

WELL DONE--1918

I.

It can be safely said that for the last four years the seamen of Great Britain have done well. I mean that every kind and sort of human being classified as seaman, steward, foremast hand, fireman, lamp-trimmer, mate, master, engineer, and also all through the innumerable ratings of the Navy up to that of Admiral, has done well. I don't say marvellously well or miraculously well or wonderfully well or even very well, because these are simply over-statements of undisciplined minds. I don't deny that a man may be a marvellous being, but this is not likely to be discovered in his lifetime, and not always even after he is dead. Man's marvellousness is a hidden thing, because the secrets of his heart are not to be read by his fellows. As to a man's work, if it is done well it is the very utmost that can be said. You can do well, and you can do no more for people to see. In the Navy, where human values are thoroughly understood, the highest signal of commendation complimenting a ship (that is, a ship's company) on some achievements consists exactly of those two simple words "Well done," followed by the name of the ship. Not marvellously done, astonishingly done, wonderfully done--no, only just:

"Well done, so-and-so."

And to the men it is a matter of infinite pride that somebody should judge it proper to mention aloud, as it were, that they have done well. It is a memorable occurrence, for in the sea services you are expected professionally and as a matter of course to do well, because nothing less will do. And in sober speech no man can be expected to do more than well. The superlatives are mere signs of uninformed wonder. Thus the official signal which can express nothing but a delicate share of appreciation becomes a great honour.

Speaking now as a purely civil seaman (or, perhaps, I ought to say civilian, because politeness is not what I have in my mind) I may say that I have never expected the Merchant Service to do otherwise than well during the war. There were people who obviously did not feel the same confidence, nay, who even confidently expected to see the collapse of merchant seamen's courage. I must admit that such pronouncements did arrest my attention. In my time I have never been able to detect any faint hearts in the ships' companies with whom I have served in various capacities. But I reflected that I had left the sea in '94,

twenty years before the outbreak of the war that was to apply its severe test to the quality of modern seamen. Perhaps they had deteriorated, I said unwillingly to myself. I remembered also the alarmist articles I had read about the great number of foreigners in the British Merchant Service, and I didn't know how far these lamentations were justified.

In my time the proportion of non-Britishers in the crews of the ships flying the red ensign was rather under one-third, which, as a matter of fact, was less than the proportion allowed under the very strict French navigation laws for the crews of the ships of that nation. For the strictest laws aiming at the preservation of national seamen had to recognise the difficulties of manning merchant ships all over the world. The one-third of the French law seemed to be the irreducible minimum. But the British proportion was even less. Thus it may be said that up to the date I have mentioned the crews of British merchant ships engaged in deep water voyages to Australia, to the East Indies and round the Horn were essentially British. The small proportion of foreigners which I remember were mostly Scandinavians, and my general impression remains that those men were good stuff. They appeared always able and ready to do their duty by the flag under which they served. The majority were Norwegians, whose courage and straightness of character are matters beyond doubt. I remember also a couple of Finns, both carpenters, of course, and very good craftsmen; a Swede, the most scientific sailmaker I ever met; another Swede, a steward, who really might have been called a British seaman since he had sailed out of London for over thirty years, a rather superior person; one Italian, an everlastingly smiling but a pugnacious character; one Frenchman, a most excellent sailor, tireless and indomitable under very difficult circumstances; one Hollander, whose placid manner of looking at the ship going to pieces under our feet I shall never forget, and one young, colourless, muscularly very strong German, of no particular character. Of non-European crews, lascars and Kalashes, I have had very little experience, and that was only in one steamship and for something less than a year. It was on the same occasion that I had my only sight of Chinese firemen. Sight is the exact word. One didn't speak to them. One saw them going along the decks, to and fro, characteristic figures with rolled-up pigtails, very dirty when coming off duty and very clean-faced when going on duty. They never looked at anybody, and one never had occasion to address them directly. Their appearances in the light of day were very regular, and yet somewhat ghostlike in their detachment and silence.

