

## Pratt's Cats.

By W. L. ALDEN.

“**T**HERE’S some folks,” remarked Captain Baker, reflectively, as he laid aside the *Nantucket Gazette* and wiped his spectacles, “that has ideas, and some that hasn’t: and it’s them that hasn’t that are lucky. Now, I never had any ideas, beyond doing my duty as a sailorman in whatever situation I might happen to be. The consequence was that I got on peaceably with everybody, and never made more than a middling-sized ass of myself at any one time. Then there was Captain Hank Pratt, of the *Natchez*. Some people used to say that he didn’t know anything whatever, except seamanship and the Bible; and so, in a way, he didn’t. But he was chock-full of ideas, most of which went to show that he ought to have confined himself to seamanship and religion. He was, take him by and large, the best able-bodied A1 Christian I ever heard of, afloat or ashore; but when he tried to bend his ideas on to his innocence it was like bending a three-inch cable to the signal halliards and trying to anchor with the lot.

“I often think of the time we had in the *Natchez* with Captain Pratt’s cats. I was first mate of the ship at the time, and we were lying in Boston Harbour, filling up with New England rum and cotton goods for Singapore and Canton. We had taken in about all she would hold, when Captain Pratt says to me, ‘Mr. Baker, you’ve been ashore several times at Singapore?’

“‘It wasn’t my fault, sir,’ I says—for, next to Port Said, Singapore is the measliest place

in the whole East, and I can’t say worse than that.

“‘I wasn’t asking why you went ashore,’ says the captain. ‘What I want to know is just this: Did you ever see a cat in Singapore?’

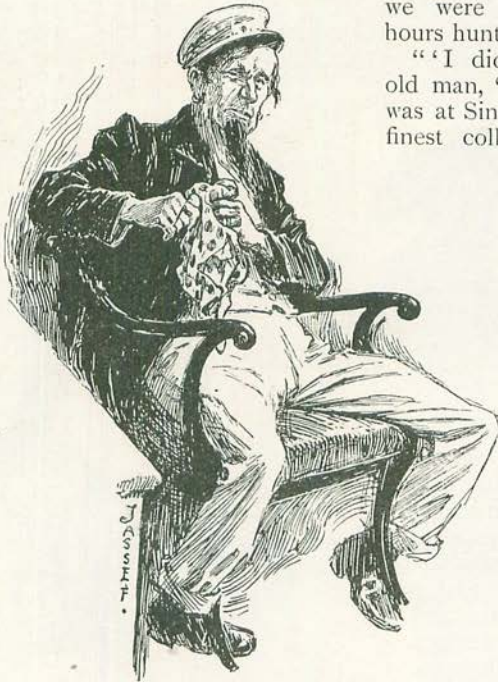
“‘Well, sir,’ says I, ‘I don’t remember any particular cat, but then I haven’t much opinion of cats, and I might pass half-a-dozen without noticing them. You’d better ask the carpenter: he was ashore at Singapore last voyage, for, if you remember, we were delayed twenty-four hours hunting him up.’

“‘I did ask him,’ says the old man, ‘and he said while he was at Singapore he’d seen the finest collection of variegated monkeys, mostly blue, that any sailorman ever saw, even after a month ashore in London, but he couldn’t swear to any cats.’

“‘Might I ask,’ said I, ‘what your particular interest in Singapore cats is pointing to?’

“‘It’s this way,’ says he. ‘I know from what I’ve read that there ain’t a single solitary individual cat in all Singapore. I’ve got it in print in a book down in my cabin, and you can’t

deny what’s in a book. Now, Singapore is just overrun with rats and mice, and the dogs and some other small animal, whose name I can’t lay my hand to at this particular minute, don’t begin to do their duty toward the vermin. What Singapore needs the worst way is cats that have been brought up to know their duty in regard to rats and mice, and will do it. Why, if the Singapore people could lay in a good supply of cats their property would improve in value



CAPTAIN BAKER.



at least 10 per cent. Now, I've been studying over this cat question for some time, and I've come to the conclusion that the man who carries a cargo of cats out to Singapore will make a lot of money.'

