no harm done, Somers,' the high strung nerves of the boatswain gave way, and he fell back upon a locker temporarily prostrate and insensible from sudden revulsion of feeling. Several times I was an unintentional auditor of scraps of conversation between the two whilst the lad was on the sick list, from which I gathered that *Ally* was the sole issue of a marriage which had left bitter memories in the mind of the father; but whether arising from the early death of his wife, or other causes, I did not ascertain. Somers was, it appeared, a native of the west of England, and it was quite evident had received a much better education than usually falls to individuals of his class.

At the close of the war Somers and his son were, with thousands of others, turned adrift from the royal service. Some months after my appointment to the command of the revenue cutter, I chanced to meet the father in the village of Tilton, about four miles out of Southampton, on the New Forest Road. He had I found re-entered the navy, but chancing to receive a hurt by the falling of a heavy block on his right knee, had been invalided with a small pension, upon which he

was now living at about a hundred yards from the spot we had accidentally met. *Ally*, he informed me, was the skipper of a small craft trading between Guernsey and Southampton. There was little change in the appearance of the man except that the crippled condition of his leg appeared to have had an effect the reverse of softening upon his stern and rugged aspect and temper. When paid off, he was, I knew, entitled to a considerable sum in prize money, the greater part of which he told me he had recently received.

About a couple of months after this meeting with the father I fell in with the son. I was strolling at about eleven in the forenoon along the front of the Southampton customhouse, when my eye fell upon a young man, in a seaman's dress, busily engaged with three others in loading a cart with bundles of laths which had been landed shortly before from a small vessel alongside the quay. It was *Ally* Somers sure enough; and so much improved in looks since I last saw him, that but for a certain air of fragility—inherited probably from his mother—he might have been pronounced a handsome fine young fellow. The laths, upwards of two hundred bundles, which he was busily assisting to cart, he had brought from Guernsey, and were a very common importation from that island; Guernsey possessing the right of sending its own produce customs free to England, a slight duty, only tantamount to what the foreign timber of which the laths were made would have been liable to, was levied upon them, and this was ascertained by the proper officer simply measuring the length and girth of the bundles.—This had been done, and the laths marked as 'passed.' It struck me that the manner of *Ally* Somers was greatly hurried and excited, and when he saw me approaching, evidently with an intention to accost him, this agitation perceptibly increased. He turned deadly pale, and absolutely trembled with ill-concealed apprehension. He was somewhat reassured by my frank salutation; and after a few common place inquiries I walked away, evidently to his great relief, and he with his sailors continued their eager work of loading the cart. I could not help suspecting that something was wrong, though I could not make up my mind to verify the surmise his perturbed and hurried manner excited. Once in a skirmish on shore his father, the boatswain, had saved my life by sending a timely bullet through the head of a huge negro who held me for the moment at his mercy. Besides I might be wrong after all, and I had no right to presume that the officer who had passed the laths had not made a sufficient examination of them.—The flurry of the young man might arise from physical weakness and the severe labor he was performing in such hot weather. These reasons, or more truly these excuses for doing nothing, were passing through my brain, when I observed the hasty approach of the collector of customs himself towards the cart, followed by several of his subordinates.—Young Somers saw him as quickly as I did, and the young man's first impulse, it was quite plain, was flight. A thought no doubt of the hopelessness of such an attempt arrested his steps, and he stood quaking with terror by the side of the cart, his right hand grasping for support at one of the wheel-spokes.

'One of you lend me a knife,' said the collector, addressing the officers of customs.

A knife was quickly opened and handed to him; he severed the strong cords which bound one of the bundles of laths together, and they flew assunder, disclosing a long tin tube of considerable diameter, closely rammed with tobacco. All the other bundles contained a similar deposit; and so large was the quantity of the heavily taxed weed thus unexpectedly made lawful prize of, that a profit I was assured, of not less than £500 or £600 would have been made by the audacious smuggler had he succeeded in his bold and ingenious attempt. The ends of the bundles had been filled up with short pieces of lath, so that, except by the process now adopted, it was impossible to detect that the cargo was not *bona fide* what it had been declared to be. The penalties to which Somers had rendered himself liable were immense, the vessel also was forfeited, and the young man's liberty at the mercy of the crown. He looked the very picture of despair, and I felt assured that ruin, utter and complete had fallen upon him.

He was led off in custody, and had gone some dozen paces when he stopped shortly, appeared to make some request to the officers by whom he was escorted, and then turning round, intimated by a supplicatory gesture that he wished to speak to me. I drew near, and at my request the officers fell back out of hearing. He was so utterly prostrated by the calamity by which he had been so suddenly overtaken, that he could not for several moments speak intelligibly. I felt a good deal concerned for so mere a boy, and one too so entirely unfitted by temperament and nerve to carry through such desperate enterprises, or to bear up against their failures.

