

A Haven of Rest.



THE ROYAL ALFRED AGED SEAMEN'S INSTITUTION.

By Our Own Charity Commissioner. Photos by George Newnes, Ltd.

THESE are few institutions that appeal to the Britisher so vividly as the National Lifeboat Institution. None of the inhabitants of this wind-swept isle live sufficiently far from the sea to be, as we imagine the inhabitants of Siberia are, as ignorant of the ocean as of the moon. No, the sea is part of a Britisher's heritage and he frankly accepts it as such. Without the maritime element, not only much that is characteristic of Britons would be eliminated but their very existence would be imperilled. Instead of dominating the world they might consider themselves lucky if they maintained their independence, or even managed to scrape together enough of this world's goods to keep themselves out of the workhouse.

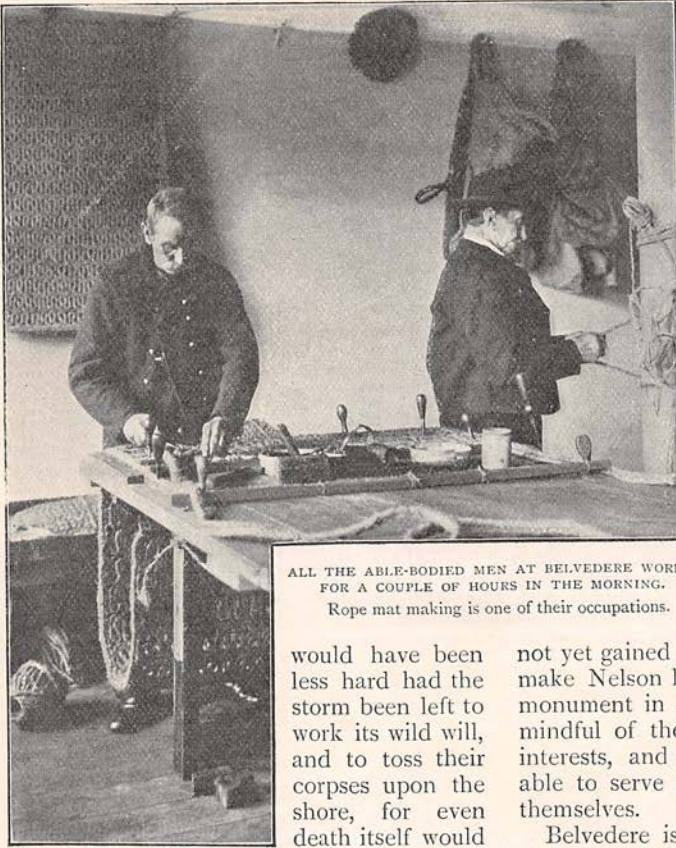
Englishmen, in short, have come to look upon the ocean as a sort of British institution, and the lifeboat and its glorious associations have that flavour of romance which is dear

to the hearts of young and old. A good ship upon the rocks; the howling gale; the crashing breakers; the despairing crew; the timely lifeboat; the glorious rescue—to hear or read of these things thrills the blood and warms the heart.

But it comes with something like a shock to learn that the fate of not a few sailors



THE ENTRANCE HALL AT BELVEDERE.



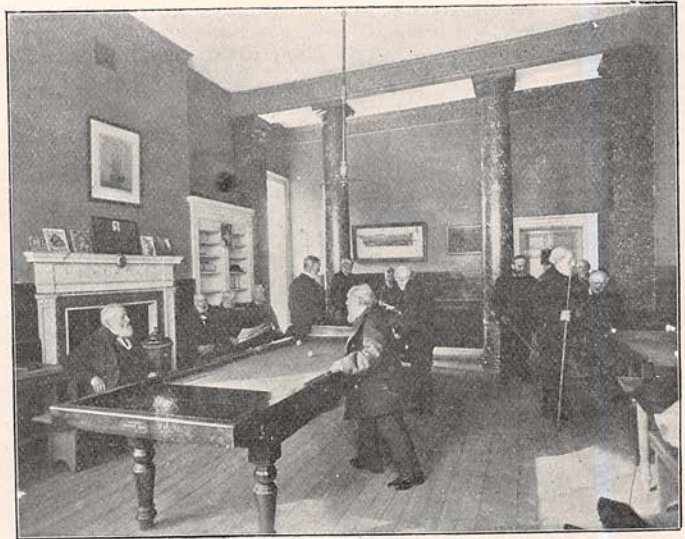
ALL THE ABLE-BODIED MEN AT BELVEDERE WORK FOR A COUPLE OF HOURS IN THE MORNING. Rope mat making is one of their occupations.

