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BOWSPRIT ASHORE

BOWSPRIT ASHORE. By ALEXANDER BONE.
Illustrated by FREDA BONE. With a Fore-
word by H. M. TOMLINSON. (Jonathan
Cape. 7s. 6d. net.)

There was a time—and that by no means a remote one, as Mr. H. M. Tomlinson recalls in the charming and characteristic preface which he contributes to Mr. Alexander Bone's collection of nautical vignettes—when the bowsprits of sailing ships in dock, soaring over the grimy roofs of Limehouse and Poplar as if they meant to thrust themselves through the upper windows of the buildings across the way, were sights so far from uncommon in that part of the world that no one ever bothered to look at them.

It is with that time—the closing phases of it—that Mr. Bone is very largely concerned. He went to sea twenty-eight years ago, and during those years he has seen the old order at sea pass away at last. His first ship was Hardie's old Killoran, one of the few which has outlived almost all her generation. A newspaper picture of her bowsprit gave him the inspiration of bringing some of his memories together between the covers of a book. The inspiration was a happy one; for these brief chapters, pleasantly discursive as a sailor's yarns should be, tell much that is worth telling about a breed of seamen, a way of thought and a whole mass of tradition, custom and belief which fled from the face of the seas with the last of the wind-ships. Mr. Bone once saw another of his old ships—the Loch Ness—doing duty as a hulk in Port Adelaide. "It don't ought to be allowed," said an old seaman who also saw the melancholy spectacle. "All old ships should be sunk at sea, same's I hope I'll be." The Loch Ness has been sunk by gunfire, like the Thermopylae before her, since Mr. Bone witnessed her degradation. People who saw her go said she went as unwillingly as an old horse that smells the knacker's yard; a fact which seems to give countenance to the point of view of the sailorman of the old school, who, says Mr. Bone, "would never believe that a ship was inanimate."

His memories are mainly of the lumber and nitrate ports, in the days when they were the sailing ship's last hope. He recalls perhaps the most beautiful, as it was one of the last to survive, of all the old sailing ship usages, the cheering of the homeward-bounder in accordance with the time-honoured "West Coast custom." The famous, or infamous, Shanghai Brown of San Francisco was before his time, as was Paddy West—not, as Mr. Bone has it, Paddy Doyle of the celebrated boots—who sent men round the Horn in his Liverpool backyard. But there were still crimps, otherwise boarding masters, and boarding mistresses into the bargain, on the West Coast in his day, and, true to the saying, the female of the species was more ferocious than the male. The modern seaman, he tells us, prefers—shades of Paddy's Goose and the Mahogany Bar!—a whist drive to any other form of shore-going recreation. But there are probably a good many still to whom that celebrated public house he writes of, with its name in large white letters on its roof, is a more familiar London landmark than the dome of St. Paul's. Why not, after all? Even landmen, nearing the end of a toilsome and uncomfortable pilgrimage, do not think of their destination in terms of statues and cathedrals.

It is a little unusual to find a seaman subscribing to the popular view of the sailor-folk as unduly superstitious. True, they had their own peculiar beliefs. They thought—with reservations—that Finns were unlucky, and that whistling brought head winds. But it is more than doubtful if, taking them by and large, they were any more credulous than most of their contemporaries. Nay, are there not modern airmen who will not go up without the moral support they derive from some grinning Billiken or "Fumsup" or rabbit's foot of West Indian voodooism? The book ends, by way of contrast, with an account of Rum Row from the inside. Truth to tell, it reveals it as a mercenary, prosaic and even sordid business, with precious little money in it by way of recompense. The smuggler's trade a hundred years ago, allowing for the mellowing influence of time upon the popular view of it, was probably very much the same. But it will take a good deal more than a century to mellow Rum Row.

There are a few errors to be noted, some of which, but not all, may be due to faulty proof-reading. Thus we get "Juan de Fuga" for "Juan de Fuca," the "Colombia" River (at Astoria) and several times "Ludenburg" for "Lunenburg." And it is with something of a shock that one finds "The Wreck of the Hesperus" (one of the few classic sea poems, by the way, which survives the destructive ordeal of the expert's criticism) ascribed to Wordsworth. Miss Freda Bone's woodcuts add considerably to the attractiveness of the book, though they are perhaps a thought too consciously quaint for their period. And even the steel spike bowsprit of the eighteenth century was never the stumpy affair she shows in her cover-picture.