

## SUPERSTITIONS OF THE SEA.

WITH PICTURES BY I. W. TABER.

EARLY in the seventies the steam sloop-of-war *Resaca* was detailed for duty as the depot ship of the naval expedition employed upon the Pacific side in that optimistic survey of the Isthmus of Panama which was to reveal a tide-water canal route to the Atlantic. The climate was villainous, the work rigorous, the surroundings most depressing. Even in the preliminary stages so many denials had to be enforced that at last, as a concession to the civilized side of the men engaged in the labor, an opportunity was offered them to send home and receive letters through agencies less uncertain than the pestilent bungoes which traded coastward from the Gulf of San Miguel. Into these denials entered many essentials such as clean linen and mess stores, so when it was announced that the sailing-launch, adequately equipped and manned, was to go to Panama, there were arrayed such a mail, personal and official, and such lists of stores necessary for the successful pursuit of the elusive routes, that the departure of the craft took on a fine air of ceremonious congratulation. When the boat shoved clear of the ship's side, the men crowding the rail, and the officers gathered aft, sped her in a hearty cheer the warmest of God-speeds; the ship's dog barked, the landsmen swore at their bondage, and the fore-castle cat glared silently from the pivot-port. For hers was an absorbing interest, as among the launch's crew was that very tender-hearted blue-jacket whose affection for the cat had made him go the length of sporting her tattooed portrait, in the primary colors so dear to Jacky, upon a stalwart forearm, where a very weeping willow and an impossible tomb divided the muscles with a quaint distich out of a sailor's hornbook.

The cat gazed long and uncannily from the pivot-port rail, her tail waving a protesting adieu, and her whiskers rigged out with the rigidity of a Greek brig's bowsprit. When the boat turned a bend in the river, and was shut in by a lush fringe of mangrove, the cat jumped spitefully to the deck, walked forward (back arched and tail swollen like a magnified frankfurter), spat at the yellow dog we had—conveyed, the wise call it—up-river, and then disappeared—forever.

Whether she dropped overboard in the

swift tide-stream of the Tuyra, or was astrally translated, none of us ever learned after the closest inquest; but that surely was the end of cat number one, as we despairingly called her.

Two nights afterward, when inshore, fairly well up Panama way, the launch, spitted by a squall from no-man's-land, turned turtle, belched mail, and coin, and linen, and all the rest of it, to the sharks, and one man, the cat's particular adoption, was drowned.

Six months later, and after a deal of trying work, the *Resaca* gained a well-earned anchorage off the murky coast of Callao. Here we met an American, a civil engineer of exceeding promise, who was engaged as chief of division in the survey of that cloud-assailing route which started from Lima, skirted the Rimac, and then zigzagged over the hills at an elevation deadly to the plain-reared gringo. He was low in his clever mind, hipped, sapped by fever and anxieties, and pathetically hungry for home and American faces and ways. We stumbled into his story through a lucky pitfall, though this may have no place here. It opened our hearts, however, for he was a stranger in a freebooting zone, and we were his countrymen, and surely that was enough to make the mess beg him to come on board for a chance at the sea breezes and a sure hit at American ways and faces.

The night he crawled over the gangway the ship's new cat slipped overboard, but with such pitiful mewings and clawings that the rush of rescuers nearly swamped the lowered boat. By the flare of signal torches and deck lanterns Tom was seen in the nick of time, and to everybody's content was hauled safely inboard.

Our visitor found a tonic in the breeze, and the rest and novelty of the life, made a most receptive target for the mess-worn stories, and all around proved such a good sort of American that when, ten days later, he announced his intention of striking the beach for the afternoon, a howl of growls went up, which had a sane echo in the calm and strong protest of the surgeon. It seemed, however, that he had to go, for one of his inventions, upon which depended the immediate support of his old people at home, was then under examination by the authorities.



MERMAIDS.

ENGRAVED BY G. A. POWELL.