seem to be preferable to starvation. And there are hundreds of sailors in this land, which owes nearly everything to the sea and those who go down to it in ships, who are practically penniless. Even sailors grow old occasionally, though they are by no means a long-lived race. Hardship, privation, indifferent food, exposure, make havoc of the best constitutions and it is only the fittest of the fit who survive. Where are these, and what are they doing? Hundreds of these necessitous and worthy seamen, who for forty or fifty years have "weathered the ocean's deep chiding," now too old, though willing, to obtain work, are anxiously waiting to receive the bounty of the Royal Alfred Aged Merchant Seamen's

would have been less hard had the storm been left to work its wild will, and to toss their corpses upon the shore, for even death itself would

not yet gained admittance. It is enough to make Nelson look down from the top of his monument in scorn upon a nation so unmindful of those who have served its best interests, and who now, so far from being able to serve others are not able to serve themselves.

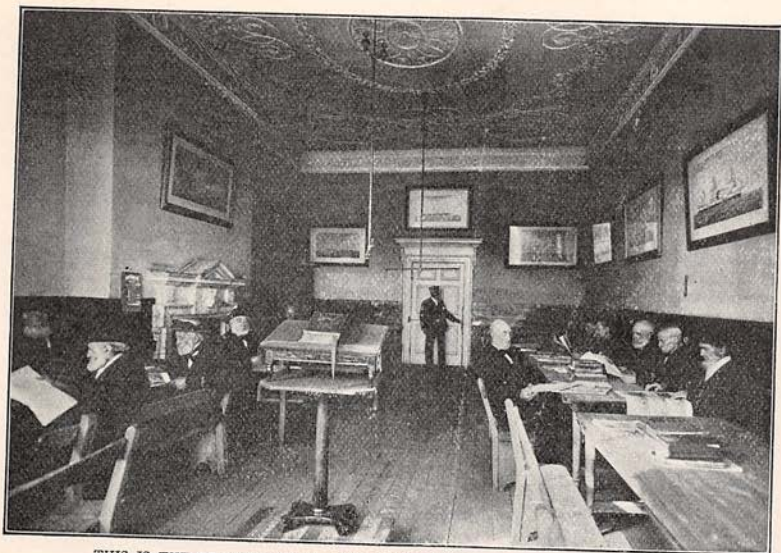
Belvedere is a lovely place. You climb up a steep hill from the railway station, and every step gives you a wider prospect



THE BAGATELLE BOARD IS A SOURCE OF CONSTANT RECREATION. The balls have been worn elliptical, but the old salts are wonderfully skilful nevertheless.

Institution at Belvedere, in Kent.

A great American humorist made a happy *mot* when he said, "Good Americans when they die go to Paris," and this witty saying may be parodied into "Aged Seamen when they do *not* die hope to go to Belvedere," but it is a harbour very difficult to make. The bar is barely covered at ordinary tides and it takes a very high one to float them over. The fact is, the funds of this splendid and national Institution are so inadequate that the Committee have to do what they *can* and not what they *would*. Many a worthy old salt has literally been knocking at their doors for years and has



THIS IS THE READING ROOM—THE QUIET HARBOUR OF THE INSTITUTION.

of the green land and winding river. The stately mansion which stands upon the top, in the midst of a spacious, well-wooded park, was once a great country house, and by reason both of its site and its spaciousness, it is well fitted for those who have known the dizzy heights of the fore-top and the level wastes of the sky-bound sea. If the house were approached in ignorance of its nature, and the visitor could get as far as the great hall door without encountering an old salt whose appearance would certainly give the secret away, he would begin to suspect the mansion's connection with the sea the minute he entered the hall. Extending almost to the whole length of the wall on the left is a full-rigged model ship, quite a work of art, and the pictures upon the walls and the marble busts upon their pedestals all have a flavour of the briny.