But of the white crews of British ships and almost exclusively British in blood and descent, the immediate predecessors of the men whose worth the nation has discovered for itself to-day, I have had a thorough experience. At first amongst them, then with them, I have shared all the conditions of their very special life. For it was very special. In my early days, starting out on a voyage was like being

launched into Eternity. I say advisedly Eternity instead of Space, because of the boundless silence which swallowed up one for eighty days--for one hundred days--for even yet more days of an existence without echoes and whispers. Like Eternity itself! For one can't conceive a vocal Eternity. An enormous silence, in which there was nothing to connect one with the Universe but the incessant wheeling about of the sun and other celestial bodies, the alternation of light and shadow, eternally chasing each other over the sky. The time of the earth, though most carefully recorded by the half-hourly bells, did not count in reality.

It was a special life, and the men were a very special kind of men. By this I don't mean to say they were more complex than the generality of mankind. Neither were they very much simpler. I have already admitted that man is a marvellous creature, and no doubt those particular men were marvellous enough in their way. But in their collective capacity they can be best defined as men who lived under the command to do well, or perish utterly. I have written of them with all the truth that was in me, and with an the impartiality of which I was capable. Let me not be misunderstood in this statement. Affection can be very exacting, and can easily miss fairness on the critical side. I have looked upon them with a jealous eye, expecting perhaps even more than it was strictly fair to expect. And no wonder--since I had elected to be one of them very deliberately, very completely, without any looking back or looking elsewhere. The circumstances were such as to give me the feeling of complete identification, a very vivid comprehension that if I wasn't one of them I was nothing at all. But what was most difficult to detect was the nature of the deep impulses which these men obeyed. What spirit was it that inspired the unfailing manifestations of their simple fidelity? No outward cohesive force of compulsion or discipline was holding them together or had ever shaped their unexpressed standards. It was very mysterious. At last I came to the conclusion that it must be something in the nature of the life itself; the sea-life chosen blindly, embraced for the most part accidentally by those men who appeared but a loose agglomeration of individuals toiling for their living away from the eyes of mankind. Who can tell how a tradition comes into the world? We are children of the earth. It may be that the noblest tradition is but the offspring of material conditions, of the hard necessities besetting men's precarious lives. But once it has been born it becomes a spirit. Nothing can extinguish its force then. Clouds of greedy selfishness, the subtle dialectics of revolt or fear, may obscure it for a time, but in very truth it remains an immortal ruler invested with the power of honour and shame.

II.

The mysteriously born tradition of sea-craft commands unity in a body of workers engaged in an occupation in which men have to depend upon each other. It raises them, so to speak, above the frailties of their dead selves. I don't wish to be suspected of lack of judgment and of blind enthusiasm. I don't claim special morality or even special manliness for the men who in my time really lived at sea, and at the present time live at any rate mostly at sea. But in their qualities as well as in their defects, in their weaknesses as well as in their "virtue," there was indubitably something apart. They were never exactly of the earth earthly. They couldn't be that. Chance or desire (mostly desire) had set them apart, often in their very childhood; and what is to be remarked is that from the very nature of things this early appeal, this early desire, had to be of an imaginative kind. Thus their simple minds had a sort of sweetness. They were in a way preserved. I am not alluding here to the preserving qualities of the salt in the sea. The salt of the sea is a very good thing in its way; it preserves for instance one from catching a beastly cold while one remains wet for weeks together in the "roaring forties." But in sober unpoetical truth the sea-salt never gets much further than the seaman's skin, which in certain latitudes it takes the opportunity to encrust very thoroughly. That and nothing more. And then, what is this sea, the subject of so many apostrophes in verse and prose addressed to its greatness and its mystery by men who had never penetrated either the one or the other? The sea is uncertain, arbitrary, featureless, and violent. Except when helped by the varied majesty of the sky, there is something inane in its serenity and something stupid in its wrath, which is endless, boundless, persistent, and futile--a grey, hoary thing raging like an old ogre uncertain of its prey. Its very immensity is wearisome. At any time within the navigating centuries mankind might have addressed it with the words: "What are you, after all? Oh, yes, we know. The greatest scene of potential terror, a devouring enigma of space. Yes. But our lives have been nothing if not a continuous defiance of what you can do and what you may hold; a spiritual and material defiance carried on in our plucky cockleshells on and on beyond the successive provocations of your unreadable horizons."