He remained ashore after sundown, came off in the damp boat of a drunken fletero, who raised a row half-way to the ship about the fare, and when he climbed the gangway was so worn out with the running about and heat and worry that he had to be helped to his state-room. Just as two bells struck in the first watch (nine at night), and tattoo had its echo in taps beaten, the doctor came on deck to tell us that the engineer was in a bad way; but in the middle of his explanations we heard a scramble on the housed awning, saw a tangle of flying feet and clawing paws, and heard a splash, a wail-

ing mew of despair, answered by the bleat of a belated seal paddling toward San Lorenzo, seaward. Cat number two was overboard, this time for good and all; for though the nearest boat went into the water by the run, and willing fingers gripped oar-looms and handles, it was too late. The cat had slipped into the darkness, and was borne shoreward on the flood, surging riotously.

When the ebb was making about two in the morning of the second day, the young engineer stretched out a faltering hand to the doctor and to the rest of us gathered about him,



INDIANS SACRIFICING TOBACCO TO APPEASE THE SPIRIT OF THE WAVE.

ENGRAVED BY GEORGE P. BARTLE.

tried to tell us something about his invention, and died.

After long days at sea, and longer ones in stunted Peruvian and Chilian ports, the *Resaca* anchored one breezy morning off the town of Talcahuano, which offers such large possibilities to sailors. Here some one was given a wonderful kitten, yellow and gray, with curious interlacings of black and tawny rings. It was a breed strange to the country, so everybody said, and no one pretended to account for it save Lafferty, a Californian, who ran the Fourth of July hotel. This tavern was much frequented by sailors of all degrees, and here one day, in the captain's room, religiously tabooed to all save master-mariners and naval officers, Lafferty told in an ornamental lie how the kitten's mother had appeared suddenly after a rainfall, and how she proved to be, not a Dago cat, but one of an Indian breed, born on the silent, yellow pampas, which stretched over the hills for miles and miles out Argentine way.

The kitten grew into a very gentle cat, took kindly to all hands, though it adopted as its special ward the senior watch-officer, who, by the way, was the only man in the mess that had a wife and baby to keep him out of mischief.

Those were busy days for the ship off that nook-shotten coast, and so after another six months the *Resaca* was one morning at sea, standing up the shore, bound for Payta, when the senior watch-officer came on deck and learned that the cat was dead. In a mad chase

after a rat, diving into a chain-pipe, it had made a jump from the topgallant forecastle, struck its head on the cable, and ended thus untimely its career. After his manner, the senior watch-officer fell into sad forebodings. When the day broke, the gear was laid up, decks were swept, and preparations made for washing down. Hardly had the hickory brooms begun their swishing when White — John White, captain of the starboard watch of the after-guard — staggered against the bulwarks, and said, "I feel bad, sir," and then gripping his throat, continued; "all throttled here." Two hands were ordered to help White forward, the doctor was called, the apothecary aroused.

Just as the gray dawn silvered into clear day the doctor came — in pajamas — with a leap and a bound on deck, asked what the row was, and started forward; but in the center of a silent crowd of sailors of the watch gathered at the weather-gangway he stopped. It was too late; White was dead.

After the captain of the after-guard had been buried, and the ship had gathered way on her old course northward, the petty officers came to the mast, and asked to see the captain. When he appeared, the senior sailorman, cap in hand, forelock properly patted, spoke up manfully and quietly. The burden of his request — this most gravely considered, most earnestly granted — was that the ship's company begged that no more cats be allowed on board. He went on to prove that they brought bad luck; black cats

