

**TWENTY YEARS**  
**AT SEA**  
**OR**  
**LEAVES FROM MY OLD LOG-BOOKS**

**BY**  
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TO MY WIFE,  
TO WHOSE SUGGESTION THE PUBLICATION OF THESE  
EPISODES IN A BUSY LIFE IS MAINLY DUE,  
I dedicate this book.

## INTRODUCTION

IN the old days, fifty years ago, when I first went to sea, it was the custom in fine weather, in most ships, after supper had been leisurely discussed and pipes lighted, for both watches to gather on the forecandle deck to listen to the yarns of some old tar, or to join in one of the many ballads with a rattling chorus, in which the exploits of Dick Turpin, Claude Duval, or some other dashing knight of the road were set forth in glowing terms and endless verses.

Many an evening, when a boy, I have coiled myself up on the deck, close to the windlass bitts, with my jacket rolled up under my head as a pillow, and have listened with eager interest to those tough yarns, while the good ship, with every inch of canvas, from courses to moonsails, drawing, gently rose and fell with rhythmic motion, as she ploughed her way through the long rolling swells of the broad Pacific.

A hundred feet above our heads, the tapering point of the skysail mast swayed; in the heavens about us blazed the brilliant constellations of the southern hemisphere; beneath us the waves gently swished as the sharp forefoot clave them asunder, and the story-teller droned on with his tales of peril by storm and wreck, or, perchance, in a lighter vein, dwelt upon the charms of that lass in some far-away port who loved a sailor.

That was indeed the poetry of sea life! But like everything else that is pleasant in this world, the hour in which we enjoyed it was brief and it came to an end, often in the very midst of the most exciting episode of a story, with the harsh cry from the quarter deck:

“Strike eight bells! Set the watch, and lay aft here and heave the log!”

I here propose, in my turn, as though sitting on the windlass bitts, to give some chapters from my old log-books, which, however, are somewhat more veracious than many of the stories often told in that way. For barring a little—a very little—license, such as must be allowed any old barnacle-back when he starts out to spin a yarn, these sketches may be considered very truthful pictures of a sailor’s life fifty years ago, and veritable experiences in the navy during our civil war.

Such as they are, then, I offer these sea stories to my young friends for their approval, premising by saying that a few of the sketches have already appeared in the “Youth’s Companion” and in the “Cambridge Tribune.”

F. STANHOPE HILL.

CAMBRIDGE, 1893.

# **TWENTY YEARS AT SEA**

**PART I**  
**IN THE MERCHANT SERVICE**

## CHAPTER I

### HOW I WENT TO SEA

IT was a blazing hot morning of the first week in September, 1842. The sun was pouring down with the fierce heat that so often marks the departing days of our Northern summers, and the evil smells in the filthy gutters of the southern section of Brooklyn were more than usually noxious.

A Knickerbocker ice-wagon had stopped at the corner beer saloon, and the sturdy, blue-shirted driver was carrying in a great block of ice, while the children of the tenement overhead were picking up the fragments from behind the wagon. Across the street, half a dozen frowsy, tow-headed boys were striving to drive an unwilling goat, harnessed to a soap-box on wheels, in which was seated one of their number, and the little wretches were cheerfully beating the unfortunate animal with a piece of iron hoop, when it stopped, to bleat forth its complaint.

A marine in blue uniform coat and white trousers, on duty at the Navy Yard gate, hard by, walked his beat, keeping close to the grateful shade of the high brick wall of the inclosure, and covertly watching the struggle between the children and the goat. The corporal of the guard lounged on a bench beneath the wooden porch of the guard-house, deeply interested in the morning paper.

Two persons, evidently strangers, came down the street, stopped hesitatingly at the gate, and asked a question of the corporal.

“The Bombay, is it?” said the marine. “You will find her at the dock near the shears. Keep down that path to the right, pass the

commandant's house, then take the first turn to the left, and you will see her."

The elder of the two strangers, who thanked the corporal, was a grave, respectable, middle-aged man, with the general appearance of a trusted bookkeeper in some mercantile house, as indeed he was; his companion, evidently under his charge, was a bright-looking lad of thirteen, dressed in a blue sailor suit, with a tarpaulin hat with long ribbons hanging down his back. The boy's fair skin and delicate appearance, however, indicated very plainly that he could not have had a very extended experience as a sailor.

Following the directions given them, the man and the boy soon reached the dock, where a good-sized merchant ship was moored, taking on board the cargo that filled the wharf.

Here we paused. I say we, for the boy was the writer, who is about to tell you his life story; and his companion was Mr. Mason, my uncle's bookkeeper, sent over from New York to see me safely bestowed on board the good ship Bombay for my first voyage to sea.

"Well, Robert," said Mr. Mason, "here we are; and now, before I take you on board, I am instructed by your uncle to ask you for the last time if you still persist in your resolution of going to sea. It is a hard life, lad, and I almost wonder that you should desire to undertake it. Come! take my advice; it is not yet too late: hadn't you better turn around and go back? there is no harm done yet."

