CHAPTER XVII

North we raced from the Bonin Islands to pick up the seal-herd, and north we hunted it for a hundred days into frosty, mitten weather and into and through vast fogs which hid the sun from us for a week at a time. It was wild and heavy work, without a drink or thought of drink. Then we sailed south to Yokohama, with a big catch of skins in our salt and a heavy pay-day coming.

I was eager to be ashore and see Japan, but the first day was devoted to ship's work, and not until evening did we sailors land. And here, by the very system of things, by the way life was organised and men transacted affairs, John Barleycorn reached out and tucked my arm in his. The captain had given money for us to the hunters, and the hunters were waiting in a certain Japanese public house for us to come and get it. We rode to the place in rickshaws. Our own crowd had taken possession of it. Drink was flowing. Everybody had money, and everybody was treating. After the hundred days of hard toil and absolute abstinence, in the pink of physical condition, bulging with health, over-spilling with spirits that had long been pent by discipline and circumstance, of course we would have a drink or two. And after that we would see the town.

It was the old story. There were so many drinks to be drunk, and as the warm magic poured through our veins and mellowed our voices and affections we knew it was no time to make invidious distinctions--to

drink with this shipmate and to decline to drink with that shipmate. We were all shipmates who had been through stress and storm together, who had pulled and hauled on the same sheets and tackles, relieved one another's wheels, laid out side by side on the same jib-boom when she was plunging into it and looked to see who was missing when she cleared and lifted. So we drank with all, and all treated, and our voices rose, and we remembered a myriad kindly acts of comradeship, and forgot our fights and wordy squabbles, and knew one another for the best fellows in the world.

Well, the night was young when we arrived in that public house, and for all of that first night that public house was what I saw of Japan--a drinking-place which was very like a drinking-place at home or anywhere else over the world.

We lay in Yokohama harbour for two weeks, and about all we saw of Japan was its drinking-places where sailors congregated. Occasionally, some one of us varied the monotony with a more exciting drunk. In such fashion I managed a real exploit by swimming off to the schooner one dark midnight and going soundly to sleep while the water-police searched the harbour for my body and brought my clothes out for identification.

Perhaps it was for things like that, I imagined, that men got drunk. In our little round of living what I had done was a noteworthy event. All the harbour talked about it. I enjoyed several days of fame among the Japanese boatmen and ashore in the pubs. It was a red-letter event. It

was an event to be remembered and narrated with pride. I remember it to-day, twenty years afterward, with a secret glow of pride. It was a purple passage, just as Victor's wrecking of the tea-house in the Bonin Islands and my being looted by the runaway apprentices were purple passages.

The point is that the charm of John Barleycorn was still a mystery to me. I was so organically a non-alcoholic that alcohol itself made no appeal; the chemical reactions it produced in me were not satisfying because I possessed no need for such chemical satisfaction. I drank because the men I was with drank, and because my nature was such that I could not permit myself to be less of a man than other men at their favourite pastime. And I still had a sweet tooth, and on privy occasions when there was no man to see, bought candy and blissfully devoured it.

We hove up anchor to a jolly chanty, and sailed out of Yokohama harbour for San Francisco. We took the northern passage, and with the stout west wind at our back made the run across the Pacific in thirty-seven days of brave sailing. We still had a big pay-day coming to us, and for thirty-seven days, without a drink to addle our mental processes, we incessantly planned the spending of our money.

The first statement of each man--ever an ancient one in homeward-bound forecastles--was: "No boarding-house sharks in mine." Next, in parentheses, was regret at having spent so much money in Yokohama. And after that, each man proceeded to paint his favourite phantom. Victor,

for instance, said that immediately he landed in San Francisco he would pass right through the water-front and the Barbary Coast, and put an advertisement in the papers. His advertisement would be for board and room in some simple working-class family. "Then," said Victor, "I shall go to some dancing-school for a week or two, just to meet and get acquainted with the girls and fellows. Then I'll get the run of the different dancing crowds, and be invited to their homes, and to parties, and all that, and with the money I've got I can last out till next January, when I'll go sealing again."

No; he wasn't going to drink. He knew the way of it, particularly his way of it, wine in, wit out, and his money would be gone in no time. He had his choice, based on bitter experience, between three days' debauch among the sharks and harpies of the Barbary Coast and a whole winter of wholesome enjoyment and sociability, and there wasn't any doubt of the way he was going to choose.

Said Axel Gunderson, who didn't care for dancing and social functions: "I've got a good pay-day. Now I can go home. It is fifteen years since I've seen my mother and all the family. When I pay off, I shall send my money home to wait for me. Then I'll pick a good ship bound for Europe, and arrive there with another pay-day. Put them together, and I'll have more money than ever in my life before. I'll be a prince at home. You haven't any idea how cheap everything is in Norway. I can make presents to everybody, and spend my money like what would seem to them a millionaire, and live a whole year there before I'd have to go back to

sea."

