

***MORGAN
ROBERTSON***



***THE GRAIN
SHIP***

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The Grain Ship

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Table of Contents

[FROM THE DARKNESS AND THE DEPTHS](#)

[NOAH'S ARK](#)

[THE FINISHING TOUCH](#)

[THE ROCK](#)

[THE ARGONAUTS](#)

[THE MARRIED MAN](#)

[THE TRIPLE ALLIANCE](#)

[SHOVELS AND BRICKS](#)

[EXTRACTS FROM NOAH'S LOG](#)

I could not help listening to the talk at the next table, because the orchestra was quiet and the conversation unrestrained; then, too, a nautical phrasing caught my ear and aroused my attention. For I had been a lifelong student of nautical matters. A side glance showed me the speaker, a white-haired, sunburned old fellow in immaculate evening dress. With him at the table in the restaurant were other similarly clad men, evidently of good station in life, and in their answers and comments these men addressed the white-haired man as Commodore. A navy captain, I thought, promoted on retirement. His talk bore it out.

"Yes, sirree," he said, as he thumped the table mildly. "A good, tight merchant ship, with nothing wrong except what might be ascribed to neglect such as light canvas blown away and ropes cast off the pins, with no signs of fire, leak, or conflict to drive the crew out, with plenty of grub in the stores and plenty of water in the tanks. Yet, there she was, under topsails and topgallant-sails, rolling along before a Biscay sea, and deserted, except that the deck was almost covered with dead rats."

"What killed them, Commodore," asked one; "and what happened to the crew?"

"Nobody knows. It might have been a poisonous gas from the cargo, but if so it didn't affect us after we boarded her. The log-book was gone, so we got no information from that. Moreover, every boat was in its chocks or under its own davits. It was as though some mysterious power had come

down from above and wiped out the crew, besides killing the rats in the hold. She was a grain ship from 'Frisco, and grain ships are full of rats.

"I was the prize-lieutenant that took her into Queenstown. She was condemned in Admiralty proceedings and, later, restored to her owners. But to this day no man has told the story of that voyage. It is thirty years and more since then, but it will remain one of the unexplained mysteries of the sea."

The party left the table a little later, and left me, an ex-sailor, in a condition of mind not due to the story I had heard from the Commodore. There was something else roused into activity—something indefinite, intangible, elusive, like the sense of recognition that comes to you when you view a new scene that you know you have never seen before. It was nothing pertaining to myself or my adventures; and I had never heard of a ship being found deserted with all boats in place. It was something I must have heard at some time and place that bore no relation to the sea and its mysteries. It tormented me; I worried myself into insomnia that night, thinking about it, but at last fell asleep, and awakened in the morning with a memory twenty-five years old.

It is a long stretch of time and space from that gilded restaurant of that night to the arid plains of Arizona, and back through the years of work and struggle and development to the condition of a sailor on shore beating his way, horseback and afoot, across the country from the Gulf to the Pacific. But in my sleep I traversed it, and, lying on my back in the morning, puffing at my first pipe, I lived again my experience with the half-witted tramp whom I had

entertained in my camp and who changed his soul in my presence.

I was a line-rider for a cattle company, and as it was before the days of wire fences, my work was to ride out each day along my boundary and separate the company's cattle from those of its neighbor, a rival company. It was near the end of the day, when I was almost back to camp, that I saw him coming along the road, with the peculiar swing to his shoulders and arms that, once acquired, never leaves the deep-water sailor; so I had no hesitancy in greeting him after the manner of seamen.

"Well, mate, how are you heading?" I inquired, as I leaned over the saddle.

"Say, pardner," he said, in a soft, whining voice, "kin you tell me where a feller might git a bite to eat around here?"

"Well," I answered, "yes and no. I thought you were a sailorman." Only his seamanly roll had appealed to me. His face, though bearded, tanned, and of strong, hard lines, seemed weak and crafty. He was tall, and strongly built—the kind of man who impresses you at first sight as accustomed to sudden effort of mind and body; yet he cringed under my stare, even as I added, "Yes, I'll feed you." I had noticed a blue foul anchor tattooed on his wrist.

