



Christmas Day at Sea.

(Written for Farm and Home by Clark Russell, author of *Wreck of the Grosvenor*, *The Death Ship*, *A Frozen Pirate*, etc.)

Could any man standing shadowless under the sun on December 25, no matter in what part of the earth, be able to realize that it is Christmas day? Could any sailor, who had used the sea for 40 years, of which he had spent 35 Christmas days upon the ocean, gather into his understanding the shore-going significance of December 25 as Christmas day? On what should he base his memories and expectations? On a handful of currants for his dark and greasy duff? There is no element of festivity in the harness cask. The beef is as hard and bitter on Christmas day as it was on Good Friday. Still does the weevil, even on Christmas day, writhe in its sepulcher of biscuit. It is true that in some of the mail lines a sort of plum duff is served out to the sailors, and the freezing compartment may supply the captain with an excuse for giving the men, on Christmas day, something more than "Harriet Lane."

What is "Harriet Lane?" asks the land-lubber. A woman of this name was murdered in Liverpool, and the sailors, to this hour, hold that her remains are still served out to them in the shape of canned meat. But when we talk of the sailor we must think of the merchant steam tramp. The second mate of a tramp of 1500 tons told me the other evening that he had crossed the Atlantic in mid-winter in quiet, almost warm weather throughout the passage, though it had blown with hurricane force before the ship started, and blew with hurricane force very shortly after her arrival. I said to him:

"No difference was made in my time in the Christmas fare of the fore-castle, unless it might have been a cupful of raisins for the crew's pudding. How do you fare now on Christmas day?" "Not so well as you did," he answered, "because rum was served out to you, and that is denied to us."

"You got no extra rations, then?" "No, nor extra time below. I relieved the bridge at eight bells in the forenoon watch. It was Christmas day. I sat down, put on my palm, and began to stitch at a weather cloth. Four Dakos and two Finns formed our crew. Three in a watch! It was mild weather for that time of year, and a Finn was at the wheel, and two Dakos were painting the bulwarks. When I had done with my weather cloth I left the bridge, took a pot and paint brush and painted the bulwarks along with the Dakos."

"Who looked after the ship?" said I. "She looked after herself," he answered. "Hard work, I suppose, all day long." said I, "and nothing better for the men to eat on Christmas day than the regular fok'sle fare?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Those buddy foreigners are shipped for ill treatment," said the second mate. "You can boot 'em, and make 'em run and leave their wares behind 'em. If Christmas day I kept for the English sailor, why should it be kept for the foreigners who fill our ships? Hard work!" he continued. "See here," said he. "Those men were kept hard at work all Christmas day, and when the evening came, a Dako who had been toiling night hours took his trick at the wheel. I had charge of the ship. The skipper lay dozed in his cabin. I set my course by a star, and we were then going about nine knots. That is to say, my course being, call it E by N, one-half N. I fixed a star close against the pole-mast to save myself the trouble of constantly looking into the compass. Suddenly I saw that star sliding away on the weather beam. I sprang to the wheel, and found the man standing upright, round asleep, grasping the spokes. I kicked him into life and yelled with

all my lungs: 'Hard aport!' The beggar tried to put the helm hard a-star-board. He didn't understand English, especially the language of the wheel, so with another kick I drove him clear of the spokes and brought the ship to her course."

"A festive Christmas," said I. "You will get no Christmas where the ship owner is," he answered.

Now, this is true, though not of the great mail lines, and I defy any ship owner to contradict the statement. Of all the myths ever begotten by ignorance, in active conjunction with salt water, the most ridiculous myth is the myth of Christmas day at sea. Upon what is it based? I have some knowledge of sea life and sea literature, and protest I do not understand why people ashore should think that Christmas day is kept by the sailors at sea on board the cargo ship, whether steam or sail. Though the ocean teems with tradition, I find no tradition of Christmas day in its abounding annals. Lieutenant Bassett of the United States navy compiled in 1885 an interesting volume about the legends and superstitions of sailors, and though he looked very deep into letters, ancient and modern, he could find no more to say about Christmas day at sea than this: "No fishing is done in Sweden on Christmas, but the nets are set that night for luck." And this: "A ship with sails set is still carried in Christmas processions in Siberia, with the figure of a saint seated on it." This is all that Lieutenant Bassett can find to say about Christmas in a book of 505 pages.

In the first voyage I made my Christmas happened in the kingdom of Christmas—at least in the southern realms of the white-haired old monarch. We were hove-to off the Horn, and our latitude was 55 deg south. The longitude does not make much difference when the South Shetlands are not far off. We had ice ahead, and ice abeam, and ice astern. Ice as big as St Paul's, ice like huge tombstones, ice like the Turkish mosque, like the spire under which we worship, like the Lion's Rump at Table Bay. We were hove-to under a close-reefed main-top-sail, and fore-topmast staysail, and the ship soared and sank, and King Christmas roared with laughter in her shrouds, and we had plenty of daylight to see the rushing snow in, to feel the barbs of the ice-lance in, to watch the majestic altitude of the Pacific surge in. The galley fire was washed out. The cook could do no business, and lay drunk and harmless in bed on a pint and a half of rum which he had stolen from heaven knows what or where. What did I get for my Christmas dinner? We had been hove-to for three days, and all this time the galley fire had been washed out, and we had eaten up every vestige of cold remains. My Christmas dinner, then, was a ship's biscuit, honeycombed with worms, on which I pasted some salt butter, and this butter I sweetened with foot-sugar. There was no cold tea even, nothing but cold water, the stinking water of the scuttle-butt. My people at home, no doubt, eating roast beef and plum pudding, drank to the safe return of the absent little midshipman, and the dear old mother would, of course, believe that, like herself, he was faring very well indeed on this same Christmas.

Of course it was supposed to be midsummer with us off the Horn. Ask the sailor what he thinks of midsummer in latitude 55 deg south, or if he is a steamboat man and cannot answer, let the reader follow Commodore Wilkes's narrative and turn the pages of Churchill—Hakluyt probably being a little too venerable and untrustworthy when it comes to wonders, such as rainbows and ice mountains, and the manatee mermaid.

Many are the delusions which fill the page of the sea book, and none is more delusive than the landman's idea about Christmas day at sea. And yet sailors enjoy delusions which do not in any way refer to Christmas day. One of the delusions is that a sailor's personal narrative of what he has seen and done and heard, whether in a steam tramp or in a sailing ship, will excite widespread sympathy and interest, and be devoured in particular by the ladies. I am an old hand, and beg to caution Jack. If he wants to be interesting he must not be too nautical, and he must seize the politician to the fore-lift, and keep that signal flying, or his book, superior to anything by Marryat, Cooper, Herman Melville and Michael Scott, will go the way of many other books, profoundly accurate, full of extraordinary descriptions, and unreadable ashore.

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