

**THE LIFE OF A
SAILOR. IN TWO
VOLUMES. VOL. I**

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The Life of a Sailor. In Two Volumes. Vol. I by Frederick Chamier

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FREDERICK CHAMIER

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THE
LIFE OF A SAILOR.

BY
A CAPTAIN IN THE NAVY.

Far as the breeze can bear, the billows foam—
Survey our empire, and behold our home.

BYRON.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

[*Richard Harrison*]

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1833.

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PREFACE.

IN offering the following pages to the public, I cannot be actuated by overgrown vanity, nor instigated by author-like ambition: some portion of my work has, in another form, already been published, and now appears with some of the scenes of a *Sailor's Life* enlarged, and rendered, I hope, more interesting. Every scene is a scene of real life, not exaggerated; but the events which are here recorded actually occurred, and I may say truly,

These eyes—these eyes beheld the fact.

A sailor's life is full of strange vicissitudes; some of us walk through our existence smoothly and quietly, mounting in our profession over the heads of more meritorious men than ourselves, unscared by the enemy, and unwounded by misfortune. It is to others a road rugged with trouble, where pleasure is a stranger, and repose unknown; and where, like the fabled stone, no sooner do we think we have reached the summit, than we are hurled again to the bottom. It is a life, to some, of indescribable misery. How often have I seen a midshipman of forty-five years of age, and a lieutenant of sixty! From these poor fellows, destitute of worldly interest, and existing entirely by their miserable pay and ship's allowance, the lighter hours of life are not entirely withheld; they find recreation in the merited abuse of their seniors, and fight the battles of the Nile

and Trafalgar on the oak table, designating ships by drops of water, and the admirals by pieces of biscuit. As every subaltern could have managed the allied armies better than either Wellington or Swartzenburg, so every midshipman could have managed Nelson's fleet better than the great admiral. They are pleased to find faults; and, as no one contradicts their assertions, they experience the momentary pleasure of conscious superiority—then, drowning the cold neglect of the world in a jorum of grog, retire to their hammocks, in visions of fancy, believing themselves the talented heroes, that in more youthful days they once aspired to be.

It was my lot to be more fortunate: but I cannot forget what has passed before my own eyes. Here I will mention one anecdote to verify the above statements. It will be seen that I was promoted as soon as my age and service permitted. I looked younger than I was—and I recollect poor Preston, when I exhibited my commission, turning round to Sir Alexander Gordon, and remarking, "I say, Gordon, what the devil do the Lords of the Admiralty mean, by appointing such boys to *my* ship?" If he had boys for lieutenants, he had grey-beards for midshipmen. I was left commanding-officer one day; and, being engaged in some occupation below, was informed by the midshipman of the watch, that the serjeant had a complaint to make against the master's mate. I went instantly on deck, and sent for the mate;—what was my surprise to find "a young gentleman" as midshipman are termed—of upwards of forty years of age, with a grey head and weather-beaten countenance! He stood before his beardless judge like Shylock before Portia. I reserved the case for the first-lieutenant, and went below in my own cabin. I asked the particulars of poor Steel's life—it was the same as many others: he had been only thirty years in the service—and, having no interest, was likely to be thirty more without promotion. I urged him to go to the Admiralty, and *show* himself; and through my exertions he procured an interview with the First Lord. Steel

mentioned the object of his visit, which was to be promoted. The First Lord said, "Why, Mr. Steel, you are too *old!*" Steel modestly replied, "that it was not his fault that he was not promoted in earlier life."—"Oh!" retorted the First Lord, "*then* I was not in office." Steel was bowed out, and is not now a midshipman:—this happened seventeen years ago. It is now too late to serve him, who, if not dead, must be forgotten. Remember this, good reader—that the poor old man is not entitled to one farthing's half-pay: the country have had his whole services, and now leave him to die in a poor-house!