"Come along, old man," I said, kindly. "You're traveling for your health. I'll ask no fool questions and say nothing about you. My camp is just around that hill."

He walked beside my horse, and we soon reached the camp, a log house of one room, with an adobe fireplace and chimney, a rough table, and a couple of boxes for seats. Also, there was a plank floor, a novelty and a luxury in that

country at that time. Under this floor was a family of huge rats that I had been unable to exterminate, and I had found it easier and cheaper to feed them than to have them gnawing into my stores in my absence. So they had become quite tame, and in the evenings, keeping at a safe distance, however, they would visit me. I had no fear of them, and rather enjoyed their company.

I fed and hobbled my horse, then cooked our supper, of which my guest ate voraciously. After supper I filled my pipe and offered him another, but he refused it; he did not smoke. Then I talked with him and found him weak-minded. He knew nothing of consequence, nothing of the sea or of sailors, and he had forgotten when that anchor had been tattooed on his wrist. He thought it had always been there. He was a laborer, a pick-and-shovel man, and this was the only work he aspired to. Disappointed in him, for I had yearned for a little seamanly sympathy and companionship, I finished my smoke in the fire-light and turned to get the bed ready, when one of the rats sprang from the bed, across the floor and between the tramp and the fire; then it darted to a hole in the edge of the floor and disappeared. But its coming and going wrought a curious effect upon that wayfarer. He choked, spluttered, stood up and reeled, then fell headlong to the floor.

"Hello!" I said, anxiously; "anything wrong?"

He got on his feet, looked wildly about the place, and asked, in a hoarse, broken voice that held nothing of its former plaintiveness:

"What's this? Was I picked up? What ship is this?"

"No ship at all. It's a cow camp."

"Log cabin, isn't it?"—he was staring at the walls. "I never saw one before. I must have been out of my head for a while. Picked up, of course. Was the mate picked up? He was in bad shape."

"Look here, old man," I said, gently, "are you out of your head now, or were you out of your head before?"

"I don't know. I must have been out of my head. I can't remember much after tumbling overboard, until just now. What day is this?"

"Tuesday," I answered.

"Tuesday? It was Sunday when it happened. Did you have a hand in picking me up? Who was it?"

"Not me," I said. "I found you on the road out here in a dazed state of mind, and you knew nothing whatever of ships or of sailors, though I took you for a shellback by your walk."

"That's right. You can always spot one. You're a sailor, I can see, and an American, too. But what are you doing here? This must be the coast of Portugal or Spain."

"No, this is a cow camp on the Crossbar Range in the middle of Arizona."

"Arizona? Six thousand miles from there! How long have I been out of my head?"

"Don't know. I've only known you since sundown. You've just gone through a remarkable change of front."

"What day of the month is it?"

"The third day of December."

"Hell! Six months ago. It happened in June, Of course, six months is time enough for me to get here, but why can't I remember coming? Someone must have brought me."

"Not necessarily. You were walking along, caring for yourself, but hungry. I brought you here for a feed and a night's sleep."

"That was kind of you—" He involuntarily raised his hand to his face. "I've grown a beard, I see. Let's see how I look with a beard." He stepped to a looking-glass on the wall, took one look, and sprang back.

"Why, it isn't me!" he exclaimed, looking around with dilated eyes. "It's someone else."

"Take another look," I said. He did so, moved his head to the right and left, and then turned to me.

"It must be me," he said, hoarsely, "for the image in the glass follows my movements. But I've lost my face. I'm another man. I don't know myself."

"Look at that anchor on your wrist," I suggested. He did so.

"Yes," he said, "that part of me is left. It was pricked in on my first voyage." He examined his arms and legs. "Changed," he muttered. He rubbed his knees, and passed his hands over his body.

"What year was it when, as you say, you jumped overboard?" I asked.

"Eighteen seventy-five."

"This is eighteen eighty-four. Matey, you have been nine years out of your head," I said.

"Nine years? Sure? Can you prove that to me? My God, man, think of it! Nine years gone out of my life. You don't know what that means to me."

I showed him a faded and discolored newspaper.

"That paper is about six months old," I said, "but it's an eighteen eighty-four paper."

