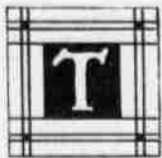
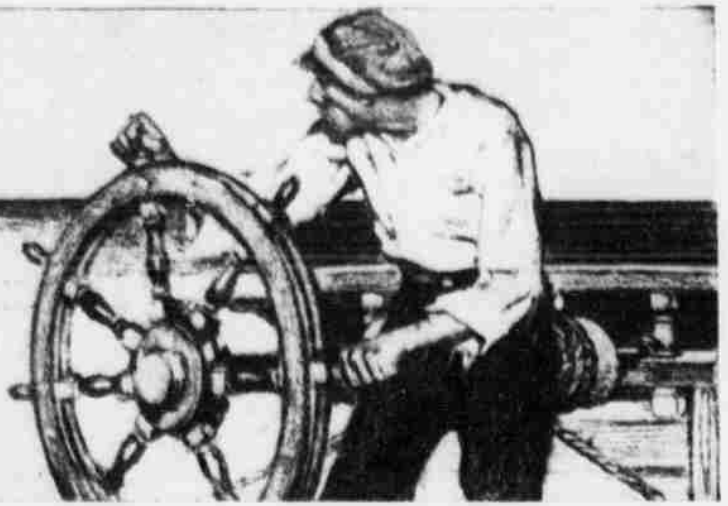


THE WHEEL

By MRS. JACK LONDON

ILLUSTRATIONS By PERCY E. COWEN



THE LEAN YANKEE skipper turned slowly from his scrutiny of the sky to the northeast. A lowering cloud strung along the horizon, its frayed under-edge dripping gray wisps of rain. The skipper mopped his warm pink countenance with an irreproachable linen handkerchief, and paused before the steering-wheel, ornate with stars and shields of tarnished brass. He idly fingered the dull brass nut that held the wheel to the threaded shaft of the steering-gear, and shot a keen look at the under-sized, swart-faced man who held the spokes in his hands.

Only to Shelton, lounging in his deck chair in the lee of the chart-house, did the skipper's movements cause special interest. It was not the first time this day that he had noted a watchful restlessness on the part of the easy-going master.

"A little bath-brick on them brass fixin's would n't do no damage," the latter remarked to no one in particular; but an angry scowl creased the brows of the hard-faced officer leaning against the taffrail.

The skipper sank exhaustedly into his long canvas chair, slowly stretched his arms, clasped his hands behind his head and crossed his white-trousered legs.

"No," he took up the interrupted conversation, heaving a long sigh, while his eyes rested upon an almost stationary puff of smoke from his big cigar; "no, there's no such sailors now-a-days like there use' to be. — Look at that poor little cuss," he broke off, as the transparent wraith of a fox terrier slouched across a sizzling bar of late sunshine and sat down before a mug of tepid water. "He laps the blame stuff all over his front, and then wonders where it come from. Here, Coon!" The sad pup regarded him out of lackluster eyes, and with spiritless mutiny slumped down in the shade of the hot steel chart-house. "Poor ribby little cuss! Between his topsy-turvy insides an' this blame heat, I ain't the heart to make him mind. . . .