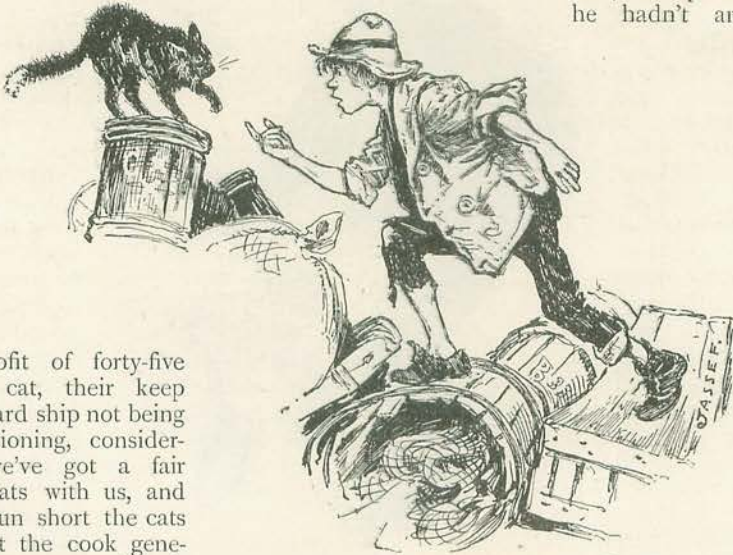
"'How so?'" says I.

"'Look at it from a business point of view,'" says the old man. 'What's the market value of a cat here in Boston? Just nothing at all, says you, and right you are. Now, what ought to be the market value of a cat in Singapore, where there ain't a cat of any kind, and where the mice and rats couldn't be reckoned up with any table of logarithms that was ever yet printed? My idea is that a good article of cat, laid down at Singapore, would fetch an average price of fifty cents in our money. Very good. I calculate to take in about a thousand cats between now and the day we sail. The boys on the wharf will catch them for me, and be glad to do it, for five cents a cat. I shall sell those cats at Singapore for fifty cents apiece, which will be

You just lay that to heart, and have nothing to do with cats.'

"This was speaking a good deal plainer to my superior officer than I generally spoke, but I knew his cat idea was the worst sort of foolishness, and I wanted to have him give it up. But, of course, he wouldn't do anything of the sort. He was determined to take a cargo of cats to Singapore, and, accordingly, the more I might say against it the more he'd stick to his idea.

"Well, that very day Captain Pratt went to work to collect cats. He agreed with a warehouse man on the wharf to keep his cats for him till the day we sailed, and he offered a reward of five cents to every boy who would get a cat for him. Cats were thick in Boston in those days, and boys were mighty smart. They turned to with a will, and cats fairly poured in, as you might say. I told the captain that there wasn't the least doubt that nine-tenths of the cats were private cats that the boys stole from their owners, and I put it to him, as a pious man, that he hadn't any right to



"BOYS WERE MIGHTY SMART."

a clean profit of forty-five cents per cat, their keep while on board ship not being worth mentioning, considering that we've got a fair supply of rats with us, and if the rats run short the cats will eat what the cook generally throws away. That's my little scheme for turning an honest penny in a new way, and I'd like to hear your opinion of it.'

"'Begging your pardon, captain,'" says I, 'I haven't any opinion of it whatsoever. Likewise the same is my opinion of cats, which are an animal that no man can trust. You'll find long before you're off the Cape that you've made the biggest mistake of your life in meddling with cats. I've heard my mother say that there ain't a cat mentioned in the whole Bible, from beginning to end.

encourage boys to steal. But he wouldn't listen to me. He said that the boys looked to him to be good, honest boys, and he wouldn't insult them by suspecting them of stealing.

"About an hour before we sailed the cats were all brought on board and dropped down the main hatchway to the 'tween decks, where the old man calculated that the beasts would be comfortable. We took away the ladder from the hatchway so that



the cats couldn't come on deck, and there were two or three pannikins of fresh water waiting for them below. The crew seemed considerable amused when they saw the cats coming aboard—that is, all except the carpenter. He was a good man, the carpenter, so long as he was at sea, though a bit grumpy in temper, but he always stopped ashore when we were in port, and I'm afraid that he wallowed a good deal in the intoxicating bowl.

"He came aboard just after we had taken in all the cats, and he happened to look down the hatchway and saw the cats. He sort of staggered back and took hold of the fife-rail to support himself. I asked him what was the matter, and he said he felt a little faint. 'By-the-bye, Mr. Baker,' said he, 'is there such a thing as a cat aboard this ship, for it would be mighty unlucky to go to sea without one?'

"'Cats!' said I. 'Why, man, there's a thousand of them in the 'tween decks, that the captain is taking to Singapore on speculation.'

"You never saw a man look so relieved.

"'Oh,' says he. 'If they're real cats, that's all right. I don't mind real cats.'

