1849

Recollections of the Sea

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.dickinson.edu/collegian
Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
"Recollections of the Sea." The Collegian 1, no. 2 (1849).
Available at: http://scholar.dickinson.edu/collegian/vol1/iss2/14

The Collegian is a literary magazine published by the Belles Lettres and Union Philosophical Societies at Dickinson College in 1849. For more information, please contact scholar@dickinson.edu.
RECOLLECTIONS OF THE SEA.

To a casual observer the effects of gambling are rarely seen. To look upon a set of jovial young fellows playing a game of "whist," or "backgammon," one would scarcely venture to affirm that they were otherwise than innocently employed; but gambling, like every other evil, may be compared to a maelstrom, into the outer circles of which the little boat glides imperceptibly, and the unconscious victim sports with the rippling waves, while his bark moves on with streaming colors, and heeds not that "the fairy-like music stealing o'er the sea" is the roar of distant danger, until he awakes to shriek, as he sinks amid the whirl and foam of the engulfing vortex.

As the recurrence to scenes of our boyhood days frequently refreshes our minds, especially when cramped beneath the press of college studies, I often, while seated in my studium, recur to incidents I met with while connected with the United States Navy. The following illustrates my remarks above, and I give it as nearly as I can verbatim, as it was related to me. The main facts are strictly true.

Gambling is a crime which, in the United States service, has always been strictly prohibited, and the severest punishment awarded the unfortunate individual detected in practicing it. Notwithstanding all the vigilance of the officers, there are always to be found some who spend their leisure time in this pernicious practice; and many a promising young man have I seen reduced to a mere skeleton, by what is called the gambler's fever; indeed I know one who wasted away until he was little more than a walking shadow, and at last mysteriously disappeared, no one knew how.

On the birth-deck of the frigate, between the hours of seven and eight in the evening, might be seen a motley group of weather-beaten tars, gathered around a mess chest, upon which was a sperm candle dimly burning; some were reading, others playing checkers; while a third party was listening with intense interest to one who had obtained considerable celebrity for spinning good yarns. Farther forward sat three men, surrounded by a number of very attentive spectators. To an observer, the aspect they presented, was one peculiarly remarkable, added to their overgrown beard and hair, swarthy sun-burnt features, and careless swaggering air, which are common to sailors having been some time at sea, were the quick suspicious glance of the eye of one, the low hoarse chuckle of the other, and the wild vacant stare of the third, whose pale emaciated countenance denoted the inroads of much care and anxiety. The constant changes which took place in the expression of their countenances plainly indicated that they were playing no ordinary game. Sometimes the dark features of one would be faintly illumed with a sarcastic grin, as he coolly pocketed
Recollections of the Sea.

the stakes, while a frown, like the shades of night, would settle upon that of the others. They were undisturbed, except now and then, by the cry of some one on the lookout, "douse the glim—the master-at-arms is about."

One night it was rumored that these men had been informed on by some one of the crew. This produced a considerable agitation among them, as nothing enrages a sailor more than to be reported by one of his own ship's company, and consequently every inquiry was made to find out the informer.

The night had set in dark and gloomy. The wind moaned solemnly, as it swept through the rigging of the tall spars. Numerous collections of sailors were seen seated around the fore hatch smoking; others, differently occupied, were gathered in crowds on the forecastle, or around the halliard racks, while the chorus of some song was pronounced to be "done up brown," as it swelled out upon the evening air from the stentorian voices of Neptune's musical fund. Into a secluded part of the vessel three men were seen stealthily making their way, apparently anxious to escape observation, and now, had we the power to penetrate their thoughts, and behold the workings of their black hearts as they join in consultation deep and dark! Time passed on, and the greater part of the ship's company had retired to rest; some stretched upon the softest plank, while others preferred their hammocks. But the three we left in consultation—what has become of them? Are they wrapped in the arms of Somnus with those around them, peacefully dreaming of by-gone days, and sweethearts in every port? Alas! no. Their consultation broke up at a late hour. We cannot tell the terrible proceedings of that meeting. Suffice it to say, that it was determined that it should be decided by a game of chance which of their number should accomplish their black design. The die was cast, and the lot fell upon S———, the noblest-hearted of the three, and the one perhaps least consenting to their fiendish purposes; but honor, how strange that such men should talk of honor, compelled him to keep his word.

It was night. The dark clouds that gathered overhead in the early part of the evening had cleared away, and the moon shone clear and bright upon the glassy sea. The crew were in profound repose fore and aft. The sails flapped loosely against the masts, and fitful gusts of wind sighed through the slack rigging. The midnight silence was unbroken, save by the toll of the bell and the cry of the lookout.

"It seemed as if the general pulse of life
   Stood still, and nature made a pause, an awful pause,
   Prophetic of her end."

On the gun-deck, near the forehatch, lay a boy wrapped in profound sleep. His long disheveled hair flowing back, displayed an intellect of no ordinary character. The rays of the moon shining through the hatchway, fell on his beautiful features, exhibiting the flush of health upon his fair and
ruddy cheek. Sleep on youthful mariner, and dream on. Let fancy's magical pinions bear thee to thy father's land—let thy fond sister press thee to her bosom, and a mother's warm tear bedew thy cheek—for the last time bid them farewell. Thou shalt never see them more. Perhaps thou art dreaming of future prospects—high hopes, I would fain undeceive thee; but, alas, farewell.

A figure was seen stealing along in the dark, where the moon was obscured by the sails and the bulwarks. Suddenly a man emerged, and approached the hatchway. He looked around, and then gazing down below, his eyes rested upon the boy sleeping on the deck. Taking one of the cannon balls from the rack which surrounded the hatchway, he held it over the boy's head, and let it drop, then rushed away. Suddenly a shriek of horror echoed from the gundeck, and in a short time the ship was filled with the screams of murder.

* * * * * * * * *

It was a beautiful summer's day, and scarcely a cloud was seen in the sky, when the boatswain's shrill pipe sounded, and the cry of "All hands witness punishment," was heard on board of the frigate. The men were all dressed in their musterling clothes, and ordered on deck. To one extremity of the foreyard was attached a block, through which was rove a rope, at one end of which was a noose; at the other a very heavy weight, stopped with a cord, which passed immediately before the mouth of one of the forward guns. A prisoner was slowly led to the forecastle. The solemn sentence was pronounced. At the signal given, the roar of the gun was heard, and ere the sound died away upon the distant waters, or the blue smoke curled above the masts, a spirit stood in the presence of its God.

Ernest Maltravers.

MONTHS since we read Ernest Maltravers. We read it, not as the cold, calculating moralist would have us read such works, with a treble shield of crafty suspicion thrown before our hearts; but we read it as we contend, however erroneously, such a book should be read; with a mind ready to believe all it contained was true; with a heart prepared to sympathize with our favorites, and a disposition to place ourselves in their situations—to identify ourselves with them.

There is a vast deal of pleasure to be derived from the perusal of such a work; and, for our part, we envy not the man who has not a heart that will linger with pleasure over creations as bright and beautiful as those there shadowed forth. Such an one may sneer at this, and talk with disdain of sentimental novel readers; but if it be womanish and weak to love such things, we must plead guilty still, for we have loved the heroes and heroines of Bulwer. About some of them, there is something so pure and so noble