" . . . No, as I was sayin', you can't get real sailors these times. An' it's more 'n hard to get good officers. You may believe it or not, but one voyage out I waited weeks, ship all loaded an' ready, for a mate that could navigate. An' I finally went to sea with one that did n't know a sextant from an azimuth-mirror. Lucky my health was good, wa'n't it?" He puffed in silence for a few moments. "Now, take that specimen of an 'able seaman' over there, coilin' down them halyards. He wa'n't aboard three days before he come to me an' showed me the lookin'est old sores I ever seen. An' he's been laid up most of the time sence, an' no use on the ship. That ain't the point, however; it's his general make-up I'm referrin' to — small, weak, full uncapable. It seems 's ef, when you find a fellow with a husky body, he's bound to be rattled in the main-top. You know that Paddy — mighty good-lookin' man if you don't see his face; but he can't think two consecutive thoughts. I had to laugh the other day," the captain warmed to his subject; "the mate said Paddy'd been hangin' round a bucket of green paint for two solid hours, out of his own watch below, too, tryin' to sneak some of it, but he wa'n't able to do it 'thout gettin' seen. The mate kep' an eye on 'im for the fun of it, an' every time he comes near the bucket, Paddy'd be disappearin' round the corner of the fo'e's'le. He must 'a' got discouraged finally, for after two hours he come brisk up to the mate, 's ef the idea'd just struck 'im, an' asked ef he could have a brushful of that ther green paint. 'Why sure,' says the mate — he's a direct-spoken old rascal, you've noticed by this time, I guess — 'Why sure; but why in thunder did n't you ask for it before, instead o' wastin' your watch below tryin' to swipe it?' And the fool just looked sheep-

eyed, and went an' licked up a brushful o' the green paint for Gawd knows what."

He smiled reminiscently, and took a slow pull at his long cigar, the while gazing out over the shimmering, motionless sea. Shelton never tired of listening to this genial yet quiet character, whom years of travel and metropolitan life had failed to rob of certain traces of his quaint Down East speech.

"He's a mean varmint, too, that Irishman," the captain added. "Ef he sees another man tryin' to steal a bucket of fresh water out of the donkey-engine boiler — you know water an' butter 's the only things we keep tab on in any ship of mine — why, he'll blab on 'im right off. I ain't had so much amusement out of anything aboard ship in years as I get out o' that fool Paddy!"

"Oh, well, take 'most any of 'm!" he went on, stretching his long arms above his head. A God-forsaken visage appeared at the head of the poop-ladder. "Look at that picture comin' on to the poop; he ain't heard himself sneeze for thirty years. Looks like somethin' the cat brought in, I declare. Bet he ain't washed sence he come aboard at Philadelphia — which is blame nigh one hundred an' fifty days already. Yep," he reiterated, yawning, "ef anybody should ride up right now on a turtle off them Galapagos, an' ask you, you could tell him truthful we'd ben one hundred and thirty-eight mortal days gettin' to twelve north in the Pacific — and no wind. An' them long passages is expensive 's a glass of water in th' hot regions."

"About how much does it cost to run a ship like this?" Shelton had never before quite liked to ask.

The skipper ran a thin hand over his close-cropped hair.

"Oh, I should say about two hundred a day, includin' six per cent on the principal! 'Tain't so bad for a captain on a salary; but some o' that two hundred comes out of my pocket. Oh . . . well . . ." He yawned again, long and audibly, and left his thought unuttered.

"I'm sorry for you," Shelton said dreamily; "but as for me, I don't care if we don't get into Frisco for a year. I like this sort of thing, you know. It's so . . . so . . . so big, and wide, and round, and restful," he concluded, his eyes sweeping the visible arc of the hot horizon.

"Well, I'm glad somebody's satisfied," the master drawled in his benevolent voice. "I'm free to confess I never yet, in all my years at sea, had a land-passenger that did enjoy a long passage the way you do. Most of 'em try a voyage to get over something or other — I've had more dope-fiends an' alcoholics an' that sort aboard than you could shake a stick at. And whether they get over what ails 'em or not, they're soon most mortal tired of the ship; and the weather, no matter what it's like; and the skipper, too, 's ef he was to blame for their comin'. But you're the real right sort."

Shelton smiled a contented acknowledgment of this tribute to his traveler-virtues, melted a little more deeply into the yielding canvas of his chair, and closed his eyes to the glare. He was a fair-skinned young man, and, despite his liking for traveling in the tropics, he was conscious of the deteriorating effects upon his nervous system.

When his eyes again unclosed, they rested upon the captain dozing moistly, mouth open to miss no available air. The puppy was also asleep, between its master's feet, its tired velvet head lying across one white shoe. The man at the



"What in thunder's happened here!" the furious officer barked

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