

# **TALES OF THE CLIPPER SHIPS**

**BY  
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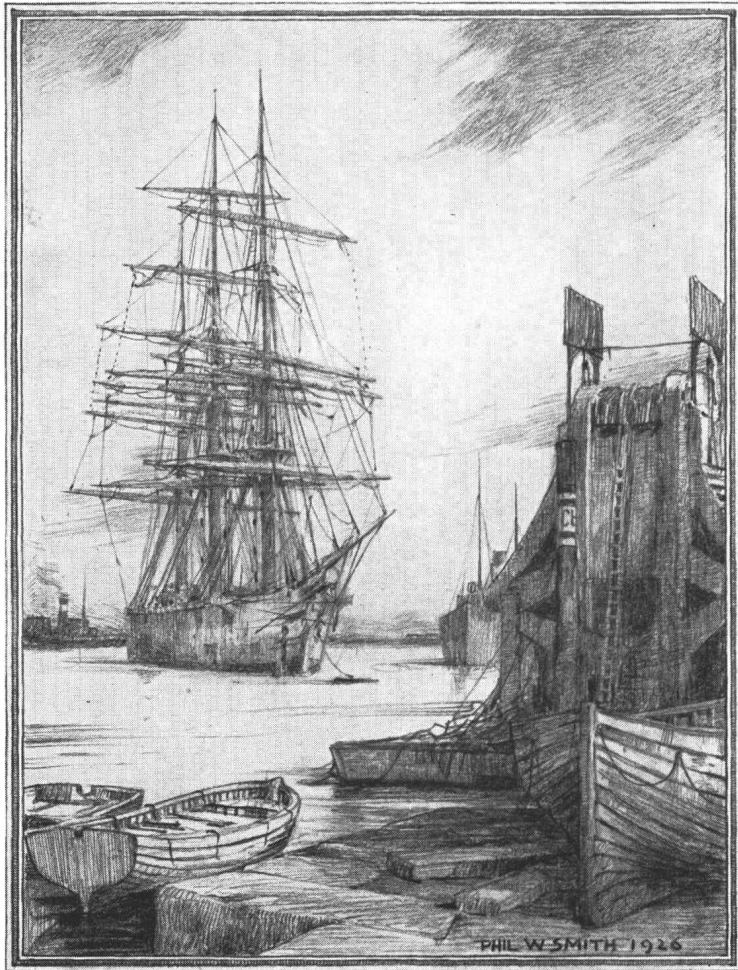
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**THE LAST VOYAGE OF THE  
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# TALES OF THE CLIPPER SHIPS

## THE LAST VOYAGE OF THE “MAID OF ATHENS”

### I

OLD Thomas Featherstone was dead: he was also buried.

The knot of frowsy females—that strange and ghoulish sisterhood which frequents such dismal spots as faithfully as dramatic critics the first nights of theatres—who stood monotonously rocking perambulators on their back wheels outside the cemetery gates, were unanimously of opinion that it had been a skinny show. Indeed, Mrs. Wilkins, who was by way of considering herself what reporters like to call the “doyenne” of the gathering, said as much by way of consolation to her special crony Mrs. Pettefer, coming up hot and breathless, five minutes too late for the afternoon’s entertainment.

“No flars” (thus Mrs. Wilkins), “not one! Not so much as a w’ite chrysant’! You ’aven’t missed much, me dear, I tell you.”

Mrs. Pettefer, her hand to her heaving bosom, said there was some called it waste, to be sure, but she did like to see flars ’erself.

“You’d otter’ve seen ’em when they buried the lickle girl yesterday,” pursued Mrs. Wilkins.

“I *was* put out, missin’ that, but there, I ’ad to take ar Florence to the ’orspittle for ’er aneroids,” sighed Mrs. Pettefer, glancing malevolently at “ar Florence” as if she would gladly have buried her, without flars, too, by way of paying her out. “I do love a lickle child’s fruneral.”

“Mask o’ flars, the corfin was,” went on Mrs. Wilkins. “The harum lilies was lovely. And one big reaf like an ’arp. W’ite ribbinks on the ’orses, an’ all...”