'This is a bad business,' I said; 'but the venture has not, I trust, been made with your own or your father's money?'

'Every penny of it,' he replied in a dry, fainting voice, 'was our own. Father lent me all his prize money, and we are both miserable beggars.'

'What in the name of goodness could induce you to venture your all upon a single throw in so hazardous a game?'

'I will tell you,' he went on hurriedly to say in the same feeble and trembling tone: 'I am not fitted for a sea-life—not strong, not hardy enough. I longed for a quiet peaceful home ashore. A hope of one offered itself.

I made the acquaintance of Richard Sylvester, a miller near Ealing. He is a good man, but gripping as far as money is concerned. I formed an attachment for his eldest daughter Maria; and he consented to our union, and to taking me as a partner in his business, if I could pay down five hundred pounds. I was too eager to wait long; besides I thought that perhaps—But it boots not to speak of that now; I set more than life upon this cast; I have lost, and am now bankrupt of resource or hope. Will you break this news to my father?—His remaining firmness gave way as the thought he would have uttered struggled to his lips, and the meek hearted young man burst into tears, and wept piteously like a girl. A number of persons were collecting round us, and I gently urged him to walk on to the customhouse. A few minutes afterwards I left him there, with a promise to comply with his request without delay.

I found John Somers at home, and had scarcely uttered twenty words when he jumped at once to the true conclusion.

'Out with it, sir,' exclaimed the steel-nerved man. 'But you need not; I see it all.—*Ally* has failed—the tobacco has been seized—and he is in prison.'

Spite of himself his breath came thick and short, and he presently added with a fierce burst, whilst a glance of fire leaped from his eyes; 'he has been betrayed, and I think I know by whom.'

Your suspicion that he has been informed against is very likely correct, but you will, I think, have some difficulty in ascertaining by whom. The customhouse authorities are careful not to allow the names of their informants to leak through their office doors.'

'I would find him were he hidden in the centre of the earth,' rejoined the ex boatswain with another vengeful outcry, which startled one like an explosion.—'But,' added the strong and fierce willed man after a few moment's silence, 'it's useless prating of the matter like a wench. We must part company at once. I thank you sir, and will tell *Ally* you have called.' I mentioned the other request made by his son.—'That is a rotten plank to hold by,' he said.—'Ally's chance is over there, and it would be mere waste of time to call on the old man; his resolution is hard and unyielding as his own millstones. Maria Sylvester is gone with the five hundred pounds her father bargained for; and the girl's tears, if she shed any will soon be dry. I warned *Ally* of the peril of steering his course in life by the deceptive light of woman's capricious smiles and vanities; but he, poor, flexible, gentle minded boy, heeded me not. I may not longer delay; and will be anxious to see me.—Good-day, sir.'

The consequence which I chiefly feared came to pass, even more speedily than I apprehended. It being impossible to liquidate the penalties incurred, *Ally* Somers was imprisoned as a crown debtor; and at that period, whatever may be the case now, revenue penalties could not be got rid of by insolvent court schedules. The prospect of an indefinite term of imprisonment, with other causes of grief and depression, broke down the always fragile health of the prisoner, and he died, ere yet his youth was well begun, after about six months' confinement only.

The tidings were brought me by the old man himself. I was seated in the cabin of the *Rose* cutter when it was announced that John Somers was alongside in a boat and wished to see me. I directed that he should be allowed to come aboard, and presently the old man, with despair visible in every line of his countenance, in every glance of his restless, flaming eyes, entered the cabin.

'I am come to tell you, sir, that *Ally* is dead.'

'I was somewhat prepared for this bad news, Mr Somers,' I answered. 'It's hard upon you, but it should be bravely borne with.'

He laughed strangely. 'To be sure, to be sure,' he said, 'that is wise counsel—very wise; but that which I want now more than wise counsel is more than ten pounds—ten pounds which I shall never be able to repay.' 'Ten pounds.'

'Yes: you may remember that I once saved your life. If that piece of service was worth the sum I have mentioned, you can now discharge the obligation. I have parted with everything, and *Ally*'s last prayer was to be buried beside his—Beside a grave, an early and untimely one, like his own, many miles away.'

'I understand; it is a natural and pious wish, and you shall have the money.'

'Thank you. The funeral over, I have but one more thing to do in life, and that is to assist you in securing *Cocquerel* whilst running one of his most valuable cargoes.'

'*Cocquerel* the Guernseyman you mean?'

'Ay, so he calls himself; but I fancy he at one time hailed from another port. He is the man who sold *Ally*'s secret to the revenue officers.'

'Are you sure?'