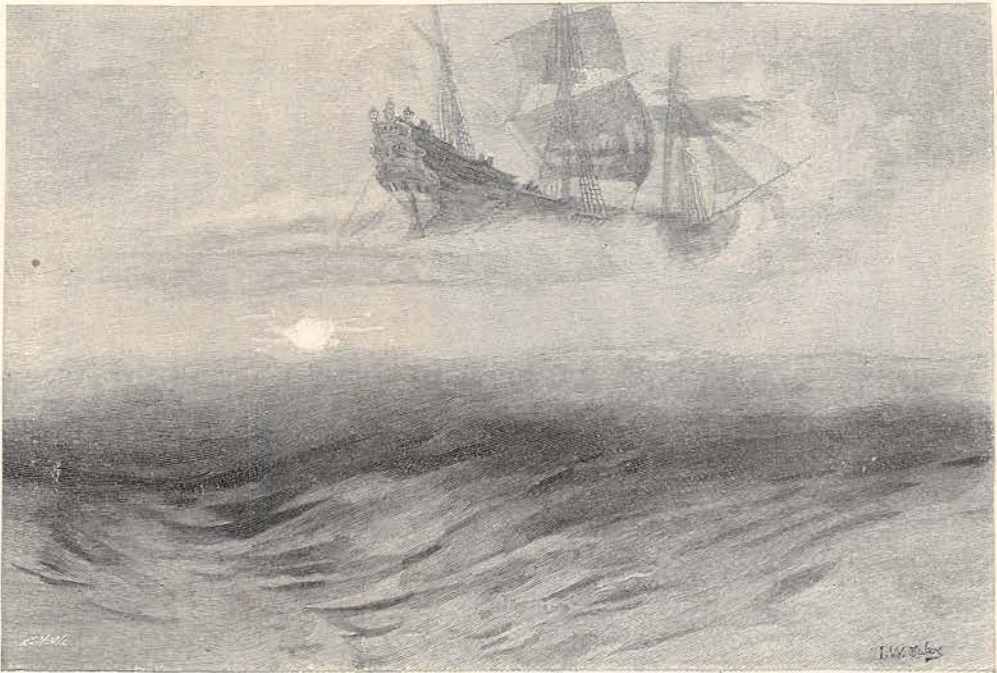
and strange, foreign cats especially, and while the people forward were not superstitious, still, queer things had happened of late, and he felt it to be only fair that the captain should know how the men looked at it.

Lafferty's pampas cat was the last we shipped that cruise, and the rats had a fine run of the holds thereafter, until one day Bill Clarke, late champion light-weight of South Australia, and then proprietor of a snug English pub and dog-pit in Callao, came off to the ship by contract, and, baiting his traps with melon rinds, caught in two nights more rats than may be chronicled here.

This, of course, is an over-long yarn to reel off in order to prove that superstition is still

itances and developments. In the youth of the world its manifestations were the earliest recorded utterances of men concerning the visible phenomena of the universe, and its grip on simple words was an outgrowth of the fear of the unknown. Of all people sailors must deal at first hand, and helplessly to some degree, with the most unknowable, uncontrollable of material problems, the sea, and it is only natural that their folk-lore should be, in part, land stories fitted with sea meanings, and in part blind explanations of sea phenomena — both being maintained valorously by the gruesome conservatism of the seaman, even after rational causes come to the rescue.

In earlier days superstition was as much a



THE FLYING DUTCHMAN.

ENGRAVED BY E. H. DEL'ORME.

foolishly potent with sailors. It is as easy as fudging a day's work to show that, in the case quoted, coincidences were mistaken for causes, and that the evidence needed a link or two; but it was another curious coincidence that no more men died suddenly that cruise after we gave up enlisting cats.

AFTER studying them fairly well, I doubt if modern sailors are more superstitious than any other class with equal training and opportunities. I believe that everybody is leavened with superstition, notably the noisiest scoffers, and those mountebanks, the Thirteen Clubs, for these gentry protest too much. It seems to be a human instinct, modified by racial inher-

part of every ship as the water she was to float in: for it entered with the wood scarfed into her keel, and climbed to the flags and garlands waving at her mastheads; it ran riotously at her launching, controlled her name, her crew, and cargoes; it timed her days and hours of sailing, and convoyed her voyages. It summoned apparitions for her ill fortune, and evoked portents and signs for her prosperity; it made winds blow foul or fair, governed her successful ventures and arrivals, and, when her work was done, promised a port of rest somewhere off the shores of Fiddler's Green, where all good sailors rest eternally, or threatened foul moorings deep in the uncanny locker of Davy Jones of ballad memory.