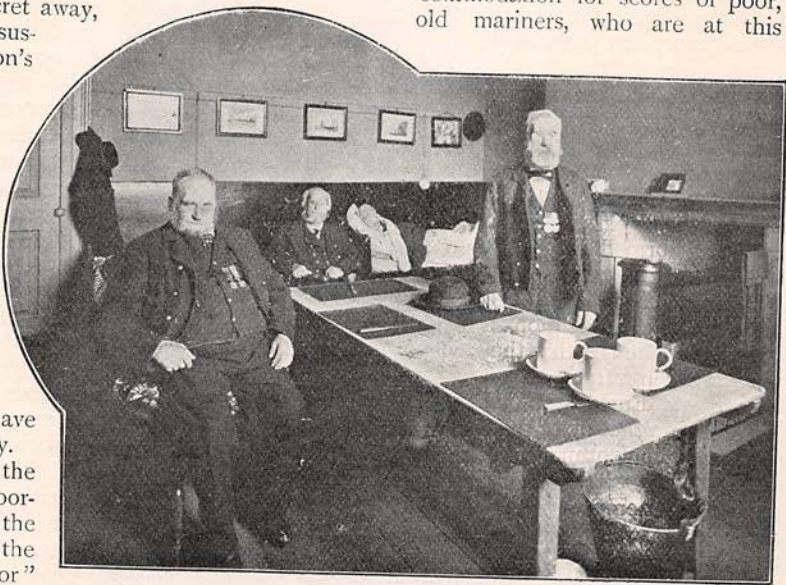
Perhaps, however, the bluff but polite door-keeper would be the main revealer of the secret. He has "sailor" written all over him, and it is emphasised by the

semi-nautical uniform which is universal in the place.

To the landsman it is odd to hear, when one dives into the interior, all sorts of seafaring names applied to the common things of life. The bedrooms are "cabins," the partitions are "bulkheads," the meals are "messes," the governor is the "captain," and the men are called to every function by the ringing of bells.

I suppose this custom gives the old fellows a more home-like feeling, and, since they are all sailors, the jargon of the sea is their mother tongue.

There is a quiet but real pathos about the place. All the men are old, most of them, indeed, very old. They are not as a rule eligible until they are sixty-five, and eligibility, alas, or even sore need for that matter, is by no means an infallible argument for admission. Room there is in plenty, accommodation for scores of poor, old mariners, who are at this



THE HOSPITAL AT BELVEDERE.

Note the pride with which the old mariners display their medals. The aged man on the couch at the back of the room is well-nigh a centenarian.



THE KITCHEN AT BELVEDERE

moment waiting patiently all over the country for the glad news that they have been elected, but the governors do not feel themselves justified in accepting responsibility which must necessarily be for the remainder of life, unless they can see their way to finding the means.

At the very last general meeting of the supporters of this grand institution, it was announced that two generous donors, a gentleman and his wife, had contributed £500 each, on condition that the committee should nominate fifteen more candidates than those originally elected. The result was that this number of old mariners, whose average age was exactly eighty years, were at once transformed from long-ing applicants to joyful recipients. The national character of the institution is attested by the fact that they were chosen from every corner of England. Can you imagine the joy of these veritable "ancient mariners" when the glad news was carried to them that at last, after years of waiting in most cases, the liberality and kindly sympathy of two Christian souls had all at once carried them out of the storm into the quiet and peace of the harbour?

Many of the men one sees in the pleasant reading room or having a quiet game of bagatelle in the recreation room, have been in their time masters of vessels, and it is by no means an uncommon thing for men who have served all their lives before the mast to find themselves again, as it were, in the same ship with their former captain. Such, too, is the permanence of the sea tradition, that those who have been officers in the old days are treated by the common sailors with very uncommon respect. It is surprising what fine faces many of the old men have, as our photographs will prove. The elemental battle has given, even to the unlettered, an expression of self respect, while the old habit of command has left upon the faces of the one-time officers among these men a quiet dignity which is very becoming. Nothing vitiates so-called charity so much as the pauperisation of its recipients; but there are no paupers here. They are men every inch of them, even though they are old "hulks" stranded upon the sands of time.



MR. J. BAILEY WALKER,
Secretary of the "Royal Alfred."
Photo Brown, Barnes, and Bell.

It is scarcely necessary to describe either the place or its inhabitants in detail, our pictures do this so thoroughly. But it is a place well worthy of a visit, and the secretary, Mr. Bailey Walker, who has been in the service of the "Royal Alfred" for twenty years, and whose whole heart is in it, will be only too glad to grant every facility to those who wish to see the place for themselves, if they write to him at 58 Fenchurch Street, London, E.C.