The connoisseurs in grief dispersed. The driver of the hearse replaced the black gloves of ceremony by the woollen ones of comfort, for the day was raw and promised fog later: pulled out a short clay and lit it, climbed to his box and, whipping up his horses (bays with black points—“none of your damned prancing Belgians for me,” had been one of Old Featherstone’s last injunctions), set off at a brisk trot, he to tea and onions over the stables, they to the pleasant warmth of their stalls and their waiting oats and hay. Four of old Thomas’s nearest relatives piled into the first carriage, four more of his remoter kindred into the second, and the lawyer—Hobbs, Senior, of Hobbs, Keating & Hobbs, of Chancery Lane—who had lingered behind to settle accounts with the officiating clergyman, came hurrying down the path between ranks of tombstones, glimmering pale and ghostly in the greying November afternoon, to make up a mixed bag in the third and last with Captain David Broughton, master of the deceased’s ship “Maid of Athens,” and Mr. Jenkinson, the managing clerk from the office in Billiter Square.

The lawyer was a small, spare man, halting a little from sciatica. Given a pepper-and-salt coat with wide tails, and a straw in his mouth, he would have filled the part of a racing tipster to perfection; but in his sombre funeral array, with his knowing, birdlike way of holding his head, and his sharp, darting, observant glance, he resembled nothing so much as a lame starling; and he chattered like a starling, too, as the carriage rattled away in the wake of the others through the darkening streets towards the respectable northern suburb where old Featherstone had lived and died.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, gentlemen,” he said, settling himself in his place as the coachman slammed the door on the party. “Well, well ... everything’s passed off very nicely, don’t you think?”

Both Captain Broughton and Mr. Jenkinson, after due consideration, agreed that “it” had passed off very nicely indeed; though, to be sure, it would be hard to say precisely what conceivable circumstance might have occurred to make it do otherwise.

Little Jenkinson sat with his back to the horses. He was the kind of person who sits with his back to the horses all through life: the kind of neat, punctual little man to be found in its thousands in the business offices of the City. He carried, as it were, a perpetual pen behind his ear. A clerk to his finger-tips—say that of him, and you have said all; unless perhaps that in private life he was very likely a bit of a domestic tyrant in some brick box of a semi-detached villa Tooting or Balham way, who ran his finger along the sideboard every morning to see if his wife had dusted it properly.



Captain Broughton sat stiffly erect in the opposite corner of the carriage, with its musty aroma of essence-of-funerals—that indescribable blend of new black clothes and moth-balls and damp horsehair and smelling salts and faded flowers. His square hands, cramped into unaccustomed black kid gloves which already showed a white split across the knuckles, lay awkwardly, palms uppermost, on his knees. “Damn the things,” he said to himself for the fiftieth time, contemplating their empty finger-tips, sticking out flat as the ends of half-filled pea-pods, “why don’t they make ’em so that a man can get his hands into ’em?”

A square-set man, a shade under medium height, with a neat beard, once fair, now faded to a sandy grey, and eyes of the clear ice-blue which suggested a Scandinavian ancestry, he carried his sixty-odd years well. A typical shipmaster, one would say at a first glance: a steady man, a safe man, from whom nothing unexpected need be looked for, one way or the other. And then, perhaps, those ice-blue eyes would give you pause, and the thought would cross your mind that there might be certain circumstances in which the owner of those eyes might conceivably become no longer a safe and steady quantity, but an unknown and even an uncomfortable one.

“Don’t mind admitting I’m glad it’s over,” rattled on the little lawyer; “depressing affairs, these funerals, to my thinking. Horrible. Good for business, though—our business and doctors’ business, what! More people get their death through attendin’ other people’s funerals than one likes to think of. It’s the standing, you know. That’s what does it. Standing on damp ground. Nothing worse—nothing! And then no hats. That’s where our friends the Jews have the pull of us Gentiles—eh, Mr. Jenkinson? If a Jew wants to show respect, he keeps his hat on. Curious, ain’t it? Ever

hear the story about the feller—Spurgeon, was it—or Dr. Parker—Spurgeon, I think—one or t’other of ’em, anyway, don’t much matter, really—and the two fellers that kept their hats on while he was preachin’? ‘If I were to go to a synagogue,’ says Spurgeon—yes, I’m pretty sure it was Spurgeon—‘if I went to a synagogue,’ says he, ‘I should keep my hat on; and therefore I should be glad if those two young Jews in the back of the church would take theirs off in *my* synagogue’—ha ha ha—good, wasn’t it?...