In many countries stolen wood was mortised into the keel, as it made the ship sail faster at night; though if the first blow struck in fashioning this keel drew fire, the ship was doomed to wreck upon her maiden voyage. Silver (usually a coin) placed in the mainmast-step went for lucky ventures, and misguided indeed was the owner who permitted any of the unlucky timbers to enter into the construction. Something of the ceremonious character given to launchings survives to this day; where of old ships were decked with flowers and crowns of leaves, flags now flutter; the libation poured on the deck, the purification by the priest, the anointing with egg and sulphur, find their ex-

bring ill luck—lawyers, undoubtedly, from the antipathy of sailors to the class, a dislike so pronounced that “sea-lawyer” is a very bitter term of reproach, and “land-shark” is a synonym. Clergymen—priests and parsons—are unlucky, probably because of their black gowns and their principal duty on shipboard,—that of consoling the dying and burying the dead,—though possibly because the devil, the great storm-raiser, is their especial enemy, and sends tempests to destroy them. Women—who may reason out their unpopularity?—save that a ship is the last place for them, or perhaps because of the dread of witches; for of all spell-workers in human form none is so dreaded as the female brewers of hell-broth. Like the priests of the middle ages, they can raise a prime quality of storm by tossing sand or stones in the air, and, like Congreve’s Lapland sorceress, are supposed to live by selling contrary winds and wrecked vessels.

Russian Fins—or “Roosian” Fins, as Jacky has it—were, and are yet, wizards of high degree. Hurricanes blew, calms beset, gales roared, as they willed, and their incantations began to operate by the simple sticking of a knife in the mast. If they wished to drive the rats out of a vessel, they shoved the point of a snicker-snee into the deck, and every rat ran for the sharp blade, and willy-nilly performed *hara-kiri*. No one ever saw, in sailor lore, a penniless Russian Fin, for by slipping his hand into his pocket he can always produce a gold doubloon—why a gold doubloon, no one seems to know, but it is always that coin; his rum bottle, often consulted silently and alone, is never full nor empty—a gentle plashing of tide—half-tide bringing fat content, and woe be to the incautious mariner who bites the weather-side of his thumb at him, for harm will surely follow.

Certain families could never get sea employment under their own surnames, not even such members as



ENGRAVED BY GEORGE P. BARTLE.  
RATS LEAVING A SHIP.

emplars in the well-aimed and wasted magnums which are shattered on the receding cut-water as the craft, released from the ways, slips, well-greased, into the sea; the jar of wine put to his lips by the captain, and then emptied on deck, the cakes and ale set before the crew, the stoup of wine offered to passers-by on the quay, and the refusal of which was an evil omen—all are realized in these sadder lustrems by the builder’s feast in the mold-loft.

Lawyers, clergymen, and women are ever looked at with disfavor on sailing-ships as sure to

were born with caul, for they were tabooed, barred; and many animals—hares, pigs, and black cats, for example—could neither be carried nor mentioned on shipboard, save under very stringent conditions. Scarborough wives kept a black cat in the house to assure their husbands’ lives at sea; but on voyages every black cat carried a gale in her tail, and if she became unusually frolicsome a storm was sure to follow. Years ago, on board the flag-ship *Franklin*, up the Mediterranean, we had a yarn that illustrated a survival of this antipathy



THE PHANTOM BURNING SHIP.

ENGRAVED BY J. W. EVANS.

to certain forms of animal life. Two old quartermasters were heard during the morning watch exchanging in the cockpit dismal experiences of their dreams the night before. One was particularly harrowing, for the narrator wound up with, "And I say, Bill, I was never so afeared in my life; when I woke up it seemed as true as day, and I was all of a tremble like an *asp on a leaf*."