One of the speakers at the annual meeting struck the right note. When commenting upon the fact that two hundred and ten applicants had again failed to gain admittance to the institution, he said: "I do not think that anyone who has studied the growth of the British Empire can for a moment doubt that our present proud position is greatly dependent upon our merchant seamen. Everyone should feel an interest in the men of the sea, for we should be starved out in a very short time if it were not for them. Our interests are vitally bound up in the welfare of the men who man our ships, carry on our commerce, and guard our shores, and we ought to ask ourselves whether we are doing what we should for the men who have so generously contributed to the making of our Empire. I think it is shameful that two hundred and ten men, who have long and faithfully served us, should be left out in the cold to-day. Long have they been knocking at the door of this charity, and still they knock in vain. Some of those who preceded me have expressed faith in bazaars and concerts, but I would say 'Have faith in God,' and the day will surely come when you will be enabled by an awakened and generous people to meet the needs of your many applicants, and thus liquidate the debt we owe to the brave men who

have grown old in serving their Queen and country."

Much has been said concerning the Home of this National and worthy Institution at Belvedere, but perhaps a deeper pathos may be found in the lives of the many out-pensioners who receive, on the second day of each month (truly a red-letter day for them), the "Royal Alfred's" bounty in the shape of a cheque for £1. Not only does it bring joy to Darby, but there nearly always is a Joan to share the hardships of his enfeebled years. No love-sick maiden

watches for the postman with more eagerness than do the aged couple who await their monthly dole,

for therein is the wherewithal to pay

the rent and keep the wolf from the

door. Many a

poor old salt with failing sight

and fast drooping frame has

cheered his heart with the prospect of "that

little pension." But the Institution cannot do all it would; if

Britannia only responded more readily to the cry of these "old men

of the sea," and oh! how often the weary eyes have

closed for ever ere the long-awaited relief has

arrived. Or again, Darby and Joan are short with the rent, and the dear old

cottage that has sheltered them and theirs during

their more prosperous

years has been closed upon them. Who can look upon that white sign, whose

words, "House to Let," tear at the heart-strings of the aged couple, as they take

their way, with many a yearning backward look, to the workhouse, without realising, as they never realised before, the need

of such a work as this, that from such a fate we may save many of the toil-worn "MARI-
NERS OF ENGLAND"?

Since the opening of the institution nearly 1800 old sailors, hailing from all ports and places of the United Kingdom, have enjoyed, either as inmates or out-pensioners, the per-



AUTUMN LEAVES.

manent benefits of the noble charity. No wonder that great sea-writer, W. Clark Russell, should say:

"I claim for this institution the possession of a peculiar element of pathos such as no man who has not beheld the aged, the stricken, the helpless, the broken-down men congregated within its walls, can form any idea of. As you survey them their past arises; you think of the black and stormy night, the frost and snow, the famine and shipwreck—all the perils which sailors encounter in their quest or carriage of that which makes us great and prosperous as a nation: and then reflections on the dire ending which must have befallen these tempest-beaten, time-laden men but for the charity that provides them with a refuge, break in upon you, and you feel that no words of praise can be too high for such an institution, and that no money dedicated by generous hearts to the alleviation of human suffering can be better directed than to the exchequer of this aged seamen's home."

Yes, we find it easy to sing—

"O hear us when we cry to Thee
For those in peril on the sea,"

but do we stretch out a helping hand to those

who, having escaped the dangers of ocean, are in peril of poverty, sickness, and starvation on land? Sailors are not, perhaps, a thrifty race. They are open-handed and generous, and often the prey of designing and wicked people. But are they to suffer for this? Where innocence and credulity fall into the net of vice and cunning, though the latter deserves our scorn, the former claims our pity.

But open-handedness is only a slight cause of the poverty in old age of many seamen. Had you listened, as I did, to Mr. Bailey Walker's moving stories of dire calamity and heart-breaking misfortune, your hearts would have been stirred to pity as mine was. So, when you hear the wintry gales blowing and the sleety rain beating upon your windows, uplift a prayer not only for those who are toiling in the trough of the sea, but also for those who, nearing the end of life's voyage, see, instead of the haven of rest, naught but the jagged rocks of misfortune and penury, and then make your prayer a reality by sending a Christmas Gift to the dear "Old Salts." The Editor of *The Sunday Strand* will very gladly forward it if you care to make him your almoner.