“And talking about getting cold at funerals, I’ll let you into a little secret. I always wear an extra singlet, myself, for funerals. Yes; and a body belt. Got ’em on now. Fact. My wife laughs at me. But I say, ‘Oh, you may laugh, my dear, but you’d laugh the other side of your face if I came home with lumbago and you had to sit up half the night ironing my back.’ Ever try that for lumbago? A common flat iron—*you* know. Hot as you can bear it. Best thing going—ab-so-lutely....”

He paused while he rubbed a clear place in the windows which their breath had misted and peered out like a child going to a party.

“Nearly there, I think,” he went on. “Between ourselves, I think the old gentleman’s going to cut up remarkably well. Six figures, I shouldn’t wonder. Not a bit, I shouldn’t.... A shrewd man, Captain Broughton, don’t you agree?”

Captain Broughton in his dark corner made a vague noise which might be taken to indicate that he did agree. Not that it mattered, really, whether he agreed or not. The little lawyer was one of those people who was so fond of hearing his own voice that he never even noticed if anyone was listening to him; which was

all to the good when you were feverishly busy with your own thoughts.

“Ah, yes,” he resumed, “a very shrewd, capable man of business! Saw the way things were going in the shipping world and got out in time. ‘The sailing ship is done’ (those were his very words to me). ‘If I’d been thirty years younger I’d have started a fleet of steam kettles with the best of ’em. But not now—not at my time of life. You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.’ Those were his very words....”

“Ah, ha, here we are at last! Between ourselves, a glass o’ the old gentleman’s port won’t come amiss. Fine cellar he kept—fine cellar! ‘I don’t go in for a lot of show, Hobbs,’ I remember him saying once, ‘but I like what I have *good*....’”

## II

Old Featherstone’s home was a dull, ugly, solid, inconvenient Victorian house in a dull crescent of similar houses. It stands there still—it has been more fortunate than Featherstone’s Wharf in Limehouse and the little dark office in Billiter Square with “T. Featherstone” on its dusty wire blinds and the half model of the “Parisina” facing you as you went in. They are gone; but the house I saw only the other day—its rhododendrons perhaps a shade dingier, a trifle more straggly, and “bright young society” (for the place is a select boarding establishment for City gents nowadays) gyrating to the blare of a loudspeaker in what was aforesaid old Thomas Featherstone’s dining-room. And the legend “Pulo Way,” in tarnished gilt on black, still gleams in the light of the street lamp opposite on the two square stone gateposts—bringing a sudden momentary vision of dark seas and strange stars, of ships becalmed

under the lee of the land, of light puffs of warm, spicy air stealing out from unseen shores as if they breathed fragrance in their sleep; so that the vague shapes of “Lyndhurst” and “Chatsworth” and “Bellavista” seem the humped outlines of islands sheltering one knows not what of wonder and peril and romance....

A maidservant had come in and lighted the gas in the dining-room, lowered the drab venetian blinds in the bay window, and drawn the heavy stamped plush curtains which hung stiffly under the gilt cornice. Broughton sipped his glass of wine and ate a sandwich, surveying the familiar room with that curious illogical sense of surprised resentment which humanity always feels in the presence of the calm indifference of inanimate things to its own transiency and mortality.