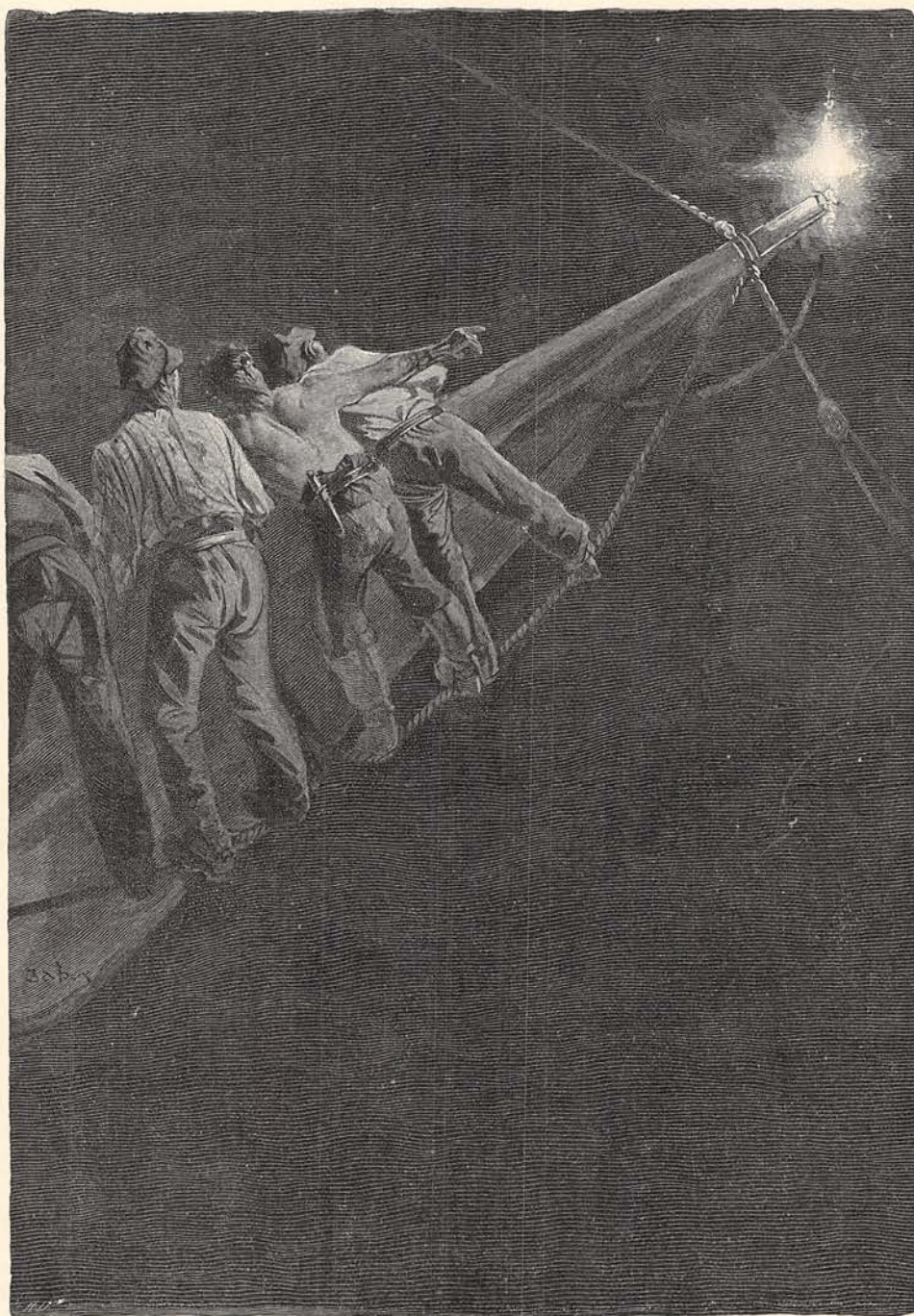
"What 's that?" said the other. "Pipe down; don't mention that rep-tile; he 's a hoodoo on shipboard."

Whistling — and let us honor this sweet tradition — is very much against the proprieties of sea-life. You may, in a calm, if not a landsman, woo with soothing whistle San Antonio or Saint Nicholas, and a lagging wind may be spurred in consequence by these patron saints of the mariner; but once the ship is going, never,

wise and wary passenger, whistle if you fear keel-hauling, for, like the Padrone in the Golden Legend, you may find

Only a little while ago,  
I was whistling to Saint Antonio  
For a cap-full of wind to fill our sail,  
And instead of a breeze he has sent a gale.

Figureheads were at first images of gods, and later of saints and sea-heroes, and were held in high reverence, and the eyes glaring from each bow of a Chinese junk enable the boat to voyage intelligently — for "no have two eyes, how can see? No can see, how can do?" is the shibboleth of their sailors. Ships' bells were blessed, and to-day if a mistake in their striking is made by a stupid messenger-boy, they are struck backward to break the spell. In one ship to which I was attached the bell had



ST. ELMO'S FIRE.

