

MASTERLY STORIES OF AMERICAN RANCH LIFE :-:

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THE CRUISE OF THE COCOA

It was a barren day. Great gusts of rain and fog swept in from the sea—a sort of wet dust, as though Neptune were housecleaning, and peevish over the operation.

Before me stretched a pier. The most lonesome pier I ever saw. It was an aged and decrepit pier. Whenever infrequent passengers landed from fishing-boats they did a cancan from one solid spot to another. I cannot find words to describe the wretched loneliness of the structure; it looked as if it were the only thing in the world, surrounded by unhappy memories and a bleak wind. Still, it was a place to go, and I went.

And there, huddled against one of the rotting, swaying piles, I found the A. A. B. This degree conferred upon the owner the privilege of smoking the worst tobacco known to man or pirate, and the power of free and untrammelled speech, for your A. A. B. is none other than the Ancient Able-Bodied—in other words, an antique deep-seafaring man.

I looked upon his old, old oilskins, the old, old sea-boots, and old, old patches of black hide that peeped here and there through whiskers adrip with rain, and I was almost at a loss for words. Then I said in the hailing sign of those who worship Nicotiana:

"Got a match?"

He eyed me with an old, old eye. That eye resembled a pale-blue oyster.

"Aye," quoth he, "I have."

He did a thumbly fingering in many vast pockets. Wonder grew upon his face, and concern.

"Split me figgerhead!" says he. "What's a come of the dang thing? I had a one, that's sure." And again those thumb-fingers explored, like little bears.

"Ah," says he, "I got 'er now!"

He pulled a rubber tobacco pouch from his left hand. From this pouch he took: first, a chamouis sack, which he balanced carefully on his knee; then, fumbling in the deep, dark recesses of the pouch, he produced an old, old match. Once it had been a gay, young, red-headed thing, ready to brighten and sparkle at a friendly touch; but now it was a melancholy pink in hue—some of its phosphorus had melted down its side, the wood-work was gray with weathering.

"There ye be, skipper!" said he with a certain blitheness; "but hold your moorin' a minyute, will 'ee, till I lay aboard a cargo."

From another pocket he extracted an old, old pipe, burned down at the side. From the pouch came out some old, old tobacco, which a cannon forefinger rammed like a cannon charge into the pipe. A bit of ashes to make the moist horror of the charge combustible followed.

"Git to le'ward, and strike 'er up!" says he. I lit my pipe and, being a handy man with a light from old range-riding days, I saved it, and stooped to put the fire to his bowl.

A vapor arose—I cannot call it smoke—it bore a greenish-yellow tint against the fog. I had to take a breath about that time—a man does occasionally—and I drew a whiff of that emanation into my lungs; the chiding tobacco mixed with coffee, tea, roast beans, red-willow bark, and other things, when need pressed on the prairie, but never did I imagine anything short of Pluto's realm held a flavor like that old, old pipe.

I choked, and the tears trickled down my face. Hastily I climbed to windward. Meanwhile my old friend poisoned the air for yards around.

As he was replacing his plunder, he glanced at the chamouis bag. From this he took a gold watch and held it up.

"Hey!" said I. "Lemme see!" He passed it over.

"She's solered," he explained; "solered gol'. Worth a pile o' moncy."

"What's the answer?" I asked him. He looked a trifle hurt.

"I tell 'ee," says he, and his voice rose and fell with the moaning cadence of the surf on a far-off shore, "s'pose you takes me up to the ho-tel and buys me one little drink to sweeten m' bilge? Then, mebbe, I can spin you the yarn about it. How's that strike you, skipper?"

"Let us go at once," I answered, and with an agility surprising, he put his feet beneath him and we went up that rickety and old, old pier.

We had a table, two drinks, and all the time there was between us. It was the usual barroom of a fishing resort, sanded floor, and so on.

After the drink disappeared I called loudly for cigars; they were bad—cabbage wrapper and sole-leather filler, but that pipe!

"My name," began the A. A. B., "is Willyum Thomkins—William L. Thomkins; but that don't matter." He held his cigar like a telescope, sailor fashion. "I was in Engerland,"

he continued, "just off'n a Briddish ship. I was sittin' on a dock precisely like that one out there, dreamin' and phiossiferizin' regardin' life and thinks. How is it, I was thinkin', every time I get ashore with my pay burnin' a hole in my leg, I say I'll never go to sea agin? I'm tired of bein' cooped up on a heavin', tossin' craft, and I'm so blamed glad to get ashore, I has to celebrate. So that pay-day proceeds to keep company with lots more pay-days, and I'm broke and longin' for the heave of a good ship underfoot agin.

