

The Case of the Sailor.

A Plea for Justice for the Crews of Deep Water Ships—
Why Seamen Submit to Abuse That Landmen Would
Resent—Remedies Suggested.

An unsigned book review, treating of Alexander J. Boyd's "The Shellback," contains the following:

"There is at all events this to be said for the officers of a deep water ship: They are very commonly under the absolute necessity of awing into subjection ruffianly crews of potential mutineers who outnumber them twenty to one; and if they resort to rough measures it is fair to presume that they do so quite as much from a knowledge of the men they have to deal with as from mere wanton cruelty.

The writer of this says a few other things to the same effect and of no account beyond the labored correctness of his style. This correctness, his cocksureness and his habitat would indicate that he is young and a student of W. Clark Russell, it so the years will probably bring him punishment, tutelage and wisdom, and what follows here is in no sense an answer to him; only as the paragraph quoted above crystallizes a very common and popular opinion of sailormen it is used as a text for this argument—and flatly denied to begin with.

The deep water sailor does not outnumber his officers twenty to one, or is he a "potential mutineer." With twenty men before the mast there are at the other end of the ship a captain, two or three mates, a steward and cabin boy, and as allies from the forward end, one or two boatswains, a cook and a carpenter—the last very handy with a broadaxe. Here at the most, are ten men to awe "potential mutineers," at the least, six. There are arms enough in the cabin—aside from the broadaxe mentioned—to equip this police force, while the sailors have none, and are seldom allowed to carry sheath knives. As testimony to the efficiency of the system and the safety of the afterguard, at sea with a large number of men in the forecastle, consider the few cases of mutiny, or even mild insubordination, that have occurred in American ships in the past generation. The deep water sailor is the last man on earth to wish mutiny. He is a rough, ignorant, hard working man, with large endurance, and never having received his share of good treatment, his patience goes hand in hand with his endurance, and his respect for authority is a matter of faith.

Mutineers can be drawn from the rest of humanity, but not from trained sailors. It is safe to predict that if an American ship put out from a New York dock with a crew of landmen, gathered from any grade in life, there would take place this side of Sandy Hook one of the liveliest mutinies ever imagined. It would be based upon the common self respect and sense of injury displayed by tormented kittens, spanked babies, bisected angle worms and other units of organic life in the presence of wrong—which is all but trained out of the soul of the able seaman. He will resent an injury on shore but at sea, while willing to risk his life daily for the good of the ship he will submit tamely to insult and cruelty that would goad the average landman to murder.

There is something strange in the apathetic submission to wrong of a man with muscles of steel and courage above the average—something incomprehensible from the ordinary viewpoint, and only plain to him who has worked before the mast long enough to become imbued with the ethics of his calling. The sailor really suffers from diverted development; his pride in himself as a seaman. He is prouder of his ability to do as he is told—to perform an almost impossible and useless task at the behest of an officer—than he would be of his ability to thrash the officer. Many a man goes to what he knows is his death—over the side in a gale, out forward on a sprung jibboom, or aloft to a rotten and stranded foot rope—from pure inability to realize that he has a human right to his life. In him the first law of nature is subverted; preservation of life stands second to preservation of property.

Such a man should be protected. True, we require the same self-sacrifice and abnegation from soldiers, policemen and firemen, and enact little legislation for their benefit; but living on shore, as they do, they are able to take reasonably good care of themselves from their more intimate acquaintance with common law and the limitations of their fellow men. The sailor ignorant of the world, and of men, and of his own rights, is the subject of more legis-

lation than is any other craftsman, but most of this treats of his duties to his superiors, and the punishments to be dealt him for insolence, insubordination, desertion, smuggling, mutiny, murder and such crimes, while the little that is enacted for his benefit has usually been twisted so as to work to his harm; for instance, the law requiring advance wages or allotment of wages as it now stands, which ostensibly procures him an outfit of clothing to go to sea with, has for generations kept him in the power of the boarding masters, or crimps.