Ah, but the charm of the sea! Oh, yes, charm enough. Or rather a sort of unholy fascination as of an elusive nymph whose embrace is death, and a Medusa's head whose stare is terror. That sort of charm is calculated to keep men morally in order. But as to sea-salt, with its particular bitterness like nothing else on earth, that, I am safe to say, penetrates no further than the seamen's lips. With them the inner soundness is caused by another kind of preservative of which (nobody will be surprised to hear) the main ingredient is a certain kind of love that has

nothing to do with the futile smiles and the futile passions of the sea.

Being love this feeling is naturally naive and imaginative. It has also in it that strain of fantasy that is so often, nay almost invariably, to be found in the temperament of a true seaman. But I repeat that I claim no particular morality for seamen. I will admit without difficulty that I have found amongst them the usual defects of mankind, characters not quite straight, uncertain tempers, vacillating wills, capriciousness, small meannesses; all this coming out mostly on the contact with the shore; and all rather naive, peculiar, a little fantastic. I have even had a downright thief in my experience. One.

This is indeed a minute proportion, but it might have been my luck; and since I am writing in eulogy of seamen I feel irresistibly tempted to talk about this unique specimen; not indeed to offer him as an example of morality, but to bring out certain characteristics and set out a certain point of view. He was a large, strong man with a guileless countenance, not very communicative with his shipmates, but when drawn into any sort of conversation displaying a very painstaking earnestness. He was fair and candid-eyed, of a very satisfactory smartness, and, from the officer- of-the-watch point of view,--altogether dependable. Then, suddenly, he went and stole. And he didn't go away from his honourable kind to do that thing to somebody on shore; he stole right there on the spot, in proximity to his shipmates, on board his own ship, with complete disregard for old Brown, our night watchman (whose fame for trustworthiness was utterly blasted for the rest of the voyage) and in such a way as to bring the profoundest possible trouble to all the blameless souls animating that ship. He stole eleven golden sovereigns, and a gold pocket chronometer and chain. I am really in doubt whether the crime should not be entered under the category of sacrilege rather than theft. Those things belonged to the captain! There was certainly something in the nature of the violation of a sanctuary, and of a particularly impudent kind, too, because he got his plunder out of the captain's state-room while the captain was asleep there. But look, now, at the fantasy of the man! After going through the pockets of the clothes, he did not hasten to retreat. No. He went deliberately into the saloon and removed from the sideboard two big heavy, silver-plated lamps, which he carried to the fore-end of the ship and stood symmetrically on the knight-heads. This, I must explain, means that he took them away as far as possible from the place where they belonged. These were the deeds of darkness. In the morning the bo'sun came along dragging after him a hose to wash the foc'sle head, and, beholding the shiny cabin lamps, resplendent in the morning light, one on each side of the bowsprit, he was paralysed with awe. He dropped the nozzle from his nerveless hands--and such hands, too! I happened along, and he said to me in a distracted whisper: "Look at that, sir, look." "Take them back aft at once yourself," I said, very amazed, too. As we approached the quarterdeck we perceived the steward, a

prey to a sort of sacred horror, holding up before us the captain's trousers.