'As death! He was *Ally*'s only confidant, and *Ally*'s father is now in *Cocquerel*'s confidence. It is but natural,' added Somers, and a bitter, deadly sneer curled his ashy lip—'it is but natural, you know, that I should be eager to assist in pillaging a government which caged my son, and held him under its iron bars till life had fled. *Cocquerel* understands this, and trusts me fully; but that which he does not understand, know, or suspect,' continued the fierce old man, sinking his voice to a whisper, and leaning forward with his face close to mine, 'is that John Somers has found out *who* it was that sold his boy's life! Did he know that, and know me

too, there would be sounder sleepers than he in these dark nights.'

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing more, of course,' he replied in a more checked and guarded tone, 'than to retort the trick he played *Ally* something after his own fashion.'

'That is fair revenge enough, and I'll not balk you. Now, then, for your plan.'

Various details were discussed, and it was settled that on that day week Somers was again to communicate with me. He then took leave.

At the appointed time Somers returned, and appeared to be in high but flighty spirits. Everything was, he said, arranged, and successful all but certain. His scheme was then canvassed and finally agreed upon, and he again left the vessel.

The arrangement for the surprise and capture of *Cocquerel* was this:—That notorious smuggler intended running a large cargo on the coast of Dorsetshire, on the north of Portland, at a place where the cliffs are high, precipitous and abrupt, and that time very inefficiently watched by the shore force. Near the spot selected is or was a kind of cavern wore by the action of the sea in the chalky stratum, which at neap tides was partially dry, and the time of our enterprise would effectually conceal a boat from the observation of any one who did not actually peer in directly at its mouth. *Cocquerel* was to leave Guernsey the next day in a large boat, with two lug sails, but chiefly depending for speed upon its sweeps. It was calculated that he would reach his destination about midnight. Somers had undertaken the duty of shore-signalman, and if danger were apprehended, was to warn the smugglers that hawks were abroad by burning a blue light. The manner of running the cargo was to be this:—

Somers was provided with a windlass and sufficient length of rope, with a kind of ropewalk at the end of it, in which a man could sit, or a couple of kegs be slung, to reach the boat. The windlass he was to secure firmly at the edge of the cliff, and two or three of men having been drawn up, other windlasses were to be fixed, by means of which it was calculated that in about half an hour the entire cargo would be safely carried off by the carts which Somers had undertaken to have ready on the spot. The signal for our appearance on the scene of action, the old man persisted, should be that agreed upon for the warning of the smugglers—the sudden ignition of a blue light. This did not seem the clearest possible mode of procedure; but as the cavern in which we were to conceal ourselves was but a few yards northward of the spot marked out for the landing, and Somers promised he would only give the signal when the smugglers were in full work, I had little fear that, if other accidents did not capsize our scheme, they would be able to escape us.

The next afternoon the largest boat belonging to the *Rose* was fully manned; and leaving the cutter quietly at anchor in the Southampton river just above Calshot, we pulled with the tide—for there was but a light air, and that favorable for the smugglers, not for us—to our hiding place, which we reached about eight o'clock in the evening.

The hours crept very slowly and distantly away, amidst the darkness and hoarse echoes and moanings of the cavern, into which the sea and wind, which were gradually rising, dashed and howled with much and increasing violence. Occasional peeps at my watch, by the light of a lantern carefully shaded seaward warned us ten, eleven, twelve, one o'clock had passed, without bringing the friends we so anxiously expected, and fears of ultimate disappointment were chilling us far more than the cold night breeze, when a man in the bow of the boat said in a whisper that he could hear the dash of oars. We all instantly listened with eager attention; but it was not until we had brought the boat to the entrance of the opening that the man's assertion was verified. There it was clear enough; and the near approach of a large boat, with the regular jerk of the oars or sweeps, was distinctly audible. The loud, clear hail of their shore signalman, answered by the 'All right' of the smugglers, left no doubt that the expected prey was within our grasp; and I had a mind to pounce upon them at once, but was withheld by a promise which I had been obliged several times to repeat, that I would not under any circumstances do so till the signal flame sent its light over the waters.

As soon as the noise and bustle of laying in the sweeps, lowering the sails, and unstepping the masts, had subsided, we heard Somers hail the boat, and insist that the captain should come up before any of the others, as there was a difficulty about the carts which he alone could settle. The reply was a growl of assent, and we could hear by the click of the check to the cog-wheel of the windlass that Somers was paying out the rope. Presently *Cocquerel* was heard to get into the cradle I have spoken of, to which a line was fastened in order to steady his ascent from below. The order was given to turn away, and the renewed click, click announced that he was ascending the face of the cliff. I could hardly comprehend this manoeuvre, which seemed to indicate the escape of the man, we were the most anxious to secure, and the order to shove off was just on my lips when a powerful blue light flamed suddenly forth, accompanied by a fierce but indistinct shout, or roar rather, from Somers. The men replied by a loud cheer, and we shot smartly out; but having, to avoid a line of reef, to row in a straight direction for about a cable's length the smugglers, panic stricken