He knew it well, that rather gloomy apartment with its solid Victorian air of ugly, substantial comfort. He had been there before many times. It had been one of Thomas Featherstone’s unvarying customs to invite his skippers to a ceremonial dinner whenever their ships were in London River. An awful sort of business, Broughton had always secretly thought these functions; and, like the lawyer on the present occasion, had been heartily glad when they were over. The bill of fare never varied—roast beef, baked potatoes, some kind of a boiled pudding, almonds and raisins, and a bottle of port to follow. “Special Captain’s port,” that turbulent Irishman, Pat Shaughnessy, of the “Mazeppa,” irreverently termed it: adding, with his great laugh, “You bet the old divvle don’t fetch out his best vintage for hairy shellbacks like us!”

Thirteen—no, it must be fourteen—of those dinners Broughton could remember. They had been annual affairs so long as the “Maid of Athens” could hold her own against the steamers in the

Australian wool trade. Latterly, since she had been driven to tramping the world for charters, they had become movable feasts, and between the last two there had been a gap of nearly three years.

Broughton's eyes travelled slowly from one detail to another—the mahogany chairs ranged at precise intervals against the dull red of the flock-papered walls; the round table whose gleaming brass toes peeped modestly from beneath the voluminous tapestry table cover; the “lady's and gent's easies” sitting primly on opposite sides of the vast yawning cavern of the fire-place; the mantelpiece where the black marble clock ticked leisurely between its flanking Marly horses and the pair of pagoda vases, with their smirking ladies and fierce bewhiskered warriors, that one of the old man's captains had brought years ago from Foochow; the mahogany sideboard whose plate-glass mirror gave back every minutest detail of the room in reverse; the inlaid glass-fronted bookcase with its smug rows of gilt-tooled, leather-bound books—the Waverley Novels, Falconer's “Shipwreck,” Byron's poems.

Thomas Featherstone seldom used any other room but this. He possessed a drawing-room: a bleak chill shrine of the middle-class elegancies where the twittering Victorian niece who kept house for him—a characterless worthy woman with the red nose which bespeaks a defective digestion—was wont to dispense tepid tea and flabby muffins on her periodical “At Home” days. He had no study: he had his office for his work, he said, and that was enough for him. He had been brought up to sit in the dining-room at home in his father's, the ship-chandler's, house in Stepney, and he had carried the custom with him into the days of his prosperity.

So there he had sat, evening after evening, with his gold spectacles perched on his high nose, reading “Lloyd's List” and the

commercial columns of "The Times," the current issues of which were even now in the brass newspaper rack by his empty chair: occasionally playing a hand of picquet with the twittering niece. He was a man of an almost inhuman punctuality of habit. People had been known to set their watches by Old Featherstone. At nine o'clock every morning of the week round came the brougham to drive him into the City. At twelve o'clock he sallied forth from Billiter Square to the "London Tavern," and the table that he always occupied there. At half-past one, back to the office; or, if one of his ships were due, to the West India Docks, where they generally berthed. At five the brougham appeared in Billiter Square to transport him to "Pulo Way" again.

A strange, colourless, monotonous sort of life, one would think; and one which had singularly little in common with the wider aspects of the business in which his money had been made. Of the romantic side of shipping, or indeed of its human side, he seemed to have no conception at all. A consignment of balas rubies, of white elephants, of Manchester goods, of pig iron, they were all one to him—so many items in a bill of lading, no more, no less. Ships carried his house-flag to the four corners of the earth: no one of them had ever carried him farther than the outward-bound pilot. No matter what outlandish ports they visited, it stirred his blood not a whit. Perhaps it was one of the secrets of his success: for imagination, nine times out of ten, is a dangerous sort of commodity, commercially considered; and if Old Featherstone had gone a-gallivanting off to Tuticorin or Amoy or Punta Arenas or Penang or Port au Prince or any other alluringly-named place with which his ships trafficked, instead of sitting in Billiter Square and looking after his business—why, no doubt his business would have been vastly the sufferer! And, indeed, since he found such

adventure as his soul needed no farther afield than between the marbled covers of his own ledgers, there would have been no sense in looking for it elsewhere.