"You are very kind, Mr. Mason, and I thank you for what you have said; but I shan't change my mind. We will go on board, if you please."

But before leaving the wharf, as I shall have a long story of my sea life to tell, suppose I go back a bit and explain how I came to be starting out for myself in this manner at such a tender age.

I was always a delicate lad, and had never been very strong, after I recovered from a fever that brought me well-nigh to death's door several years before, and I had never cared much for the usual outdoor sports of boyhood. Then I had an untiring passion for reading; and when I could curl myself up in a big arm-chair with dear old "Robinson Crusoe" or "Midshipman Easy," I was perfectly happy, and forgot all the world in the adventures of one hero and the frolics of the other.

I have no doubt that my favorite books had something to do with it; for by the time I reached the age of thirteen and had been in the High School a couple of years, I had firmly decided in my own mind that I would be a sailor and nothing else. I had not lived in a seaport, and knew nothing of ships or sailors except what I had gathered from reading, and there seemed to be no very good reason for this decision. But it was just possible that my old grandfather, who was a famous sea captain in his day, had transmitted to me a strain of his sailor blood, rather than my poet father; so instead of fitting for college or going into a counting-room, my parents at last consented that I should go to sea.

My seafaring books had prepared me to expect hardships in the merchant service that I would not find in the navy, and I was boy enough to be thoroughly alive to the attractions of a middy's uniform and dirk, for they wore dirks in those days; so when it appeared that a midshipman's warrant might possibly be obtained for me by family influence, I was very anxious to enter the navy.

This was before the establishment of the Naval Academy in 1843, and when midshipmen were appointed and sent at once to sea.

But my father wisely said: “No; let Robert try one year in the merchant service, and then if he finds a sea life distasteful he can easily abandon it, without any breach of good faith. But if he enters the navy, he will not feel the same liberty to resign, nor indeed have the opportunity of doing so, until after the expiration of a three years’ cruise.”

So it was settled that I should enter as a boy on board the ship *Bombay*, Leonard Gay, master, bound from New York to Rio Janeiro with a cargo of naval stores for the Brazil squadron. The ship was owned by a relative of ours.

How well I remember one fine summer day, fifty years ago, going down on Commercial Street in Boston with my father to order my outfit. I never pass along there now and inhale the mingled odors of tarred rigging, salt fish and New England rum, that seem perennial in that locality, that this important visit to the outfitter is not recalled. The mist of half a century of years rolls back, and I, a grave, gray-haired, somewhat rheumatic old man, seem for a moment a light-hearted boy again.

My father had been directed to the establishment of an old sailor turned tradesman, quite an original character in his way, and very well known in those days for his good wares and honest dealing. He was instructed to provide me with everything necessary for a voyage to the tropics and a winter on the English coast; and while my father was discussing the requisites for such a cruise with the proprietor, I was taking in the strange surroundings of the shop, so novel to a boy just down from Vermont.

It was a small, irregular shaped store, very low studded, which had enabled the old fellow to avail himself of the beams, from which hung specimens of his wares, all of them new to me. Upon one hook was a complete suit of oil clothing, southwester (as the head covering is called) and all, dangling and swaying about in the summer breeze and looking very much indeed like some mutinous tar or heavy weather pirate expiating his nautical crimes upon a gallows. Brilliant red flannel shirts were stacked up in great piles upon the shelves, and formidable sea boots overflowed from boxes ranged beneath the counter; gay bandanna handkerchiefs and glossy black silk neckerchiefs were temptingly displayed in the showcase; while on one side was a miscellaneous assortment of ironmongery utterly strange to me at that time, that I afterward came to know better as marline-spikes, prickers, fids, palms and sail needles, and sheath knives and belts.

Jack's lass had not been forgotten; for in the window were hung, as a special attraction, certain printed handkerchiefs with pictorial representations of the "Sailor's Farewell," the "Jolly Tar's True Love," and other subjects of a sentimental character. In the rear of the store was an old-fashioned desk, with a fly-blown calendar hanging above it, and a ship's chronometer ticking away in its case on one side; while above it, hung a spy-glass in brackets, and upon the shelf were an odd looking mahogany case and a ponderous leather-bound volume. These I came to know better, subsequently, as a sextant and the sailors' *vade mecum*, "Bowditch's Epitome of Navigation."

This collection interested me amazingly, but I was soon called upon to select my "chist," as the dealer called the gayly painted box he exhibited for my inspection. It was dark blue with vermilion trimmings, and had green-covered "beckets," as the

handles are called. This one, he said, “was neat and not gaudy, and had a secret till where a feller could stow away his tobacco and his ditty box,” which he seemed to think a very important consideration. This ditty box, by the way, is not, as one might well suppose, a special receptacle for ballads, but is for the thread, needles, buttons, etc., which are such necessities on a long voyage, where every man is perforce his own tailor.

