




## THE BLUE PETER



For forty years he had lived with his mother in the same house. For forty-five years he had worked in the same branch of the same bank, walking to and fro in morning and evening between house and bank, bank and house. For twenty years, at least, he had followed exactly the same route, crossing the streets at the same point, taking the inside of a curve and leaving it always at the same points, hardly deviating by a yard. He walked very fast in the morning and always arrived at the bank at four minutes past nine. He walked faster still in the evening, and, except at balance time, walked home exactly at five. Everything that he did between half-past eight and five was as purely mechanical as sleeping, or eating or dressing. He never saw anything in the streets he passed through four times a day, and he never noticed anything that happened in his house. His mother's habits never clashed with his own, and her presence was never disturbing, for she changed no more than the clock on the landing outside his room. The clock ticked monotonously, but he never heard it. She talked monotonously, but he never heard her. When she was ill she talked about death, when she was well she talked about her illnesses.

In the evenings he read books about ships and the universities and the lives of learned men. He never read the lives of sailors, but he read every novel of the sea that was ever published in the English language.

He had a fortnight's holiday in the year and then he would take a cheap sea voyage dressed in a pepper-and-salt tail suit—he never had more than one—and a yachting cap, with a telescope under his arm. He never spoke to a soul. The common sailors were beneath notice, and his whole attention was concentrated on criticizing the navigation, which, as a rule, he found contemptible. He had a certain scorn of steamships, though he travelled by them.

Saturday afternoons and Sundays he always spent in his bedroom, which, in its furniture, was scant and bare. Here he was the master of many ships. On the chest of drawers was a brig, full-rigged, all ship-shape, spotless, with all the furniture proper to a brig, every line of her true and trim, all her guns of polished brass lashed under her bulwarks. She was



his treasure. . . . On the mantelpiece were a schooner, a cutter and a yawl. On a cupboard by the window was a steamer that, in a swaggering moment, he had bought for a yacht, but he never believed in steamships and he had turned her to base traffic as a tramp. She never had any luck and was always in dirty weather, and, her profit being small, he had cut down her expenses to the minimum. She was very dirty. Her bow had been stove in in the bath and she was never really seaworthy again. For long enough he had not given her so much as a coat of paint. She would founder some day and that would show that these steamships were a snare and the children of the devil.

Every winter the brig, the schooner, the cutter and the yawl were put in dry dock, and thoroughly overhauled. They needed new masts or new rudders, or anchor chains or deck timbers, always new sails and spars and scientific instruments, or a capstan, port and starboard lights, bowsprit, crosstrees. There was a reason for every repair. Every ship had its log written in a neat, though roughish, hand, and signed: P. Lawrie, Master, or T. Willier, Mate, or F. Dodd or J. Pettigrew. Master's report of repairs needed, tenders received and owner's acceptance were all filed. A great many characters passed in and about the bedroom, all having dealings with the owner of those ships. These characters never passed out of the bedroom. Many of them were very villainous and mutiny was not unknown on the brig or the schooner when they went on long voyages.

They set out in the spring. When the little green buds began to peep on the blackened hawthorns in the back garden, and the sparrows sang, then the brig was made stately in full sail, then blue peter was hoisted that all might know she was about to quit port and take to the high seas, and there was a new entry in the log—"Arethusa," Brig, Liverpool to Pernambuco. . . ." When the brig had set sail, then the schooner began her series of voyages in the North Sea and the Baltic, and the cutter plied between Southampton and Bordeaux and the Spanish Ports, and the yawl joined the coastwise traffic. . . . Heavily insured, the steamer, whose every voyage might be her last, went from port to port in the China seas, and always the most horrible fates attended her. The laconic entries in her log revealed tragedy most bare—cholera, plague, enteric, mutiny, lascar crews frantic with opium, typhoon, fire, water in her bulkheads. There was never any final disaster and by Christmas, brig, schooner, cutter, yawl and steamer were safe in dock waiting for repairs.

One Saturday in winter the ship-master returned from the bank, gulped down his dinner and hurried upstairs to the dock. He was very excited and went to his office—a nest of drawers in the corner of the room—and



took out a map of England, a huge navigator's map on which the land was nothing but names and the sea charted in fullest detail. He studied this for a long time, especially the mouth of the Thames and the Kentish coast, and he took a pin and stuck it through the little circle which was called Deal. Then he hurried downstairs to his mother sitting in the parlour and with the awkward air of one approaching a vital subject he said:

"Mamma, I wish to say something."

