

Aboard the Galley

He was cruising in the Southern Seas (was the Ulysses who told me this tale), when there bore down upon him a marvellous strange fleet, whose like he had not before seen. For each little craft was a corpse, stiffly "marlined," or bound about with tarred rope, as mariners do use to treat plug tobacco: also ballasted, and with a fair mast and sail stepped through his midriff. These self-sufficing ships knew no divided authority: no pilot ever took the helm from the captain's hands; no mutines lay in bilboes, no passengers complained of the provisions. In a certain island to windward (the native pilot explained) it was the practice, when a man died, to bury him for the time being in dry, desiccating sand, till a chief should pass from his people, when the waiting bodies were brought out and, caulked and rigged *secundum artem*, were launched with the first fair breeze, the admiral at their head, on their voyage to the Blessed Islands. And if a chief should die, and the sand should hold no store of corpses for his escort, this simple practical folk would solve the little difficulty by knocking some dozen or twenty stout fellows on the head, that the notable might voyage like a gentleman. Whence this gallant little company, running before the breeze, stark, happy, and extinct, all bound for the Isles of Light! 'Twas a sight to shame us sitters at home, who believe in those Islands, most of us, even as they, yet are content to trundle City-wards or to Margate, so long as the sorry breath is in us; and, breathless at last, to Bow or Kensal Green; without one effort, dead or alive, to reach the far-shining

Hesperides.

“Dans la galère, capitane, nous étions quatre-vingt rameurs!” sang the oarsmen in the ballad; and they, though indeed they toiled on the galley-bench, were free and happy pirates, members of an honoured and liberal profession. But all we -- pirates, parsons, stockbrokers, whatever our calling -- are but galley-slaves of the basest sort, fettered to the oar each for his little spell. A common misery links us all, like the chain that runs the length of the thwarts. Can nothing make it worth our while not to quarrel with our fellows? The menace of the storms is for each one and for all: the master's whip has a fine impartiality. Crack! the lash that scored my comrade's back has flicked my withers too; yet neither of us was shirking -- it was that grinning ruffian in front. Well: to-morrow, God willing, the evasion shall be ours, while he writhes howling. But why do we never once combine -- seize on the ship, fling our masters into the sea, and steer for some pleasant isle far down under the Line, beyond the still-vexed Bermoothes? When ho for feasting! Hey for tobacco and free-quarters! But no: the days pass, and are reckoned up, and done with; and ever more pressing cares engage. Those fellows on the leeward benches are having an easier time than we poor dogs on the weather side? Then, let us abuse, pelt, vilify then: let us steal their grub, and have at them generally for a set of shirking, malingering brutes! What matter that to-morrow they may be to windward, we to lee? We never can look ahead. And they know this well, the gods our masters, pliers of the whip. And mayhap we like them none

the worse for it.

Indeed, there is a traitor sort among ourselves, that spins facile phrases in the honour of these whipmasters of ours -- as "omnes eodem cogimur," and the rest; which is all very pretty and mighty consoling. The fact is, the poets are the only people who score by the present arrangement; which it is therefore their interest to maintain. While we are doing all the work, these incorrigible skulkers lounge about and make ribald remarks; they write Greek tragedies on Fate, on the sublimity of Suffering, on the Petty Span, and so on; and act in a generally offensive way. And we are even weak enough to buy their books; offer them drinks, peerages, and things; and say what superlative fellows they are! But when the long-looked-for combination comes, and we poor devils have risen and abolished fate, destiny, the Olympian Council, early baldness, and the like, these poets will really have to go.

And when every rhymester has walked the plank, shall we still put up with our relations? True members of the "stupid party," who never believe in us, who know (and never forget) the follies of our adolescence; who are always wanting us not to do things; who are lavish of advice, yet angered by the faintest suggestion of a small advance in cash: shall the idle singers perish and these endure? No: as soon as the last poet has splashed over the side, to the sharks with our relations!

The old barkey is lightening famously: who shall be next to go? The Sportsman of intolerable yarns: who slays twice over -- first, his game, and then the miserable being he button-holes for the tedious recital. Shall we suffer him longer? Who else? Who is that cowering under the bulwarks yonder? The man who thinks he can imitate the Scottish accent! Splash! And the next one? What a crowd is here! How they block the hatchways, lumber the deck, and get between you and the purser's room -- these fadmongers, teetotallers, missionaries of divers isms! Overboard with them, and hey for the Fortunate Isles! Then for tobacco in a hammock 'twixt the palms! Then for wine cooled in a brooklet losing itself in silver sands! Then for -- but O these bilboes on our ankles, how mercilessly they grip! The vertical sun blisters the bare back: faint echoes of Olympian laughter seem to flicker like Northern Lights across the stark and pitiless sky. One earnest effort would do it, my brothers! A little modesty, a short sinking of private differences; and then we should all be free and equal gentlemen of fortune, and I would be your Captain! ``Who? you? you would make a pretty Captain!" Better than you, you scurvy, skulking, little galley-slave! ``Galley-slave yourself, and be --- Pull together, boys, and lie low! Here's the Master coming with his whip!"