You saw the old man's portrait yonder over the mantelpiece, behind the marble clock and the Marly horses—keen eyes under bushy eyebrows, side whiskers, Gladstone collar, slightly sardonic smile. Broughton indulged in a passing speculation as to what they did with his glass eye when they buried him. The picture was the work of an unknown artist. "If I'd been fool enough to pay for a big name," old Thomas had been wont to say, "I'd have got a worse picture for three times the money"; and the old man had not forgotten to drive a hard bargain, the recollection of which had perhaps a little coloured the artist's mood. The unknown had caught his sitter in a characteristic attitude: sitting erect and rigid, his hands clasped one above the other on the silver knob of his favourite Malacca walking-stick. A shrewd old man, you would say, a shrewd, hard, narrow old man, and not have been far wrong in your estimate; though, as even his enemies were bound to admit, he was not without his moments of vision, his odd surprising streaks of generosity.

A man of but little education—he had run as a child daily to a little school in Stepney, kept by the widow and daughters of a shipmaster, and later had gone for a year or two to an Academy for the Sons of Gentlemen somewhere off the East India Dock Road—he was wont to say, and to say as if it were something to boast of, that he had never read but two books in his life—Falconer's "Shipwreck" and Byron's poems, both of which he knew from cover to cover. For the latter he had a profound and astonishing admiration, so much so that all his ships were named after Byronic heroes and heroines.

The “junk store” some wag once called the Featherstone fleet: and the gibe was not far wide of the mark. Anyone who has the patience and the curiosity to search the pages of a fifty-or sixty-year-old “Lloyd’s Register” will find in that melancholy record of human achievement and human effort blown like dead leaves on the winds of time and change sufficient reason for the nickname. Everywhere it is the same tale—“Mazeppa” *ex* “Electric Telegraph,” “Bride of Abydos” *ex* “Navarino,” “Zuleika” *ex* “Roderick Random,” “Thyrza” *ex* “Rebel Maid.” Old Featherstone had at one time more than fifty ships under his house-flag, not one of which had been built to his order. “The man who succeeds,” was one of his sayings, “is the man who knows best how to profit by other men’s mistakes.”

The doctrine was one which he put very effectively into practice. He had an almost uncanny nose for bargains; but, what was more than that, he was gifted in a most amazing degree with that peculiar and indefinable quality best described as “ship sense”—an ability amounting well-nigh to a genius for knowing a good ship from a bad one which is seldom found but in seamen, and is rare even among them.

Someone once asked him the secret of his gift, but I doubt if he got much satisfaction out of the answer.

“Ask me another,” snapped out the old man in his dry, staccato fashion. “I’ve got a brother can waggle his ears like a jackass. How does *he* do that? *I* don’t know. *He* don’t know. Same thing in my case, exactly.”

And certainly where he got it is something of a mystery. But since there had been Featherstones buried for generations where



time and grime combine to make a hallowed shade in the old parish church of Stepney, there may well have been seafaring blood in the family, and likely enough the founder of the little bow-windowed shop in Wapping Wall was himself a retired ship's carpenter.

Whatever the explanation, there was undeniably the fact. He bought steamers that didn't pay and had never paid and that experts said never would pay: ripped the guts out of them, and in a couple of years they had paid for themselves. He bought unlucky ships, difficult ships, ships with a bad name of every sort and kind. Ships that broke their captains' hearts and their owners' fortunes, ships that wouldn't steer, that wouldn't wear, that wouldn't stay. And never once did his bargain turn out a bad one.

### III

From Old Featherstone's portrait, and that painted ironical smile which still had the power to call up in him a feeling of vague discomfort, Broughton's eyes travelled on to the portraits of ships which—Old Featherstone excepted—were the room's sole artistic adornment.

Over there in the corners—one each side of the portrait—were the old "Childe Harold" and "Don Juan." They were the first ships Old Featherstone bought, in the distant days when he was still young Featherstone, a smart young clerk in Daly's office, whose astonishing rise to fortune was yet on the knees of the gods.

They were old frigate-built East Indiamen, both of them, the "General Bunbury" and "Earl Clapham," from some Bombay or Moulmein dockyard: teak through and through, but as leaky as sieves with sheer age and years of labouring in seaways. Young

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