"Right," he said, sadly and somewhat wildly. "Got a pipe? I want to smoke on this, and think it out. Nine years, and six thousand miles travel! Where have I been, I wonder, and what have I done, to change the very face of me, while I lived with it? It's something like death, I take it."

I gave him a pipe and tobacco, and he smoked vigorously, trembling with excess of emotion, yet slowly pulling himself together. Finally he steadied, but he could not smoke. He put the pipe down, saying that it sickened him. I knew nothing of psychology at the time, but think now that in his second personality he had given up smoking.

I forbore questioning him, knowing that I could not help him in his problem—that he must work it out himself. He did not sleep that night, and kept me awake most of the time with his twitchings and turnings. Once he was up, examining his face in the glass by the light of a match, but in the morning, after a doze of an hour or so, I found him outside, looking at the sunrise and smoking.

"I'm getting used to my new face," he said, "and I'm getting used to smoking again. Got to. Nothing but a smoke will help a fellow at times. What business is this you're in here?"

"Cow-punching—riding out after cattle."

"Hard to learn?"

"Easy for a sailor. I'm only hanging on until pay-day, then I make for 'Frisco to ship."

"And someone will take your place, I suppose. I'll work for my grub if you'll break me in so that I can get the job. I'm through with going to sea."

"Certainly. All I need is to tell the boss. I've an extra saddle."

So I tutored him in the tricks of cow-punching, and found him an apt pupil. But he was heavy and depressed, seeming to be burdened with some terrible experience, or memory, that he was trying to shake off. It was not until the evening before my departure, when I had secured him the job and we sat smoking before the mesquite-root fire, that he took me into his confidence. The friendly rat had again appeared, and he sprang up, backed away, and sat down again, trembling violently.

"It was that rat that brought you to yourself that evening," I ventured. "Rats must have had something to do with your past life."

"Right, they did," he answered, puffing fiercely. "I didn't know you had rats here, though."

"A whole herd of them under the floor. But they're harmless. I found them good company."

"I found them bad company. I was shipmates with thousands of rats on that last passage. Want the yarn? It'll raise your hair."

I was willing, and he reeled it off. His strong self-control never left him from the beginning to the end, though the effect upon me was not only to raise my hair, but at times to stop the beating of my heart. I left him next morning, and

have never seen or heard of him since; but there is strong reason to believe that he never went to sea again, or told that yarn in shipping circles. And it is because I have not seen that old Commodore since the evening in the restaurant, and because I cannot recall the name of the ship, or secure full data of marine happenings of the year 1875, that I am giving that story to the world in this form, hoping it will reach the right quarters and explain to those interested the mystery of the grain ship, found in good shape, but abandoned by all but the dead rats.

"I shipped in her at 'Frisco," began Draper. "She was a big, skysail-yarder loading grain at Oakland, and as the skipper had offered me second mate's berth, I went over and sized her up. She seemed all right, as far as man may judge of a ship in port—nearly new, and well found in gear and canvas, which the riggers had rove off and bent. Her cargo of grain was nearly in, and there would be nothing much to do in the way of hard work. Still, I couldn't make up my mind. Something seemed to prevent me liking the prospect, so I went on up to Oakland to visit some friends, and on the way back, long after dark, stopped again at the dock for another look at her. And this time I saw what was needed to ease my mind and decide me. You know as well as I do that rats quit a ship bound for the bottom, and their judgment is always right, though no one knows why. And I reasoned that if rats swarm into an outbound ship she would have a safe passage. Well, that's what they were doing. Wharf rats, a foot long—hundreds of them—going up the mooring-chains, the cable to the dock, the lines, the fenders, and the gangway, some over the rail, others in through the mooring-

chocks. The watchman was quiet, perhaps asleep; so, perhaps, every rat that went aboard got into the hold. I signed on next morning.

