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A YARN WITHOUT A MORAL.

By MORGAN ROBERTSON.

[Copyright, 1899, by Morgan Robertson.]
It was in the early days of lake traffic, when vessels were small, discipline lax, and when each forecastle might contain one or more part owners. Dunkirk Sam, Bill Tubbs and Starboard Jack, composing the crew of the little schooner Alma, held no such dual relations with their captain. They drew wages, not profits. But, as their captain was old Long Tom Tucker of their own town, whom they loved and "sassed" and advised and obeyed as they pleased, their treatment of him was in no way calculated to impress strangers with any other belief than that they owned the whole vessel—and Captain Tom too.

At Kingston, after discharging cargo, they had put on their shore clothes and selfishly gone to the theater, leaving Captain Tom to keep ship or go ashore with himself or the cook as he liked. The mate, newly shipped, lived in Kingston, and early in the evening had fled to the bosom of his family. The captain sulked for awhile under the slight put upon him by his "boys," went ashore alone, met his agent, then hunted up his mate and sent him aboard, for the agent had secured him a load from Port Hope to Oswego. Then he hid himself to the one theater of the town, bought a ticket, went in and vainly coaxed the three unregenerates to heed the call of duty. Useless endeavor! They were kind to him—asked him to sit with them, but would not budge until the performance ended. Captain Tom coaxed, ordered, fumed and finally swore; then was collared by a scandalized fat policeman and cast forth into outer darkness, followed by the heartless threat of the three to tell his wife and the minister when they got home, for Captain Tucker was a sturdy pillar of the church.

Filled to the brim with "aggravation," he returned to the wharf where his vessel lay and helped the mate loose the canvas, vowing to pay off the three "sogers" at the first American port. The three left the theater at 11 o'clock and leisurely made their way to the vessel. Had they seen a restaurant they would have satisfied their slight hunger before putting themselves under Captain Tom's domination—not that they anticipated increased peril from the weakness attending empty stomachs, but they knew that the cook, as indifferent to nautical etiquette as themselves, had turned in for the night; hence, there would be no night-lunch prepared—and it was a long time until breakfast.

Discussing the matter made them hungrier. Starboard Jack suggested the advisability of turning back and hunting for an eating house. "for," he said, "the skipper won't turn the cook out for us tonight, but he'll get his own nibble from the galley." They agreed to this, and Captain Tom's prospective selfishness condoned their own mischievous behavior, giving the balance of injury to them. They became outrageously hungry and halted when a rooster aroused by their voices, arose to full stature, clattered at them and settled down again. Fatal mistake.

Starboard Jack testified later that visions of a chicken potpie, partaken of at home, entered his brain, and the savory odor seemed to be in his nostrils. Bill Tubbs admits that his wayward thoughts serenely reviewed an oft regretted early dissipation in which he had disgracefully attended a cockfight. Dunkirk Sam never computed how, but it is on record that Dunkirk Sam was the first to sneak.

"Mighty fine rooster: Shanghai, too," he said.

"Nice and fat," remarked Bill Tubbs, turning square the other way, thus putting temptation behind him.

Why discuss the devious course of criminal thoughts through the doubts and fears of noncriminal brains? Ten tarry digits closed around the neck of the drowsy bird, stifling the indignant outcry; five were later removed to the struggling claws, threatening to rain Starboard Jack's new "go ashore" coat, and three guilty marauders fled through the darkness.

It was blind, illogical crime for crime's sake alone. Their hunger may have suggested the abduction; the abduction could in no way satisfy their hunger. But this did not occur to them. Guilty fear possessed their souls, excluding other thoughts, even of their empty stomachs.

With the rooster snugly imprisoned under Starboard Jack's arm, they tumbled over the Alma's rail and down the forecastle stairs, unheeding the tirade of reproach launched at them by Captain Tom. Here a hurried confab resulted in the raising of the trapdoor and the unceremonious bundling of the nearly choked fowl into the inky darkness of the fore peak. One protesting squeak arose from the depths. Then they changed their clothes, went up and made sail, meekly taking the scolding they had earned, but Captain Tom's wrath finally gave way to astonishment at their submissiveness, and he desisted, for they had given him not one word of "back talk." How could they?

