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DAYS OF ENDEAVOUR

DAYS OF ENDEAVOUR. By CAPTAIN JAMES W. HARRIS, R.N.R. With an Introductory Letter from CAPTAIN SIR R. BURTON CHADWICK. (Heath Cranton. 7s. 6d. net.)

Not every first-hand narrative of life in sail presents that life in its true perspective. Many are inclined to paint it in that over-roseate hue derived from the mellowing light of retrospect. Others, again, either through the desire to spin a good yarn or, more often, through fear of the imputation of sentimentality, emphasize unduly the hardships and perils of what was inevitably a hard and dangerous life.

It is therefore all the more refreshing to come across a book of this kind which, maintaining a just balance between the two extremes, gives in straightforward, unadorned, but always readable fashion, a faithful picture of that chapter of sea life to which "Finis" has now been all but written. Captain Harris served his time in one of those big iron four-masted barques, "built," as the sailor saying went, "by the mile and cut off by the yard," which were so well-known in the grain and nitrate ports during the closing years of the last century—when, as Captain Harris reminds us, it was still possible for a vessel becalmed in the Doldrums to have more than a hundred sail in sight at one time. They were hard ships. They were hungry. They were undermanned sometimes to danger point. In heavy weather, loaded to their marks with coal, grain or nitrates, they were like half-tide rocks. Life in them under such conditions was, so those said who had experienced it, "small hell"—speaking of them none the less, as Captain Harris writes, with that odd, chiding, half-grudging affection which people feel for inanimate things which have shared their difficulties and dangers. And they were a great school for seamen. To that fact the record of the merchant service officers in the War, nine out of ten of them trained in precisely this type of vessel, bears eloquent testimony.

The "Carradale," which many people will recall as a frequent visitor to London River in her later days under the Finnish flag, was a typical Clyde "fourposter" of her time. No clipper, she had yet a fair turn of speed on occasion. Running down the Easting, Captain Harris writes that "in spite of being down to her marks with Welsh coal . . . she has covered a lot of ground during the past week, the last two days being almost her record sailing, three hundred and four miles on each of these days." Her captain and mates, far from being the insane sail-carriers and man-killing buckoes beloved of the nautical fictionist, were humane, kindly and competent. The skipper's worst foible was an excessive economy in food, which, however, he carried into effect with unusual consistency into the cabin as well as the forecastle. The crew was the usual sort of cosmopolitan crowd—Greeks, Finns, Norwegians and what not, with a sprinkling of British. The "Carradale" was more fortunate than most in this particular. It was by no means rare for a ship to leave port without a single Briton in her forecastle. Captain Harris, by the way, defines a "Scouwegian" as a Scandinavian. More usually the term was used for a "Souwegian" or Swede, as distinct from a Norwegian, the latter being the only kind of "foreigner" regarded by the average shellback without a degree of insular superiority. They were, as Sir Burton Chadwick says in his introductory letter, "the toughest waterside elements of the ports of the world. But they were men—fine seamen." The old mate of the Carradale endorses his view. "Who," he asks, "taught us our jobs? Not the mates nor masters with whom we sailed, but the old shellbacks for whom we first passed the ball when serving a foot-rope"—a tribute which many a former sail apprentice now holding high command would endorse.

There were hardships in plenty during the voyage Captain Harris describes: flooded decks where men laboured up to their necks in water, sails to fist in stormy nights of the high latitudes, shortages of food, of water, of tobacco, that bitterest of all deprivations to the sailorman—ships have been near mutiny for no greater reason. But life was not all Cape Horn. There was "farmer's weather" sometimes, day after day; there was "sailor's pleasure" in Tropic dog-watches, when chests were overhauled and yarns spun, ships put into bottles and sennit mats made. Captain Harris has rescued from the oblivion into which so many old sea usages have been swept, together with the ships whose self-contained isolation gave rise to them, an odd and hitherto unrecorded item, that of "pairing":—

> During the climb through the Trades, when the evenings are pleasant and there is seldom any ship work to be attended to, the crowd for'ard pair off, and a number of strangely assorted couples may be seen walking fore and aft the deck, no one couple having anything to do with any other.

The author offers no explanation of this curious custom. Perhaps it was a foreshadowing of the loneliness soon to be the sailor's lot after a brief spell of pleasure ashore, one of the factors that would inevitably sooner or later send him back to the ships and the life he had so often vowed to leave for ever.

And, rough or smooth, as Captain Harris's book so effectively demonstrates, the sailor took it all, as he took the sea itself, very much for granted. It was nothing to rhapsodize nor yet to rage about. It was the day's work.