Again, deeming it a hardship for a sailor to be paid off at a foreign port, far from home, some wiseacres, now dead, once passed a law that he be brought back to an American port of discharge. This compact was of necessity binding upon the sailor as well; he could not leave his ship in a foreign port without incurring the penalties of desertion, loss of money due and effects left behind, as well as imprisonment if caught. So in foreign ports where men are plenty and wages low, the sailor who has a goodly sum due him and would like to stay by his ship, finish the voyage and be paid off with his own, is first refused shore leave, then hunted, hounded, and hit with fists and clubs, until he is glad to desert to preserve the wholeness of his skin—which is just what the captain wants him to do; for the back wages and clothing left behind are forfeit to the owners, and a man can be shipped in his place at a lower rate of pay. Yet in the face of this distinct advantage to the captain, he will often appeal to the local authorities, put that recreant sailor in jail for desertion, and go to sea without him.

But these two statutes merely conduce to robbery—of his money and of his liberty, and, strange as it may seem, considering


that his pay seldom rises above \$18 a month, it is the least of his troubles, for he rarely enjoys the luxury of spending his own money, and most jails are as roomy as a ship at sea. It is his treatment on board ship—treatment that robs him of his common humanity and wears out his soul—which troubles him most, and at rare intervals brings him into court as a futile complainant. Futile because he is not successful in a legal hunt for redress so long as Judges, Consuls and Commissioners will put him in jail as a witness while they permit the captain or mate to furnish bail, which amount to a license to go to sea. All the laws which may be passed by intelligent lawmakers will not help the sailor unless some means can be devised to compel the instant trial of an accused captain or officer, for the sailor has neither time or money. He must go to sea to live.

Can any such incentive to official honesty be found and employed? There are those, knowing of the horrors of the American 'hell ship,' who say that the matter will be adjusted when this country needs sailors to man her growing navy, that then wide awake to the necessity of nourishing and protecting a reserve to draw upon, an aroused and anxious populace will rise up in all the force of its oft quoted 'public sentiment' and insist upon justice to the merchant sailor.

No such exigency will occur, unless we go back to the old type of wooden men-of-war. For as raw material for the flating machine shops which we call warships, the merchant sailor has but two points of advantage over carpenters, machinists, clerks and other wage earners, his immunity from seasickness and his ability to handle an oar.

Other observers are willing to leave the matter to Providence, saying that the wrongs of the sailor are only a part of the general social and labor problems, and must be left to work themselves out. Exactly, but social evolution comes only of human effort and until the two statutes mentioned above—those relating to discharge in foreign ports, and to allotment of wages—are repealed, the sailor will be robbed by the crimp on shore and by the captain and owner at sea.


Yet such repeal will in no wise effect a mitigation of his treatment at the hands of brutal skippers and mates. He will still be cursed, beaten and worked, up to his ex-



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trema limits of endurance until his average life of twelve years at sea expiring, he will find rest and immunity in a weighted canvas shroud. And for this state of affairs, in view of the laxity of official action and the present painful estimate placed upon sailors by a Russell taught public, there is no remedy in this generation. As long as the public believes that the harmless, inoffensive, hard working merchant sailor is a 'potential mutineer, a scoundrel seeking opportunity to mutiny and murder, to burn sink and destroy,' just so long will it be safe for a Consul, a commissioner or a Justice of the Peace to give him full benefit of the laws designed to punish, while denying him the benefit of those framed to protect him.

But there are such laws and they have been on the statute books for years. But what good have they done? How many captains and mates have been hanged, or even imprisoned, within the memory of any reader of this, for the murder of a sailor at sea? The Coast Seaman's Journal of San Francisco has published a list of crimes at sea covering a period of ten years—from 1888 to 1898—in a pamphlet entitled 'The Red Record.' 'The Black Record' would be a fitter name; for a blacker shame does not rest upon this Republic. In these ten years ninety-two cases were tried in the courts of our large seaports, and only seven convictions resulted. Fifteen of this list were cases of murder. Only one of the seven convictions showed a result that looked in any way hopeful for the sailor; First Mate Smith of the ship Benjamin Sewall, who persecuted a sailor until he committed suicide, was sentenced to Fort Townsend, Wash., to a year's imprisonment and to a fine of \$1,000 and costs. Yet

the maximum penalty for this man's crime is five years' imprisonment and an equal fine. Where were the extenuating circumstances which mitigated his offence? He was not convicted of murder; yet, is deliberate murder, punishable by death, worse than the driving of a man to suicide?