"Nothing occurred aboard that ship except the usual trouble of breaking in a new crew, until we'd got down to about forty south, when the skipper brought up a rat-trap with a big, healthy rat in it. He was a mild-mannered little man, and a rat and dog fight marked the limits of his sporting nature. That was what he was after. He had a little black-and-tan terrier, about the size of the rat, and there was a lively time around the deck for a while, until the rat got away. He put up a stiff fight with the dog, but finally saw his chance, and slipped into the forward companion of the cabin; then, I suppose, he found the hole he'd come up. But the dog had nipped him once, it seemed, for the rat left a tiny trail of blood after him. As for the dog, he nearly had a fit in his anger and disappointment, and when the skipper picked him up he nipped him, too. It was only a little wound on the skipper's thumb, but the dog's teeth were sharp, and the blood had come. The skipper gave him a licking, and the work went on.

"The dog was a spirited little fellow, and used to sit on the skipper's shoulder when we were going about, or wearing ship, or handling canvas, and he would bark and yelp and swear at us, bossing each job as though he knew all about it. It kept the men good-humored, and we all liked the little beast. But from the time of the licking he moped, and finally grew sick, slinking around the deck in a dispirited fashion, refusing any attention, and unwilling to remain a minute in one place. We felt rather sore at the skipper, who seemed ashamed now and anxious to make friends with the dog, for the little bite in his thumb had healed up. This went on for a few days, and then we woke up to what really ailed that

dog. He was racing around decks one morning with his tongue hanging out, froth dropping from his mouth, and agonized yelps and whines coming from him.

"'My God!' cried the skipper, 'Now I know. He was bitten in 'Frisco. He is mad, and he has bitten me. Keep away from him everybody. Don't let him get near you.'

"I'll always count that in the skipper's favor. Bitten and doomed himself, he thought of others.

"We dodged the little brute until he had dropped in sheer exhaustion and gone into a spasm. Then we picked him up with a couple of shovels and threw him overboard. But this didn't end it, for the skipper was bitten. He studied up some books on medicine he had below, but found no comfort. I heard him tell the mate that there was nothing in the medicine chest to meet such an emergency.

"'In fact,' he said, mournfully, 'even on shore, with the best of medical skill, there is no hope for a man bitten by a mad dog. The period of incubation is from ten days to a year. I will navigate the ship until I lose my head, Mr. Barnes; then, for fear of harm to yourselves, you must shoot me dead. I am doomed, anyway.'

"We tried to reassure him, but his mind was made up and nothing would change it. Whether or not he had hydrophobia we could not tell at the time, but we knew that strong and intense thinking about it would bring on symptoms. In the light of after happenings, however, there was no doubt of it. He got sick after we'd rounded the Horn, fidgety, nervous, and excitable, and, like the dog, he couldn't stay long in one place; but he wouldn't admit that the disease had developed in him until the little scar on his thumb grew inflamed and painful and he experienced

difficulty in drinking. Then he gave up, but he certainly showed courage and character.

"'I am against suicide on principle,' he said to Mr. Barnes and me, 'so I must not kill myself. But I am not against killing a wild beast that menaces the lives of human beings. I am to be such a wild beast. Kill me in time before I injure you.'

"But we didn't. We had the same compunctions about killing a sick man that he had about suicide. We strapped him down when he got violent, and after three days of frightful physical and mental agony he died. We buried him with the usual ceremonies, and Mr. Barnes took command.

"He and I had a consultation. We were well up toward the river Plate, and he was for putting into Montevideo and cabling the owners for orders. As he was a competent navigator I advised keeping on; and in this, perhaps, is where I earned my punishment. He took my advice, and we had reached up into the doldrums on the line, when a man turned out at eight bells of the middle watch—midnight, you know—and swore that a big rat had bitten him as he lay asleep. We laughed at him, even though he showed four bloody little holes in his wrist. But, three weeks later, that man was raving around the deck, going into periodic convulsions, frothing at the mouth, and showing every symptom that had preceded the death of the skipper. He died in the same horrible agony, and we realized that not only the skipper, but the rat bitten by the dog had been inoculated with the virus, and that the rat could inoculate other rats. We buried the man, and from that time on slept in our boots, with mittens on, and our heads covered, even in the hot weather of the tropics. It was no use. Mad rats appeared on deck, frenzied with pain, frothing at the mouth,

fearless of all living things, a few at first and after dark, then in larger numbers night and day. We killed them as we could, but they increased. They filled the cabin and forecastles, and we found them in coils of rope up aloft in the tops, the crosstrees, and the doublings of the masts. They climbed everywhere, up or down, on a sail or its leach, a single rope or a backstay. The mate and myself, with the steward, could shut the doors of our rooms and keep them out until they chose to gnaw through, but the poor devils forward had no such refuge. Their forecastles and the galley and carpenter shop were wide open. Man after man was nipped, awake or asleep, on deck or below, or up aloft in the dark, when, reaching for another hold on a shroud or a backstay, he would touch something soft and furry, and feel the teeth and hear the squeak that spelled death for him.