"Well, we got on very well with the cats for the first twenty-four hours, though the cabin-boy, whose bunk was close to the bulkhead that divided him from the cats, said he never slept a wink, owing to the awful fighting that went on among them. But the next day the second mate, who wanted something got up from below, had the ladder put down the hatchway, and the cats, supposing that it was meant for their accommodation, went on deck in such a hurry that, before anything could be done to stop them, the whole gang took possession of the main deck and the quarter-deck and the fo'c's'le, and the spars and rigging generally. The second mate ordered the men to catch the cats, but, beyond catching two or three that were either sick or particularly tame, not a cat was caught. Then our troubles began.

"You'll say that a cat isn't dangerous, but just you try going aloft, especially at night, and meeting cats in the tops and the cross-trees and on every blessed yard-arm—particularly if the cats have got the notion that the top hamper of the ship belongs to them, and that every man who goes aloft is trying to catch them. The moment a man's head came over the edge of the top he'd get two or three pairs of claws right in his face, and the wonder was that every man-jack

didn't lose his eyes. If you laid out on a yard for any purpose there would be a cat waiting for you, and she'd swear and claw at you till you was glad to give it up and slide down by a backstay singing out that you were half-killed. Why, there was three of the heaviest and best fighters of the lot—wild toms that had been champion fighters along the wharves—that took possession of the main-topgallant yard, and for three days we couldn't furl that sail, though it was blowing altogether too hard for any prudent man to carry it. When the halliards were let go and the sail brailed up the cats sat in the slings of the yard and waited for the men to come up and furl the sail. There was no knocking them off the yard, for they'd hang on with their claws and teeth like grim death. Whenever a man tried to get on the foot-rope they were ready for him, and let him have it right in the eyes. The end of it was that the men refused to go on the yard, and we had to hoist the yard up and sheet the sail home to prevent it from being lashed into ribbons.

"The old man was the only one who wasn't in a rage with the cats. He said that the poor animals were only having a little innocent play, and that as soon as they got used to the ship they would be as gentle and polite as so many women. Perhaps they would have been had they been fed properly, but as it turned out there wasn't any proper food for them. The only fresh meat we had on board was three or four pigs and about a dozen chickens, and the old man wouldn't have any of them killed for the first fortnight, because, as he said, he had so much fresh meat ashore that he was tired of it and wanted nothing better than salt horse. Now, a cat will eat most anything that isn't salt, but hates salt worse than poison. But salt pork one day, and salt beef the other day, were all the provisions the captain would serve out to the cats. He said that what was good enough for him and his officers and men was good enough for cats, and if the cats didn't like it they could turn to and catch rats. That sounded fair enough, but the truth was that there wasn't a rat on board. They had all bolted in Boston as soon as they realized that we were filling up with cats.

"What with being half-starved, besides feeling themselves insulted by being offered salt meat, those cats got more and more savage every day. It wasn't safe to be on deck at night without a lantern in one hand and a belaying-pin in the other, for you were liable to have a cat jump out at you any



minute, and carry off a piece of your leg or your hand. They stole into the fo'c's'le and tried to bite the watch below, so that the men didn't dare to go to sleep without setting a man to watch the hatchway. After we had been about three weeks out, and had just passed the line, owing to having had fresh breezes on the port or starboard quarter ever since leaving port, the men came aft, all hands of them, in the first dog-watch, and told the old man that they'd had all the cat they could stand, and that it was the wish of all hands that he'd heave the cats overboard. The old man was as sweet as new milk. He told the men that the conduct of the cats had been regular outrageous, and he gave them permission to heave every cat overboard then and there. You see, he knew what he was about. There was no catching any of those cats, as I said a little while ago, and giving the crew permission to heave them overboard, while it sounded reasonable, didn't amount to anything.

"After we passed the line we stood over toward the South American coast, so as to get the trade wind. The cats kept making their usual disturbance, and never seemed to sleep while there was the least chance for any mischief. Luckily the wind had been pretty steady after the first three or four days, and we didn't have much to do, except to brace the yards up now and then. The men were terribly discontented, but they couldn't help themselves. You'll naturally ask why the captain didn't shoot the cats. Perhaps he would have tried it if it hadn't been that he had nothing to shoot with. You see, he was principled against carrying a revolver, and used to say that when he couldn't control his

men by fair means he'd give up going to sea. We all came to the conclusion that there was nothing to be done but just to endure the cats until we got to Singapore; but the look-out wasn't a pleasant one. Those cats, as you might say, regularly besieged us, and we who lived aft never could leave the door of the companion-way, or any side-light that was near the mizzen chains, open for a minute, for fear that the cats would get down below. The old man had a bright idea one day. Says he to me: 'Mr. Baker, those cats are actually more than a Christian man is required to bear. I've made up my mind to poison them.'