Bronzed men with brooms and buckets in their hands stood about with open mouths. "I have found them lying in the passage outside the captain's door," the steward declared faintly. The additional statement that the captain's watch was gone from its hook by the bedside raised the painful sensation to the highest pitch. We knew then we had a thief amongst us. Our thief! Behold the solidarity of a ship's company. He couldn't be to us like any other thief. We all had to live under the shadow of his crime for days; but the police kept on investigating, and one morning a young woman appeared on board swinging a parasol, attended by two policemen, and identified the culprit. She was a barmaid of some bar near the Circular Quay, and knew really nothing of our man except that he looked like a respectable sailor. She had seen him only twice in her life. On the second occasion he begged her nicely as a great favour to take care for him of a small solidly tied-up paper parcel for a day or two. But he never came near her again. At the end of three weeks she opened it, and, of course, seeing the contents, was much alarmed, and went to the nearest police-station for advice. The police took her at once on board our ship, where all hands were mustered on the quarterdeck. She stared wildly at all our faces, pointed suddenly a finger with a shriek, "That's the man," and incontinently went off into a fit of hysterics in front of thirty-six seamen. I must say that never in my life did I see a ship's company look so frightened. Yes, in this tale of guilt, there was a curious absence of mere criminality, and a touch of that fantasy which is often a part of a seaman's character. It wasn't greed that moved him, I think. It was something much less simple: boredom, perhaps, or a bet, or the pleasure of defiance.

And now for the point of view. It was given to me by a short, black-bearded A.B. of the crew, who on sea passages washed my flannel shirts, mended my clothes and, generally, looked after my room. He was an excellent needleman and washerman, and a very good sailor. Standing in this peculiar relation to me, he considered himself privileged to open his mind on the matter one evening when he brought back to my cabin three clean and neatly folded shirts. He was profoundly pained. He said: "What a ship's company! Never seen such a crowd! Liars, cheats, thieves. . . "

It was a needlessly jaundiced view. There were in that ship's company three or four fellows who dealt in tall yarns, and I knew that on the passage out there had been a dispute over a game in the foc'sle once or twice of a rather acute kind, so that all card-playing had to be abandoned. In regard to thieves, as we know, there was only one, and he, I am convinced, came out of his reserve to perform an exploit rather than to commit a crime. But my black-bearded friend's indignation had its special morality, for he added, with a burst of passion: "And on board our ship, too--a ship like this. . . "

Therein lies the secret of the seamen's special character as a body. The ship, this ship, our ship, the ship we serve, is the moral symbol of our life. A ship has to be respected, actually and ideally; her merit, her innocence, are sacred things. Of all the creations of man she is the closest partner of his toil and courage. From every point of view it is imperative that you should do well by her. And, as always in the case of true love, all you can do for her adds only to the tale of her merits in your heart. Mute and compelling, she claims not only your fidelity, but your respect. And the supreme "Well done!" which you may earn is made over to her.

III.

It is my deep conviction, or, perhaps, I ought to say my deep feeling born from personal experience, that it is not the sea but the ships of the sea that guide and command that spirit of adventure which some say is the second nature of British men. I don't want to provoke a controversy (for intellectually I am rather a Quietist) but I venture to affirm that the main characteristic of the British men spread all over the world, is not the spirit of adventure so much as the spirit of service. I think that this could be demonstrated from the history of great voyages and the general activity of the race. That the British man has always liked his service to be adventurous rather than otherwise cannot be denied, for each British man began by being young in his time when all risk has a glamour. Afterwards, with the course of years, risk became a part of his daily work; he would have missed it from his side as one misses a loved companion.

The mere love of adventure is no saving grace. It is no grace at all. It lays a man under no obligation of faithfulness to an idea and even to his own self. Roughly speaking, an adventurer may be expected to have courage, or at any rate may be said to need it. But courage in itself is not an ideal. A successful highwayman showed courage of a sort, and pirate crews have been known to fight with courage or perhaps only with reckless desperation in the manner of cornered rats. There is nothing in the world to prevent a mere lover or pursuer of adventure from running at any moment. There is his own self, his mere taste for excitement, the prospect of some sort of gain, but there is no sort of loyalty to bind him in honour to consistent conduct. I have noticed that the majority of mere lovers of adventure are mightily careful of their skins; and the proof of it is that so many of them manage to keep it whole to an advanced age. You find them in mysterious nooks of islands and continents, mostly red-nosed and watery-eyed, and not even amusingly boastful. There is nothing more futile under the sun than a mere adventurer. He might have loved at one time--which would have been a saving grace. I mean loved adventure for itself. But if so, he was bound to lose this grace very soon. Adventure by itself is but a phantom, a dubious shape without a heart. Yes, there is nothing more futile than an adventurer; but nobody can say that the adventurous activities of the British race are stamped with the futility of a chase after mere emotions.