"The very thing I'm going to do," declared Red John. "It's three years since I've received a line from home and ten years since I was there. Things are just as cheap in Sweden, Axel, as in Norway, and my folks are real country folk and farmers. I'll send my pay-day home and ship on the same ship with you for around the Horn. We'll pick a good one."

And as Axel Gunderson and Red John painted the pastoral delights and festive customs of their respective countries, each fell in love with the other's home place, and they solemnly pledged to make the journey together, and to spend, together, six months in the one's Swedish home and six months in the other's Norwegian home. And for the rest of the voyage they could hardly be pried apart, so infatuated did they become with discussing their plans.

Long John was not a home-body. But he was tired of the forecastle. No boarding-house sharks in his. He, too, would get a room in a quiet family, and he would go to a navigation school and study to be a captain. And so it went. Each man swore that for once he would be sensible and not squander his money. No boarding-house sharks, no sailor-town, no drink, was the slogan of our forecastle.

The men became stingy. Never was there such economy. They refused to buy anything more from the slopchest. Old rags had to last, and they sewed patch upon patch, turning out what are called "homeward-bound

patches" of the most amazing proportions. They saved on matches, even, waiting till two or three were ready to light their pipes from the same match.

As we sailed up the San Francisco water-front, the moment the port doctors passed us, the boarding-house runners were alongside in whitehall boats. They swarmed on board, each drumming for his own boarding-house, and each with a bottle of free whisky inside his shirt. But we waved them grandly and blasphemously away. We wanted none of their boarding-houses and none of their whisky. We were sober, thrifty sailormen, with better use for our money.

Came the paying off before the shipping commissioner. We emerged upon the sidewalk, each with a pocketful of money. About us, like buzzards, clustered the sharks and harpies. And we looked at each other. We had been seven months together, and our paths were separating. One last farewell rite of comradeship remained. (Oh, it was the way, the custom.) "Come on, boys," said our sailing master. There stood the inevitable adjacent saloon. There were a dozen saloons all around. And when we had followed the sailing master into the one of his choice, the sharks were thick on the sidewalk outside. Some of them even ventured inside, but we would have nothing to do with them.

There we stood at the long bar--the sailing master, the mate, the six hunters, the six boat-steerers, and the five boat-pullers. There were only five of the last, for one of our number had been dropped overboard,

with a sack of coal at his feet, between two snow squalls in a driving gale off Cape Jerimo. There were nineteen of us and it was to be our last drink together. With seven months of men's work in the world, blow high, blow low, behind us, we were looking on each other for the last time. We knew it, for sailors' ways go wide. And the nineteen of us drank the sailing master's treat. Then the mate looked at us with eloquent eyes and called another round. We liked the mate just as well as the sailing master, and we liked them both. Could we drink with one, and not the other?

And Pete Holt, my own hunter (lost next year in the Mary Thomas, with all hands), called a round. The time passed, the drinks continued to come on the bar, our voices rose, and the maggots began to crawl. There were six hunters, and each insisted, in the sacred name of comradeship, that all hands drink with him just once. There were six boat-steerers and five boat-pullers and the same logic held with them. There was money in all our pockets, and our money was as good as any man's, and our hearts were as free and generous.

Nineteen rounds of drinks. What more would John Barleycorn ask in order to have his will with men? They were ripe to forget their dearly cherished plans. They rolled out of the saloon and into the arms of the sharks and harpies. They didn't last long. From two days to a week saw the end of their money and saw them being carted by the boarding-house masters on board outward-bound ships. Victor was a fine body of a man, and through a lucky friendship managed to get into the life-saving

service. He never saw the dancing-school nor placed his advertisement for a room in a working-class family. Nor did Long John win to navigation school. By the end of the week he was a transient lumper on a river steamboat. Red John and Axel did not send their pay-days home to the old country. Instead, and along with the rest, they were scattered on board sailing ships bound for the four quarters of the globe, where they had been placed by the boarding-house masters, and where they were working out advance money which they had neither seen nor spent.

What saved me was that I had a home and people to go to. I crossed the bay to Oakland, and, among other things, took a look at the death-road. Nelson was gone--shot to death while drunk and resisting the officers. His partner in that affair was lying in prison. Whisky Bob was gone. Old Cole, Old Smoudge, and Bob Smith were gone. Another Smith, he of the belted guns and the Annie, was drowned. French Frank, they said, was lurking up river, afraid to come down because of something he had done. Others were wearing the stripes in San Quentin or Folsom. Big Alec, the King of the Greeks, whom I had known well in the old Benicia days, and with whom I had drunk whole nights through, had killed two men and fled to foreign parts. Fitzsimmons, with whom I had sailed on the Fish Patrol, had been stabbed in the lung through the back and had died a lingering death complicated with tuberculosis. And so it went, a very lively and well-patronised road, and, from what I knew of all of them, John Barleycorn was responsible, with the sole exception of Smith of the Annie.