"In two weeks from the death of the first sailor, seven others were sick; and all went through the symptoms—restlessness, talkativeness, and the tendency to belittle the case and to deny their danger. But the real symptom, which they had to accept themselves, was their inability to drink water. It was frightful to see the poor wretches, staggering around with eyes wide open and the terrible fear of death in them, going to the barrel for a drink, only to tumble back in convulsions at the sight of the water. We strapped them down as they needed it, and they died, one by one; for there was no helping them.

"We had started with a crew of twenty, a carpenter, sailmaker, steward, and cook, besides the mate and myself. Eight were gone now, and from the exhaustion of the remainder, due to extra work and loss of sleep, it became difficult to work ship. Men aloft moved slowly, fearing at any moment the sting of small, sharp teeth. Skysails, royals, and staysails blew away before men could get up to furl them.

Gear that had parted was left unrove; for a panic-stricken crew cannot be bullied or coerced. Any of them would take a knock-down from the mate or myself rather than go aloft at night.

"We got clear of the doldrums in time, and by then six more of the crew, including the cook, had been bitten, and things looked bad. I now strongly advised the mate to put in to St.-Louis or some other port on the African coast, land the crew, and wait until the last rat had been bitten by his fellow and died; but he would not have it. To land the men, he said, meant to lose them, and to wait until another crew was sent by the owners. This would be loss of time, money, and prospects. I could only give way, even though the last item pertained solely to him. I was not a navigator, and did not hope for promotion to a command.

"So we held on, dodging the crazed men when the disease had reached their brains, knocking them down and binding them when necessary, and watching them die in their tracks like so many mad dogs. And all this time the number of rats that sought the deck for light and air was increasing. We carried belaying pins in our boots now, ready to swipe a rat that got too close; but as for killing them all this way, it was beyond any chance. There were too many, and they ran too fast. Before the six men had died, others had been bitten, and one had felt the teeth of a maddened shipmate. So the terrible game continued; we had only seven men before the mast now, and the carpenter and sailmaker had to drop their work and stand watch, while the steward quit being a steward to cook for those that were left.

"The man at the wheel had heard me arguing with the mate about making port, and, counting upon my sympathy, had prevailed upon the others forward to insist upon it. Well, you

know the feeling of an officer up against mutiny. No matter what the provocation, he must put the mutiny down; so, when the men came aft, they found me with the mate, and dead against them. We called their bluff, drove them forward at the muzzles of our guns, and promised them relief from all work except handling sail if they would take the ship to Queenstown. They agreed, because they could not do anything else, and the mutiny was over. But my conscience bothered me later on; for if I had joined them, some lives might have been saved. Even though the mate was a big, courageous Irish-American half again as heavy as myself, he could not have held out against me with the crew at my back. But, you see, it would have been mutiny, and mutiny spells with a big M to a man that knows the law.

"Before we reached the Bay of Biscay every man forward, including the carpenter, sailmaker, and steward, had been bitten, either by a mad rat or a mad shipmate, and was more or less along on the way to convulsions and death. The decks, rails, and rigging, the tops, crosstrees, and yards, swarmed with rats darting along aimlessly biting each other, and going on, frothing at their little mouths, and squeaking in pain. By this time all thought of handling the ship was gone from us. The mate and I took turns at steering, and keeping our eyes open for a sail. But a curious thing about that passage is that from the time we dropped the Farallones, off 'Frisco, we did not speak a single craft in all that long four months of sailing. Once in a while a steamer's smoke would show up on the horizon, and again a speck that might be a sail would heave in sight for an hour or so; but nothing came near us.