ENGRAVED BY H. DAVIDSON.

come down to us from the *Ticonderoga*, through the *Thetis*, I think, and was supposed to be under the special control of a blue spirit of mischief. Why the blue spirit should indulge in such vagaries is hidden, but in the middle of deep-sea nights, when the moon rode in an

auspicious quarter, and the wind blew with the force, and from the direction, necessary for the spell, the blue bell was bound to make a complete circle, and ring out nine bells stridently. Of course no one ever heard or ought to hear nine bells at sea, for eight bells are as fixed in limit as

the decalogue; but this was promised. Whether the conditions failed to coördinate, I cannot say, but though the bell was watched by all sorts and conditions of men, the occult ceremony was never performed for our benefit. Is it necessary to add that by report it was a common event in the other ships mentioned?

The proverbial desertion of sinking ships by rats is founded upon reason, and undoubtedly occurs, for as rats like to prowl about dry-footed, and will stick to one place so long as food is plenty, it is probable that the ship they leave is so leaky and unseaworthy that their under-deck work is too wet to suit them.

Most of the ceremonies of ship-life are of long descent, but, I believe, none is more ancient or more honored in the observance than those attendant upon crossing the line, whether it be the equator with deep-water ships, or the arctic circle with whalers. The details of the performance vary even among the ships of the same waters; but it is always a tribute to Neptune exacted of the officers, crew, and passengers new to the waters entered. Basset gives a description, taken from Marryat's "Frank Mildmay," which is true of our ships in essentials. With us the ship is usually hailed from the supposed depths of the sea the evening before the line is to be reached, and the captain is given the compliments of Neptune, and asked to muster his novices for the sea-lord's inspection. The next day the ship is hove-to at the proper moment, and Neptune, with his dear Amphitrite and suite, comes on board over the bow or through a bridle-port, if the weather permits.

Neptune appears [writes Marryat] preceded by a young man, dandily dressed in tights and riding on a car made of a gun-carriage drawn by six nearly naked blacks, spotted with yellow paint. He has a long beard of oakum, an iron crown on his head, and carries a trident with a small dolphin between its prongs. His attendants consist of a secretary with quills of the sea-fowl; a surgeon with lancet and pill-box; a barber with a huge wooden razor, with its blade made of an iron hoop, and a barber's mate, with a tub for a shaving-box. Amphitrite, wearing a woman's nightcap with seaweed ribbons on her head, and bearing an albicore on a harpoon, carries a ship's boy in her lap as a baby, with a marlinspike to cut his teeth on. She is attended by three men dressed as nymphs, with currycombs, mirrors, and pots of paint. The sheep-pen, lined with canvas and filled with water, has already been prepared. The victim, seated on a platform laid over it, is blindfolded, then shaved by the barber, and finally plunged backward into the water. Officers escape by paying a fine in money or rum.

To this day it is the roughest sort of rough man-handling, but it is a short shrift for those who take it good-naturedly, and, like bear-baiting, affords great amusement to the spectators.

VOL. XLVIII.—54.

On Good Friday, in many ports, Roman Catholic sailors cockbill their yards, slack their gear, and scourge Judas, as signs of mourning. In the harbor of New York I have seen the effigy of Judas hanged to a yard-arm until sunset, then lowered, and so belabored and beaten, so cuffed and kicked, that it seemed a mercy when it was burned to a charred mass in the galley, and the ashes were scattered with contumely on the water. Spanish sailors, on certain days of the week or month, lay aloft at sunset, and beat the sheaves and pins of the blocks—pulleys, as shore people call them. This is driving the devil out of the gear, and a fine din it makes, for the Spaniards put their brawn into it. After all, it is nothing more than a general order popularized, and is the result of a certain disaster, when a Spanish squadron, surprised at a long occupied anchorage, could not make sail to engage the enemy because the pins and sheaves of all the principal blocks had rusted in their seatings.

