

## SAILORS AND SWIMMERS

**I**N England we find the summer useful as an excuse for jokes about the wintry weather, but it may be safely assumed that there is some sort of difference between winter and summer : otherwise, how should we get strawberries and cream in July and not even want them in January? Summer may be regarded as beyond a joke sometimes, but it is also more than a joke if but strawberries and cream be the happy memory it conjures up into renewed pleasure. To some people it means more even than this; maybe tramping over the green hills or loitering in sun-splashed woods. To others the summer is most pleasantly companioned by the sea, but the ways in which they respond to its briny flavour form the gravamen of these curious observations which follow.

Perhaps you remember one of Robert Browning's lyrical ruminations that tells how he swam out a long way from the seashore on a sunny day. He was peacefully floating on his back when he saw a flittering white butterfly above him in the sunlight. The poem makes a pretty picture, but to any swimmer it appeals more than any picture. For there is a whole world of exhilarating contacts belonging to those whose love of the sea is not confined to an admiration of its appearance, or an appreciation of the salubrious properties of ozone. Therefore, swimmers in general must be distinguished from that other big group of sea-lovers, whose pleasure is rather in 'those water-trampling ships which made me glow,' to quote the English Laureate, who seems to owe something to Wordsworth's 'trampling waves.' Indeed, one might plausibly argue that too keen a devotion to ships leads to the misguided pursuit of voyaging across the hemi-

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spheres and a highly romantic view of the sailor's life. Such seafaring separates the devotee from the very element that washes earth's human shores. It is in mid-ocean that monotony sets in and back-chat in the saloon gets more and more like that of the clubs and drawing-rooms at home. It is against the coast that the ocean plays the organ and the bassoon to the wind's harping, and into bays and estuaries that it swings rhythmical tides at the moon's behest. Man, not being a fish, has no need to live in mid-ocean; he wants to sport in the sea so that he may feel himself a part of the earth against which with musical thunders or whispering whispers it flings itself or creeps.

In his new biography of Swinburne, M. Georges Lafourcade observes that the poet whose verse is so much ensplendoured by the sea was indeed fond of swimming: his praise was no mere lip-service of a would-be romantic. So much is evident when Swinburne writes; and, like others who have commented on the poet, M. Lafourcade cannot help recalling 'the multitudinous laughter of the sea' conjured up by Aeschylus. 'The sea to clasp and wrestle with,' is Swinburne's, and, like his Tristram, he often:

'forward smote,  
Laughing, and launched his body like a boat  
Full to the sea-breach.'

He looked right into the volume of green water, seeing  
'the dark dayshine' and knew the

Dense water-walls and clear dark water-ways,  
Broad-based, or branching as a sea-flower sprays  
That side or this dividing.'

It is no matter for surprise that the ever-changing music of the sea has encouraged the poets to imitation in words, and Tennyson, a master of onomatopoeia, of course finds his opportunity here. He has several word-

plays as good as this :

‘ One show’d an iron coast and angry waves,  
You seem’d to hear them climb and fall  
And roar rock-thwarted under bellowing caves  
Beneath the windy wall.’

A little attention to the poets shows also that there is a reasonable compromise between the strenuous delight of the swimmers and the sloth of the voyagers in big ships. You can go in a canoe or dinghy not so high perched that the water is beyond the touch even of a trailing hand, its subtle voices too soft for deck-proud ears. Then at least you may notice with J. A. Symonds

‘ The slack waves rippling at the smooth flat keel.’

And what of the scents of the sea? How, among the green wastes of mid-ocean, shall you share with Philip Bourke Marston the sense of how

‘ The salt shore, furrowed by the foam, smells sweet’?

Not beside the eventful beaches and cliffs where earth and sea exchange their continual commerce, but on board a ship one can sometimes feel a sympathetic agreement with Mark Tapley’s verdict : ‘ The sea is as nonsensical a thing as any going. It never knows what to do with itself. It hasn’t got no employment for its mind, and is always in a state of vacancy.’

I consider that the case is now amply proved for making a distinction between true sea-lovers and sea-farers; but this does not mean that there is nothing more to be said. Comparatively few professional sailors can swim, for instance. Why? Because they rather dislike the sea and probably share Mark Tapley’s opinion. You have only to think of the mermaids, sea-serpents, and what-not that sailors have had to invent to relieve the monotony of their voyages. Stevenson’s Gordon Darnaway declared from experience that the sailor’s life was ‘ cauld, wanchancy.’ How much

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better to be a landlubber whose spontaneous love of the sea makes him seize upon a summer holiday as an opportunity to sport in its glittering surf, dive into pellucid turquoise depths, recline on the sun-warmed sands that it has taken tens of centuries to make!

Gordon Darnaway may be dismissed as a fictitious character, but not so Mr. H. M. Tomlinson, who has devoted some of his best prose to the sea and is still among us to stand by his words. And what does he say about it? Why, he even takes exception to Byron's enthusiastic declaration about the sea, that there is 'music in its roar.' 'I think I dimly understand what the noble poet means, yet,' he says, 'when holding fast and bracing oneself for it as she rolls and pitches, one would have to be an immortal to enjoy fully from a small steamer in the twilight of a winter's days the antiphon of gale and breaking seas.' To cap this he then quotes with hearty approval an old Levantine seaman in the Greek Anthology who spoke of 'the hated thunder of the sea.'

Conrad knew something of the sea, and a careful reading of his sailor's testament, *The Mirror of the Sea*, leaves no doubt of his awareness of the monotony imposed on seafarers. The regularity of the routine of sailing, though he made of it a craft to be conscientiously studied, a service of fine traditions, is more evident in his sincere pages than the dangerous romance attributed to the lives of those that go down to the sea in ships.

So far from monotony is the experience of the sea's moods to one who goes to meet it at the earth's edges, that repeated visits to the same locality teach one more about that infinite variety than a constant change of destination. I can speak autobiographically.

There is a bouldered foreshore I know of, that skirts a stony promontory roofed with green turf and arched by the same blue dome that covers the wide Atlantic.

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While the year was still too young, at Budget-time, in fact, I ran away from tax-collectors and their like for two days to make a flying call there. The little coast town was shrouded in soft grey rain. Piling clouds, grey and slate-coloured, slid up the sky from the far fringes of the horizon. The wind blew hard and cold as I approached the loud beach. Facing the batteries of the rain and wind, I drove forward to the end of the first breakwater. A smother of plangent waves made loud answers to the challenge of the minions of Eolus. Further from the breakwater the sea formed ridges like taut muscles which gradually relaxed and tightened again close to the shore, where the foam-flowers broke into flying blossoms. For a little while this was exhilarating, but soon the loud wellaway of wind and roar of water, the ice-cold rain and breath-taking pressure in the air satisfied my need of 'a blow.'

I have just gone down again to the bay under the sky of azure softened by some creamy wisps of feathery cloud. The sea is in one of its evanescent moods of stillness, during which its subtle hues from turquoise to cobalt continually alter their tones in harmony with the shifting light. The water ripples to the shore, making a dulcet music above which the high pitched cries of Kittiwake gulls that swoop from rocky ledges come keen as silver arrows through the balmy air. Presently the sun slides lower and for some minutes is involved in a small billowy cloud, dove-grey and cream. Its radiance falls in torn sheets on the smooth water. There is now a broad shimmering band bright as brass, and ruffled patches that shake a myriad tiny shields of silver, like the shivered mirror of breeze-stirred ponds in moonlight. By a jutting mass of rock I free myself of clothes while there is still time, and slip into the cool arms of the murmuring sea.

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