"The mate and I began to quarrel. We had heeled ourselves with pistols against a possible assault of some frenzied sailor, but there was strong chance that we might use these

playthings on each other. I upbraided the mate for not putting in to St.-Louis, and he got back at me for advising him against putting in to Montevideo. It was not an even argument, for the first sailor had not been bitten at the time I advised him. But it resulted in bad feeling between us. We kept our tempers, however, and kept the maddened men away from us until they died, one by one; then, with the wheel in becket, and the ship steering herself before the wind, we hove the bodies overboard. There was no funeral service now; we had become savages.

"'Well,' said the mate, as the last body floated astern, 'that's done. Take your wheel. I'm going to sleep.'

"'Look out,' I said, grimly, 'that it's not your last.'

"'What do you mean?' he asked, eying me in an ugly way. 'Do you strike sleeping men?'

"'No; but rats bite sleeping men,' I answered. 'And understand, Mr. Barnes, I'd rather you'd live than die, so that I may live myself. With both alive and one awake a passing ship could be seen and signaled. With one dead and the other asleep, a ship might pass by. I shall keep a lookout.'

"'Oh, that's all, is it? Well, if that's all, keep your lookout.' His ugly disposition still held him. He went down, and I steered, keeping a sharp lookout around; for I knew that up in the bay there were sure chances of something coming along. But nothing appeared, and before an hour had passed, Mr. Barnes was up, sucking his wrist, and looking wildly at me.

"'My God, Draper,' he said, 'I've got it! I killed the rat, but he's killed me.'

"Well, Mr. Barnes,' I said, as he strode up to me, 'I'm sorry for you; but what do you want?—what I would want in your place?—a bullet through the head?'

"No, no.' He sucked madly at his wrist, where showed the four little red spots.

"Well, I'll tell you, Barnes. You've shown antagonism to me, and you're likely to carry it into your delirium when it comes. I'll not shoot you until you menace me; then, unless I am too far gone myself, I'll shoot you dead, not only in self-defense, but as an act of mercy.'

"And you?' he rejoined. 'You—you—you are to live and get command of the ship?'

"No,' I answered, hotly. 'I can't get command. I'm not certificated. I want my life, that's all.'

"He left me without another word, and stamped forward. Rats ran up his clothing, reaching for his throat, but he brushed them off and went on, around the forward house, and then aft to me.

"Draper,' he said, in a choked voice, 'I've got to die. I know it. I know it as none of the men knew it. And it means more to me.'

"No, it doesn't. Life was as sweet to them as to you or the skipper.'

"But I've a Master's license. All I wanted was my chance, and I thought my chance had come. Draper, if I'd taken this ship into port I'd have been a hero and obtained my command.'

"So, that's your cheap way of looking at it, is it?' I answered, as I hove on the wheel and kicked rats from underfoot. 'A hero by the toll of twenty-four deaths. Down off the river Plate I didn't realize the horror of all this. Off St.-Louis I did, and advised you. You withstood, to be a hero. Well, I'm sorry for you, that's all.'

"A big rat jumped from the wheel-box at this moment, climbed my clothing, and had reached my chest before I knocked it off with my fist.

"You see, Barnes, the rat does not know, and I did not kill it. But you do know, and I shall hasten your death with a bullet if you approach me. It will not be murder, nor manslaughter. It will be an act of mercy; but I cannot do it now. See how I feel?'

"Oh, God!' he shrieked, running away from me. He reached the break of the poop, then turned and came back.

"Got your gun on you, Draper? Kill me now; kill me, and have it over with. I'm down and done for. There's nothing more for me.'

"I refused; and yet I know that with regard to that man's mental agony for the next few days, culminating in the first physical symptoms of unrest, fever, and thirst, I should have obeyed his request. He was doomed, and knew it. And he was a madman from mental causes before the physical had produced effects, even though the disease ran its course quickly in him. On the third day he was raving of a black-eyed woman who kept a candy store in Boston, and who had promised to marry him when he obtained command.

"I got out a bottle of bromide from the medicine chest and induced Barnes to take a good dose of it. He drank about