To the fortunate, there is no life like that of a sailor:—we roam the world at no expense; our libraries travel with us; and if we are not men of some research and some acquirements, it is through our own negligent idleness. We ought to be the best judges of human nature; we see the rich and gaudy of all climes, and all countries;—we see the poor and miserable, from the wretches captured by our press-gang, to the ragged, squalid, famished beggar of South America. The gates of knowledge throughout the whole world are opened to us; but, I grieve to say, we slumber at the portals, or have hardly energy to enter. Some there are, and happy am I to bear witness to their talents—such are Parry, Franklin, Hall, Marryat, Glascock, Beaver, Beaufort, &c.;—these men have exalted our profession, and stamp the lie upon the assertion, "that sailors are fools." Who ought to be more entertaining than a sailor? Of every nation, of every clime he must have gleaned some anecdotes, some nationalities, and been witness to scenes to move the tenderest affections, or to quail the most stubborn of hearts. "I pity the man who can travel from Dan to Beersheba, and say 'all is barren.'" To a captain, all societies are open, all language is familiar: the man who has served years in the Mediterranean, must have picked up some Italian, some French, and some Spanish. I will admit, that during the war we were lamentably ignorant. When a prize was taken, or a vessel's papers to

be examined, how often have I heard, "Boatswain's-mate, pass the word for any man who can speak French, to come aft on the quarter-deck." They do relate an anecdote of a captain of a frigate, who, having sprung his main-yard in a gale of wind, and being off Lisbon, fell in with a gun-boat belonging to that port. As the captain wished to repair the damages without going to England, he desired a man, who declared he could speak Spanish, which the Portuguese understand, to be sent for. "Here, Jones," said the captain, "ask this gentleman, how long they would be in Lisbon, in making us a new main-yard." Jones, turning his quid, began, "Senho, roundho come squarro; how long you makee the main-yard for John Ingliterro?"—"No intende!" was the answer. "What does he say?" asked the captain. "Not in ten days," said the *interpreter*. "Not in ten days!" re-echoed the captain, "why, we shall be in England long before that;—up with the helm!"

I have endeavoured to make myself as amphibious as possible. Lord Erskine says, "A sailor's log would sell for very little in Bond Street." I shall speak out like a sailor; but I shall disguise our barbarous dialect. It will be seen that I have not travelled blindfolded, like poor Holman, or wilfully prejudiced, like a certain doctor in Russia: I set my face against all cant and humbug, and only endeavour to amuse the elder, and instruct the more juvenile. I neither intend to stand on the summit of the Ural mountains, (which separate Europe from Asia,) with one foot in each quarter, like a certain pedestrian tourist, to groan over the sins, miseries, frauds, deceptions, and devilments which exist in opulent and populous cities; nor sigh for a return to barbarism, with all its virtues, and rugged honesty. I have never rolled down the Andes, like Brand, to tumble into a ready-made lake to break the fall; neither have I fished out a donkey, or a mule, with a lasso, which had been twirling in a whirlpool for a quarter of an hour, with two portmanteaus and a traveller's bed on his back. In-

deed, I much regret that I have never galloped across the Pampas, for I never could make *head* against such difficulties; or sat like the caricature of *Nashional* taste, on the peak of the Potosi mountain, admiring the works of God from so cold a *temple*. I have ridden strange animals; but I modestly confess, I have never galloped on an alligator, or rode races on turtle—the common amusement of the marines at Ascension. I shall be content to stick to homely truth, and common scenes in a Sailor's Life.

I have ventured on two chapters, perhaps foreign to the work itself—one, on the prospect of the ultimate success of the Mine Speculations in South America; and the other, on Negro Emancipation. On both, I am open to the censure of the public. I cannot believe either will be successful in its results: and knowing, as I do, the contentment which did exist among the Slaves, until Fanaticism and Caut made men unhappy, who were not disposed so to be; and having personally experienced the danger of passing the roads of Mexico, the insecurity of property, and the partiality of the law—I cannot believe that, in a country every second month in a state of revolution, any speculation to a great extent can be made to answer—or that men can be benefited by a sudden emancipation, who are ignorant slaves.

As some readers may imagine that I have stolen the idea of a Sailor's Life from the admirable Autobiography of Captain Basil Hall, I here protest against any theft on my part. The first number of the Metropolitan Magazine, which began in May, 1831, had the first chapter of this work in its pages. Captain Hall's work did not appear until two months afterwards. I am content now to sail in his wake, for I have not as yet quite impudence enough to place my description of battles, fires, and wrecks, in competition with his stronger and more graphic sketches.