"'All right,' says I. 'I'm glad to hear it. But where are you going to get your poison from?'

"'Ain't there a medicine-chest in the cabin?' says he. 'And ain't medicines mostly poison? I'll give them all a dose of horse salts to-night, and we'll see what that will do for them.'

"Now, it's one thing to give a sailor medicine, and another thing to serve it out to a cat. A sailor has a natural taste for medicine, and will take anything you give him, from salts up to castor-oil—but a cat has more sense. The old man left pannikins of salts in all three of the tops that night, and calculated that the majority of the cats would be dead before morning, but they never turned a hair. Not one of them would touch the salts. So we

had to give up the idea of poisoning them.

"We'd been out of Boston just about five weeks when the cats began to go mad. There wasn't any doubt that either the salt food or something else had given them the hydrocephalus, as those scientific doctors call it. Anyway, mad they were, and



"THE USUAL DISTURBANCE."



behaved accordingly. They fought among themselves; they tried to bite every man who came within reach, and they rushed up and down the deck and up and down the rigging, yelling and cursing and spitting, as if they didn't believe there was any hereafter, and didn't care whether there was or not.

"Pretty soon the men understood what was the matter with the cats — which they found out through the second mate being foolish enough to tell them. I don't want to say anything against the second mate, but it can't be denied that he was young, and when a man is young he is naturally foolish. I was foolish myself when I was a young man, and I don't doubt that you were, too— begging your pardon, and not meaning any offence. Well, when the men knew that the cats had gone mad they were dead sure that they would all go mad, too, most of them having been

chewed up considerable since the cats first came aboard, and it being well known that the bite of a mad animal is certain death. The captain did his best to quiet them by telling them that if they were bound to go mad there was no help for it, there being no medicine that could do them any good, and, consequently, the best thing they could do was to say their prayers regular and do their duty to him and the owners.

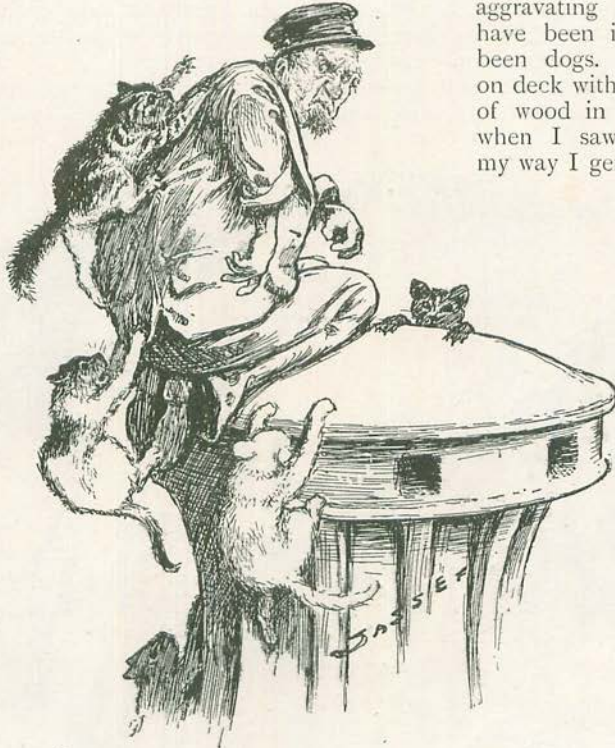
"I judged that he made a mistake in this. He ought to have told them that he had a medicine which was a certain cure for hydrocephalus, and then he ought to have ladled salts into them, with, say, a little tar mixed in with it to give it a flavour, and then the men would probably have been satisfied. But there's the inconvenience of not being able to tell a lie! I can't really blame the

captain for it, but it would have been a sight handier if the *Natchez* had happened to have a captain who was a first-class liar, and could have quieted the men down and avoided any serious trouble with them.

