

A FRIENDLY PLACE

Eighteen years have passed since I last set foot in the London Sailors' Home. I was not staying there then; I had gone in to try to find a man I wanted to see. He was one of those able seamen who, in a watch, are a perfect blessing to a young officer. I could perhaps remember here and there among the shadows of my sea-life a more daring man, or a more agile man, or a man more expert in some special branch of his calling--such as wire splicing, for instance; but for all-round competence, he was unequalled. As character he was sterling stuff. His name was Anderson. He had a fine, quiet face, kindly eyes, and a voice which matched that something attractive in the whole man. Though he looked yet in the prime of life, shoulders, chest, limbs untouched by decay, and though his hair and moustache were only iron-grey, he was on board ship generally called Old Andy by his fellows. He accepted the name with some complacency.

I made my enquiry at the highly-glazed entry office. The clerk on duty opened an enormous ledger, and after running his finger down a page, informed me that Anderson had gone to sea a week before, in a ship bound round the Horn. Then, smiling at me, he added: "Old Andy. We know him well, here. What a nice fellow!"

I, who knew what a "good man," in a sailor sense, he was, assented without reserve. Heaven only knows when, if ever, he came back from that voyage, to the Sailors' Home of which he was a faithful client.

I went out glad to know he was safely at sea, but sorry not to have seen him; though, indeed, if I had, we would not have exchanged more than a score of words, perhaps. He was not a talkative man, Old Andy, whose affectionate ship-name clung to him even in that Sailors' Home, where the staff understood and liked the sailors (those men without a home) and did its duty by them with an unobtrusive tact, with a patient and humorous sense of their idiosyncrasies, to which I hasten to testify now, when the very existence of that institution is menaced after so many years of most useful work.

Walking away from it on that day eighteen years ago, I was far from thinking it was for the last time. Great changes have come since, over land and sea; and if I were to seek somebody who knew Old Andy it would be (of all people in the world) Mr. John Galsworthy. For Mr. John Galsworthy, Andy, and myself have been shipmates together in our different stations, for some forty days in the Indian Ocean in the early nineties. And, but for us two, Old Andy's very memory would be gone from this changing earth.

Yes, things have changed--the very sky, the atmosphere, the light of judgment which falls on the labours of men, either splendid or obscure. Having been asked to say a word to the public on behalf of the Sailors' Home, I felt immensely flattered--and troubled. Flattered to have been thought of in that connection; troubled to find myself in touch again with that past so deeply rooted in my heart. And the illusion of nearness is so great while I trace these lines that I feel as if I were speaking in the name of that worthy Sailor-Shade of Old Andy, whose faithfully hard life seems to my vision a thing of yesterday.

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But though the past keeps firm hold on one, yet one feels with the same warmth that the men and the institutions of to-day have their merit and their claims. Others will know how to set forth before the public the merit of the Sailors' Home in the eloquent terms of hard facts and some few figures. For myself, I can only bring a personal note, give a glimpse of the human side of the good work for sailors ashore, carried on through so many decades with a perfect understanding of the end in view. I have been in touch with the Sailors' Home for sixteen years of my life, off and on; I have seen the changes in the staff and I have observed the subtle alterations in the physiognomy of that stream of sailors passing through it, in from the sea and out again to sea, between the years 1878 and 1894. I have listened to the talk on the decks of ships in all latitudes, when its name would turn up frequently, and if I had to characterise its good work in one sentence, I would say that, for seamen, the Well Street Home was a friendly place.

It was essentially just that; quietly, unobtrusively, with a regard for the independence of the men who sought its shelter ashore, and with no ulterior aims behind that effective friendliness. No small merit this. And its claim on the generosity of the public is derived from a long record of valuable public service. Since we are all agreed that the men of the merchant service are a national asset worthy of care and sympathy, the public could express this sympathy no better than by enabling the Sailors' Home, so useful in the past, to continue its friendly offices to the seamen of future generations.