"I am not feeling at all well," replied the old woman, fencing off his disturbing excitement.

"But it is most important. To-day, at the bank, the manager talked to me about my retirement next year. I had not realized that it was so near. I shall get my full pension—eighty pounds a year. We could go and live in some quiet place and be very happy. I thought of Deal. It is a very quiet place and all day and all night you can watch the ships going by, coming and going from all parts of the world. I should have a window looking out to sea and I would buy a large telescope. . . . It is near Dover and any day I could cross the Channel and back again; sometimes I could go to Ostend or the Hook, or Hamburg. They say Hamburg is one of the greatest ports in the world. . . ."

"But I don't know anybody in Deal."

"There are hundreds of ships going by every day."

"I don't know anybody in Deal."

"There's a little harbour at Deal and many fishing boats. You would see them putting out to sea, and you would see them return with their holds full of fish, gleaming like bars of silver."

"I don't like fish."

Desperately he said:

"All day long and all night long you would hear the sea, and there would be storms and a wreck or two, and you would see them man the lifeboat. . . ."

He saw that his mother was crying, and his excitement oozed away. Helplessly his hands dropped between his knees and sadly he hung his head.

His mother said in a choking voice:

"I couldn't leave this house. I couldn't bear to sit in a strange room. I couldn't bear to look out of the window and see strange people, and I should miss the houses and the street so much. I never could abide the sea. It is so empty. . . . I couldn't leave this house."

"No. I suppose not. . . . I suppose not."

To avoid speaking again his mother went on weeping, and presently he



stole away. Very slowly he went upstairs to his bedroom. He took the pin out of the circle called Deal, folded up the map and put it away in the nest of drawers. He no longer thought of it as his office.

All the rest of the day and through the night he sat brooding, absolutely still, by the window. In the early morning of Sunday he rose and locked the door. Then for hours he sat still again, brooding.

About one o'clock he bestirred himself and shivered out of his lethargy. He took the yawl and broke it on his knee, the cutter and crushed it with his feet. Then he began dismantling the brig "Arethusa," his treasure. He took down her masts and rigging, stripped her and left her a sheer hulk. With his old log books and office papers and the broken chips of the cutter and the yawl he lit a fire, and when it had come to a great blaze he laid the hulk of the brig "Arethusa" on it and sat watching the paint blister and the wood char, flare, glow and crumble into dust.

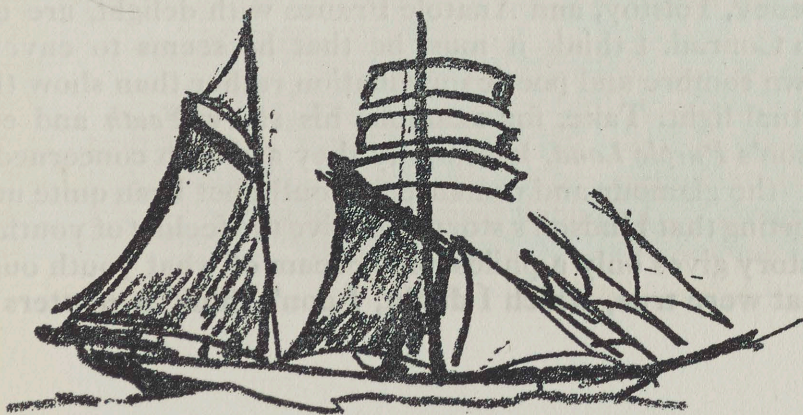
That done he turned to the schooner and crammed into her all the guns of the brig, making cunning devices for their concealment. He victualled her for a very long voyage, and he painted her black.

He was at work on her all Sunday night, paying no heed to the repeated knocking on his door, and by seven o'clock on Monday morning he had her all ship-shape. He hoisted the blue peter that all men might see she was about to leave port for the high seas. Then he opened a new log and in a rough sprawling hand he wrote: "'Sanguinea,' schooner, Bristol to the Spanish Main. No cargo."

At eight o'clock he hauled down the blue peter, as she hove out of sight of land, he hoisted a signal which, being interpreted, is "Damn your eyes."

This he left flying when he hurried downstairs, swallowed his breakfast and walked swiftly away to the bank, crossing the streets at the same point, taking the inside of the curve and leaving it at the same points, hardly deviating by a yard from his accustomed route and entering the door at four minutes past nine.

GILBERT CANNAN.



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