"I don't say that I wasn't mighty afraid of those cats myself, for I never liked the idea of going mad; and to go mad in consequence of a cat was more aggravating than it would have been if the cats had been dogs. I never went on deck without a heavy bit of wood in my hand, and when I saw a cat coming my way I generally went the

other way in double-quick time. Two of the men were caught by the mad cats, and the way they were bit up was a sight. Finally the men broke into open mutiny, and swore they would stop below in the fo'c's'le till the captain would promise to put into the nearest Brazilian port, which was then only

about 300 miles to leeward. The old man gave in and promised, for there was nothing else for him to do, and we braced up on the starboard tack and headed for Pernambuco. The men seemed to be more or less satisfied; but that night, soon after the second mate came on deck in the middle watch, I having gone below and the old man taking all night in, three or four of them jumped on him from behind as he was leaning over the rail, and gagged him and made him fast to the wheel. Then they tossed some provisions and a breaker of water into one of the quarter-boats, and having backed the main-topsail, the breeze being light at the time, they got into the boat, all hands of them, and lowered away, and that was the last that any man ever saw or heard of them.



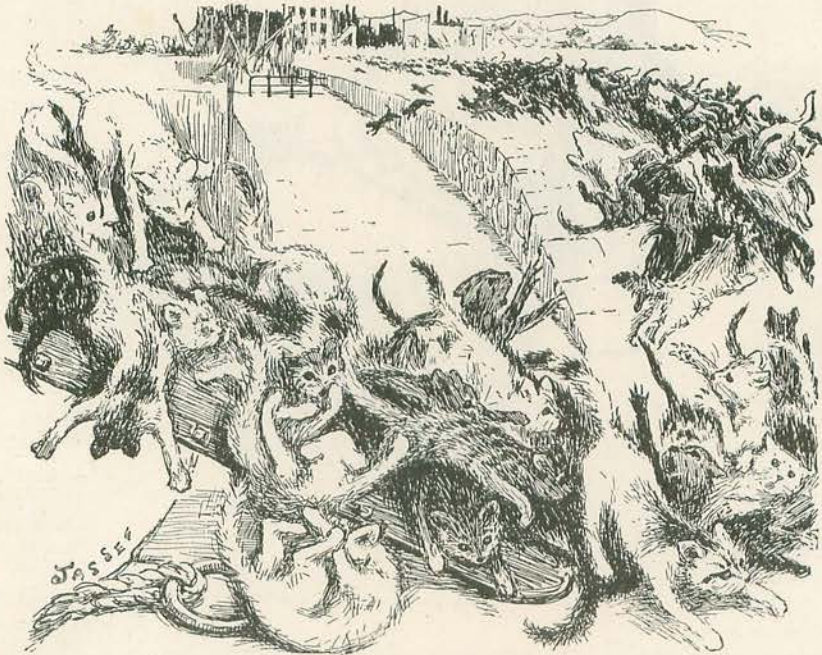
"THEY TRIED TO BITE EVERY MAN WHO CAME WITHIN REACH."



"The men had worked so quietly that neither the captain nor I woke up, but after a while, the old man happening to awake and look at the compass over his berth, saw the ship was heading about north, and knew that something was wrong. So he rushed on deck and loosed the second mate, and told him to call all hands. There was nobody to call except the carpenter and me and the nigger cook and the cabin-boy, but when we were all mustered on deck we braced the yards up again and put her on her course. The second mate was wild with anger and fright, for several times while he was bound

bucó, and the minute the ship was fast to the quay the cats bolted. They went along that quay like a streak of black and tabby lightning, and the natives ran and yelled that a whole regiment of devils had been let loose on them. We never saw any more of those cats, though I did read in the *Boston Globe* after we got back to Boston that an epidemic of hydrocephalus had broken out at Pernambuco, and that the people were that scared they were leaving the town and going into the country.

"We shipped a new crew—and a scaly lot of Dagos they were—and pursued our voyage



"THEY WENT ALONG THAT QUAY LIKE A STREAK OF LIGHTNING."

hand and foot and couldn't help himself, or even sing out, cats had come up and investigated him; but, curious as it may seem, nobody bit him. I calculated that this was on account of the tobacco that he used to use, which was the worst that I ever smelt. Anyway, it showed the advantages of using tobacco, and I've often thought of it when my wife talked to me about the evils of smoking.

"In three days' time we ran into Pernam-

to Singapore and Canton. I never mentioned cats once to the old man, for I could see that he was a good deal cut up about the failure of his speculation; but one day, while we were lying at Singapore, he said: 'Mr. Baker, you warned me not to put my trust in cats, and I laughed you to scorn. You were right, and I beg your pardon. Cats are an irreligious and an unscrupulous animal, and no Christian man, let alone a Christian sailor, ought to have any dealings with them.'