Into my chest were packed, under the advice of the proprietor, an assortment of red flannel shirts and drawers, with thick woolen stockings for cold weather and blue drilling trousers and white duck frocks for the tropics. Stout shoes and sea boots and a full suit of oil-clothes were provided for rainy weather, and two suits of blue cloth went in—one for ordinary wear of satinet, the other of broadcloth, with brass anchor buttons, for a Sunday go-ashore suit. These, with a tin cup and plate, a spoon, and fork for my mess, and a belt and sheath knife, completed the outfit, to which the dealer added, as a gratuity or “lanyap,” as he called it, a dozen clay pipes, a pound package of smoking tobacco, and a bundle of matches, “to make the fit out reglar.”

These gifts, rather scorned at the time, came in good play at a later date, and gained me many desired favors with my future shipmates.

By the time my chest was filled, locked, and the key deposited in my pocket, I was full of excitement and crazy to have it sent home for my mother’s inspection. The business completed by paying the bill, we returned home to Summer Street, where we were staying for a week with my uncle, and I answered every ring at the bell myself until the anxiously expected box was at last received.

Nothing then would do but I must try everything on for my cousin's delectation, and the entire afternoon was devoted to a series of dress rehearsals with the different costumes. Poor, dear, little mother! many a tear she shed that night as she repacked those strange, rough garments that were to take the place in the future of the delicately made clothing it had been her pride and joy to fashion for her dearly loved boy.

The days now flew swiftly while I made my farewell visits to friends and relations, and my chest was filled in every corner with their last offerings. These, in most cases, took the form of rich cakes, mittens, or comforters for my neck; but I well remember an eccentric uncle bringing down a pair of dueling pistols as his parting gift, to the great horror of my mother, but to my infinite delight, as all boys can well understand.

Under the excitement of these preparations I had kept my courage up very bravely, but I almost broke down when the time came for parting and my mother clasped me in her arms in an agony of grief, exclaiming, "I cannot let him go from me!"

But when I was at last in the cars and had really started off on my journey, I felt that I must put aside all childish feelings and show myself a man and an American sailor. I had insisted upon traveling in full sea rig, and I wore my new blue suit, with white shirt and black silk neckerchief tied in a sailor's knot, and a shiny tarpaulin hat, with long streaming ribbons hanging down my neck. I was, in fact, a veritable nautical dandy.

As I was only thirteen and small for my age, I have no doubt I presented rather a noticeable appearance. At any rate I know that quite a number of passengers spoke to me very pleasantly on board

the Sound boat; and as I was walking through the saloon an old lady called me to her, and, after asking me no end of questions, gave me a kiss and a warm, motherly hug, rather to my mortification, I must confess.

The day after my arrival in New York I was sent over to the Brooklyn Navy Yard with my uncle's bookkeeper to report for duty, and here we were.

As I walked up the Bombay's gang-plank a rough looking man in his shirt sleeves eyed me rather sharply, and said, "Well, youngster, what do *you* want?"

"I wish to see the captain, sir."

"What do you want of him? The captain isn't on board, but I am the mate."

"I am Robert Kelson, sir, and I am sent to go to sea in this ship. Mr. Mason, here, has a letter to the captain."

At this juncture my companion interposed and explained the matter to the mate, giving him the letter to the captain, and then, evidently very much disgusted at our reception, endeavored again to dissuade me from my project; but I would not listen to him, and, shaking his hand, bade him good-by and accompanied him on shore.

When I returned the mate said: "Go down in the steerage; you will find your chest there; it came early this morning; get those longshore togs off and put on your working clothes. Then come up here, and I will find something for you to do."

I looked about, not discovering anything answering at all to my idea of a stairway, when the mate, evidently understanding my dilemma, shouted: "You Jim! come here and take this greenhorn down into the steerage and show him his chest, and be quick about it! do you hear? Don't you two boys stay loafing down there spinning yarns!"

I had never been spoken to so roughly before in my life, and for a moment I half regretted that I had not listened to Mr. Mason's advice; but it was now too late, so I choked down a sob and followed Jim into that portion of the between decks from the mainmast aft which was called the steerage.

My companion informed me that I was to sleep and mess there with him and the ship's carpenter. After looking about for a time we discovered my chest, half hidden beneath a pile of sails, and proceeded to pull it out to the light.

"What in thunderation have you got in this dunnage barge?" said Jim, as he sat down on the hatch coaming and looked at my beloved chest, half in admiration at its brilliant coloring and half in scorn at its size and weight. "Why, it weighs pretty nigh half a ton, and it's big enough to hold a fit-out for a three years' v'y'ge!"

As I deemed it advisable to placate Jim at the outset, I unlocked the chest, and hunting out one of the plum-cakes, divided it with my comrade, who watched this proceeding with ill-concealed anxiety and interest.

"Well, by gosh, you're a lucky feller; how many more of these 'ere you got, anyhow? Lem'me look at your knife," as my new sheath knife turned up; "what did you give for that knife? I got mine down by Fulton Market for a quarter, and I'll bet it's as good as

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