Nothing was more common at sea in the old days than apparitions, from horned and monstrous seamen, through saints and red-bearded Norse-gods, to that dreadful specter of the Cape, Adamaster, who is sometimes seen even yet, in the twilight, hovering in cloud and mist over the white folds of the Devil's Tablecloth mantling the headland of Good Hope. More picturesque than any other, perhaps, is the Flying Dutchman, whose tale is told with variations in nearly every maritime country, and whose sad mishaps have formed the burden of many a song and story. Jal gives the accepted version thus:

An unbelieving Dutch captain had vainly tried to round Cape Horn against a head gale. He swore he would do it, and when the gale increased, laughed at the fears of his crew, smoked his pipe, and drank his beer. He threw overboard some of the crew who tried to make him seek a port. The Holy Ghost descended upon the vessel, but, firing his pistol at the apparition, he pierced his own hand and paralyzed his arm. He cursed God, and was then condemned to navigate always without putting into port; only having gall to drink, and red-hot iron to eat, and a watch to keep that should last forever. He was to be the evil genius of the sea, to torment Spanish sailors; the sight of his storm-tossed bark to carry presage of ill-fortune to luckless beholders. He sends white squalls, disasters, tempests. Should he visit a ship, wine sours, and all food becomes beans; should he bring or send letters they must not be touched on pain of death and damnation. His crew are all old sinners of the sea, sailor thieves, cowards, and murderers, who suffer and toil eternally, and have little to eat and less to drink.

Cooper tells us that the vessel is said to be a double-decker, always to windward, sometimes in a fog during clear weather, often under all



sail in a gale, and on occasions veering and hauling among the clouds. The ship's history has been chronicled with the particularity of a great war, and in the late Lieutenant Bassett's book will be found many curious particulars of her woful fate and of her Heaven-cursed skipper.

To the adventurous globe-trotter who has climbed the rock-path to the sailors' church of Notre Dame de la Garde, dominating the Phœnician port of Marseilles, the potent influence of sacrifices and offerings for perils passed and to come must be no old story. There is a pathos, even for the worldly, in the quaint ships and galleons, in the rusting marlinspikes and shattered tiller-heads, swinging to the mistral, in reverential offering before the shrines. These graces after danger, these insurances against evil to come, circle the world. No people have escaped the influence of such hopes and thanks. Our Indians were fettered by them, and no ceremonious offerings were more common than those which went to appease the angry Spirit of the Waters. On the upper tributaries of the Mississippi, the Indians, with occult rites, gave tribute of tobacco from a beetling cliff to the Great Spirit of the River, and to the winds that smote the waters with blasts from the caverns of the jealous gods. Algonquins in the North, Aztecs, sons of Atahualpa and Marco Capac, in the South — all blew incense out of their pipes, and strewed upon the currents and tide ways just such offerings of tobacco as, in our more subjective days, we give with lost meanings to the

minor gods who rule the man's hour in our feasts.

But not alone did apparitions, or votive offerings which must be made, crowd to daunt the sailor, for in his voyages ghostly lights would gleam suddenly from yard-arms or masthead, and at the bowsprit-cap spectral flames might cast weird reflections upon the water.

High on the mast, with pale and lurid rays,  
Amid the gloom portentous meteors blaze,

is the manner in which Falconer sang of it, though among the Latin seafaring races the St. Elmo's Fire or the corposant is, specially if seen double, the best of omens, and is hailed as evidence of Heaven's care for ship and crew. Dampier described it as a small, glittering light, like a star when it shines at the masthead, like a glow-worm when it appears on deck. He believed it to be some kind of a jelly, but we know now that it is an electrical manifestation which occurs in rarified conditions of the atmosphere, and adheres to the iron of the spars, as the metal is the best conductor available.

Many modern sailors will reject this explanation as incomplete, and in the older days it would have been scoffed at, and banned by bell, book, and candle, for it was one of the commonest and most cherished of superstitions held by the men who went down to the sea in ships and saw the supernatural everywhere.

*J. D. Jerrold Kelley.*

## THE PASSING OF DAY.

BLUE bloom is on the distant hill;  
Mystic grays the mid-air fill.  
The low winds say:  
"Farewell to Day;  
Evening is on her way."

She walks the waters and the land,  
She and Quiet, hand in hand.  
The low winds say,  
"Sweet sounds, obey;  
Soft colors, fade away."

And all the lovely colors go;  
All the sounds; and very low  
The winds say on —  
Do they say on?  
No whisper. Day is gone.

*John Vance Cheney.*