The successive generations that went out to sea from these Isles went out to toil desperately in adventurous conditions. A man is a worker. If he is not that he is nothing. Just nothing--like a mere adventurer. Those men understood the nature of their work, but more or less dimly, in various degrees of imperfection. The best and greatest of their leaders even had never seen it clearly, because of

its magnitude and the remoteness of its end. This is the common fate of mankind, whose most positive achievements are born from dreams and visions followed loyally to an unknown destination. And it doesn't matter. For the great mass of mankind the only saving grace that is needed is steady fidelity to what is nearest to hand and heart in the short moment of each human effort. In other and in greater words, what is needed is a sense of immediate duty, and a feeling of impalpable constraint. Indeed, seamen and duty are all the time inseparable companions. It has been suggested to me that this sense of duty is not a patriotic sense or a religious sense, or even a social sense in a seaman. I don't know. It seems to me that a seaman's duty may be an unconscious compound of these three, something perhaps smaller than either, but something much more definite for the simple mind and more adapted to the humbleness of the seaman's task. It has been suggested also to me that the impalpable constraint is put upon the nature of a seaman by the Spirit of the Sea, which he serves with a dumb and dogged devotion.

Those are fine words conveying a fine idea. But this I do know, that it is very difficult to display a dogged devotion to a mere spirit, however great. In everyday life ordinary men require something much more material, effective, definite and symbolic on which to concentrate their love and their devotion. And then, what is it, this Spirit of the Sea? It is too great and too elusive to be embraced and taken to a human breast. All that a guileless or guileful seaman knows of it is its hostility, its exaction of toil as endless as its ever-renewed horizons. No. What awakens the seaman's sense of duty, what lays that impalpable constraint upon the strength of his manliness, what commands his not always dumb if always dogged devotion, is not the spirit of the sea but something that in his eyes has a body, a character, a fascination, and almost a soul--it is his ship.

There is not a day that has passed for many centuries now without the sun seeing scattered over all the seas groups of British men whose material and moral existence is conditioned by their loyalty to each other and their faithful devotion to a ship.

Each age has sent its contingent, not of sons (for the great mass of seamen have always been a childless lot) but of loyal and obscure successors taking up the modest but spiritual inheritance of a hard life and simple duties; of duties so simple that nothing ever could shake the traditional attitude born from the physical conditions of the service. It was always the ship, bound on any possible errand in the service of the nation, that has been the stage for the exercise of seamen's primitive virtues. The dimness of great distances and the obscurity of lives protected them from the nation's admiring gaze. Those scattered distant ships' companies seemed to the eyes of the earth only one degree removed (on the right side, I suppose) from the other strange monsters of the deep. If spoken of at

all they were spoken of in tones of half-contemptuous indulgence. A good many years ago it was my lot to write about one of those ships' companies on a certain sea, under certain circumstances, in a book of no particular length.

That small group of men whom I tried to limn with loving care, but sparing none of their weaknesses, was characterised by a friendly reviewer as a lot of engaging ruffians. This gave me some food for thought. Was it, then, in that guise that they appeared through the mists of the sea, distant, perplexed, and simple-minded? And what on earth is an "engaging ruffian"? He must be a creature of literary imagination, I thought, for the two words don't match in my personal experience. It has happened to me to meet a few ruffians here and there, but I never found one of them "engaging." I consoled myself, however, by the reflection that the friendly reviewer must have been talking like a parrot, which so often seems to understand what it says.

Yes, in the mists of the sea, and in their remoteness from the rest of the race, the shapes of those men appeared distorted, uncouth and faint--so faint as to be almost invisible. It needed the lurid light of the engines of war to bring them out into full view, very simple, without worldly graces, organised now into a body of workers by the genius of one of themselves, who gave them a place and a voice in the social scheme; but in the main still apart in their homeless, childless generations, scattered in loyal groups over all the seas, giving faithful care to their ships and serving the nation, which, since they are seamen, can give them no reward but the supreme "Well Done."