Captain Tom Tucker was a Lake Erie navigator and had brought his little schooner down to glean some of the lucrative barley trade of the lower lake. Knowing nothing of Lake Ontario, he had secured a mate who did, and this was enough—for summer sailing at least. He had no use for charts—would not have one aboard—or any other salt water methods. He believed in carrying courses and distances in his head, where he could get at them when needed.

An hour after the mate had given the course up the north shore and turned in, the fog shut down, moist and thick, blotting out the patch of blacker darkness that loomed up as lead to the northward and making the voice of Dunkirk Sam, heaving the lead at the request of the anxious captain, sound hoarse and resonant as he called out, "No bottom."

Captain Tucker wished, not for a chart, but that he knew that shore better and, not caring to call the mate, took his stand at the weather bow, tooting the fog horn and straining sight and hearing into the wet blanket ahead. The wind was off the land at an angle which just allowed Bill Tubbs at the wheel to lay his course.

In his bunk in the fore-castle was Starboard Jack, making the best he could of his watch below, and beneath him, be it remembered, was the confiscated rooster. Either his conscience or his empty stomach or the fog horn above kept Starboard Jack awake, and he rolled out to enjoy the usual sailor's relief from insomnia—he lighted his pipe.

It was not daylight, nor time for it, and the occupant of the fore peak had no legitimate right or reason to think so, but, he was, no doubt, rather upset by the night's adventure and his powers of discernment unequal to the task of distinguishing between daylight and the flicker of a lighted match showing through the chinks in the fore-castle floor. Or it may be that he understood and merely expressed approval of the light shed on his darkness. He gave vent to a hearty, long drawn crow, which, reaching the ears of Captain Tom on the weather bow, muffled and indistinct, seemed to him to come from the lee side, where there should be nothing but open water.

"Great snakes, where are we?" he shouted. "Hear that, Dunkirk? Did you hear it? Light up the jib sheets. Hard-alee. There's land over there."

Around went the little vessel. Starboard Jack heard with dismay the sounds beneath and above and started up to forestall any further mischief by honest confession, but the sight of Dunkirk Sam's round face, shaking with silent, unholy glee as he peered down the hatch during the transit from jib sheet to jib sheet, sent him back. Dunkirk Sam returned to the lead, while Captain Tom tooted the horn from the weather bow, now, of course, the other side. When a lonely rooster begins to crow, it is hard to guess when he will stop. The schooner had been skimming along straight for the shore for five minutes, and Dunkirk Sam had just called out, "Mark 20, hard bottom," when Captain Tom distinctly heard another rooster—not the first; they were leaving that stern. This one was on the lee bow, as before, but in another direction.

"Oh, my good Lord," he groaned, "where in Sam Hill are we—barnyards all round—we're going up some river. Hard up, Bill," he yelled. "Hard up. Slack off the main sheet an get her 'fore the wind."

He ran aft to look at the compass and call the mate if necessary, waving his long arms and shouting. Dunkirk Sam jerked the lead inboard and sped to the fore-castle hatch.

"Starboard!" he called in a hoarse whisper, "you awake?"
"What?"

"Wring his neck; the old man's goin daft. He near beached her."

Dunkirk Sam's sense of humor had left him when his lead reached bottom.

Captain Tom steadied his vessel due southeast and had partially recovered his wits, when from straight ahead he heard another rooster. The misguided fowl in the fore peak had proclaimed his third defiance just as Starboard Jack raised the trapdoor to descend upon him. Loud and clear came the clarion note to the ears of the perplexed skipper, to whom it seemed not three lengths ahead.

"Hard down," he snarled to the grinning Bill: "hard down, man: down



"Chicken thieves, scoundrels, ingrates," with that wheel. We're goin ashore, what you laughin at? Down with it! He seized the spokes and ground the wheel over.

(to be continued)

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