In the other eighty-five cases the accused captains and officers were either 'exonerated' or acquitted on the ground of lack of evidence, 'justifiable discipline,' or because 'no official' charge has been made. And yet this horrid list of torture and death contains only recorded cases. How much of unrecorded, uncomplained-of murder and assault has occurred in that ten years?

There are people so constituted mentally that if this bare record of crime were placed before them to read and digest, they could not bring themselves to believe it, because it lacks the 'local color' generally given to accounts of crime in the news papers. To such is recommended Paul Eve Stevenson's book, 'By Way of Cape Horn.' It is a journal written from day to day, on a voyage with his wife during the summer of 1897, around the Horn from New York to San Francisco, is one of the finest American ships afloat. It is written well, and it rivals the Red Record in realism.

On Feb. 20, 1899, a new seamen's law went into effect, which contains a very few good and quite a number of insane and ridiculous provisions—some of the latter contradicting and annulling each other. Allotment of wages is reduced from four payments of \$10 each to one payment of a month's wages. This lessens the amount that the crimp can obtain when a sailor signs from his boarding house, and this provision can only be improved upon by abolishing allotment altogether.

In place of the naval war ration allowed by the former law which was generally superseded by a 'full and plenty' allowance at 'master's option,' which privilege was always inserted and signed to, in the shipping articles, of food, insufficient in quantity and quality, to nourish a small-sized dog, there has been substituted a scale of provisions surprising in its variety and generosity. If properly cooked, this list would run an ordinary boarding house, and it is difficult to conceive how owners will evade this scale. Coffee is prescribed in the 'green berry,' with sugar enough to sweeten it. This eliminates the bootleg decoction heretofore served to sailors. Water is still limited to four quarts a day, which is not enough, in hot weather, of this cheapest of earthly constituents; but in view of the splendid square meals (provided the cook is a cook) now coming to a class of starved and scurvy tainted men, who would take exception to one item? The lawmakers who compiled this list must have done so before dinner, when empty stomachs enlivened their imagination. But they could not have been, and in all probability they were not, very thirsty. Good luck to them! May they never be thirsty!

Men can no longer be imprisoned in an American port for quitting their berths, the penalty is merely loss of clothes and wages due. In foreign ports the imprisonment is lessened from three months to one—a distinct improvement, which can still be improved upon.

All forms of corporal punishment are abolished, which means that it is no longer lawful to punish a man with cat-o-nine tails, fists, belaying pins or capstan bars. But where is the skipper or mate going to sea to day who will concern himself with this restriction, even though another provision of the law makes the captain liable in civil damages for permitting the escape of an officer who anticipates complaint and arrest. They will say, as they have said for generations, 'To hades with the law,' and will go bravely on, confident of official sanction and sympathy, in the pleasant work of man crippling and killing.

Just after the going into force of this law the ships Governor Robie and State of Maine sailed from New York for Hong Kong. Their crews are now filtering back by transport and tramp steamer with tales of bloody horror equal to any in 'The Red Record' or in Paul Eve Stevenson's book. There were scratch screws of landmen; and they fought back; and the stories make humorous reading for the casual reader of the news.

But why did not the Hong Kong Consul who was appealed to enforce the new law? There is not space for the answer.

After this rather pessimistic view of the power of the law, it is only fair to the reader to give what the writer believes to be the only remedy for brutality on board American ships in each seaport, where boys may be trained in the duties of seamen and officers, without becoming brutalized.

By this means, and by no other, may the American ship cease to be a disgrace to a free country and a blot upon civilization.



IT MAY BE FOR YEARS.