"This is in the day of wooden ships and iron men. You wouldn't believe what a man I was them days—well, shipmate, I ain't the kind to boast, or I could tell you sumpin'. Anyways, there warn't no upstair nor down-cellar board ship them times. You was either on deck or below. And if you told the bucko at the wheel to please take the first turn to the left, he'd fly a belayin'-pin at you. There warn't no conversation 'bout 'right' and 'left'. That kinder talk takes all the gumption out of seafarin'. Fust you know this crew of young fellers that's doin' things now will be callin' St. Peter 'Pete' and askin' for the loan of a bit of chewin'. They ain't got proper respect for nothin'."

"Well, I warn't no sea-lawyer for to be worritin' 'bout things; but I ain't et for three days, an' though I kept a haulin' up on my belt, my stummick continered to slack away like a moorin' cable on the turn of the tide; an' I didn't like that. Phiossiferizin' don't fill an empty gizzard. Allover suddent I looks up, and here come a square-built female a bearin' down on me on a fair wind.

"'Good mornin'!" she says. "'Mornin' ma'am," says I, cautious. 'My pay-day's three days gone; an'—"

"I hates to disturb you in your meddertashuns," says she, 'but are you lookin' for a berth?'"

"Yes, ma'am, I is," I says, wonderin' if this was some new kinder game for the benefit of the seafarin' person.

"'Would you mind tellin' me your ratin'?" says she, very polite.

"'Cook,' says I. "'Ah, good,' says she, a clappin' her hands; 'just what I been huntin' for. An' you look like a nice man, too.'"

"'Thanks, ma'am,' says I, a blushin' an' bowin', 'I thankee very kindly; but I ain't no land cook. I'm a sea cook, and a son of a sea cook.'"

"'Of course,' says she, airy, 'I knowed that. My 'usban' is the master of that there bark, an' I'm a pickin' up a crew for him. I want on'y nice, God-fearin' men a sailin' with my 'usban'. I don't allow no liquor drinkers' board ship. My 'usban' don't drink nothin' but cocoa himself. He's that fond of it be named the ship Cocoa. Foller me, and sign up,' says she.

"An' away goes that lady skipper, me towin' behind like a dingy, to where a three-masted bark is lyin' at her berth.

"The skipper stood at the gangway as we went aboard, and when he sees us he tips his hat an' bows. I never see that done afore, so I tips my hat, an' I bows. When it come to bein' polite, I don't allow no Briddisher to blanket me.

"'Whom 'ave we 'ere?' says the skipper.

"'The new cook,' says the lady, 'that I just got for you!'"

"'And very much obliged,' says the skipper, bowin' again, so I bows and the lady bows, and we was bobbin' around there like buoys in a channel till the skipper run out his fin and says: 'How do, cook?'"

"I wipes my hand on my breeches and shook hearty. 'Fine, sir; fine!' I says, thinking to myself this is the politest old man I ever did see.

"'Cook,' says the skipper, 'you look to me to be as good a cook as hever I lay me lamps on.'"

"'That ain't for me to admit, sir, beggin' your pardon,' says I, thinkin' of that poor, fondered stummick of mine that was fairly clewed around my backbone. 'But there's one thing I may say: when I'm paid to work, I get at it—where's the galley, sir?'"

"'Oh!' he answers, 'I wouldn't think of makin' yo' turn to now. Take the rest of the ay ashore while you got the chanst.'"

"'Cap'n,' I says, 'for me work comes fust, pleasure arterward,' an' I starts for the galley smoke.

"'All right, cookee,' says he, 'you're a willin' hand—go forrard and get busy.'"

"In about five minutes I hatter let two holes ou'n my belt. I swallered them biscuits whole. Three days' fastin' will give you a mighty appy-tite.

"For the two weeks we laid in port I never see such a polite crew as was aboard that ship. Nothin' but bowin' an' beggin' pardon and excuse me an' ettyket. Even them 'prentice boys was took with the idee, and a plain seaman thanks me with tears in his

eyes for savin' him a plate of hash when he was late to mess account of havin' fell overboard.

"The skipper's wife stuck a little Bible in each man's sea-bag, an' then they all got relig'ous. All but Blue-nose. He didn't get it. He never got nothin'. He was an athyist. I up and ast him one day: 'Does you b'lieve in anything?' 'Yes,' says he, 'I drawin' through that nose o' his, I b'lieve in three meals a day, I do.'"

"Well, sir, when the crew warn't busy heavin' around they sot readin'

nor the hull land but a place to get buried in!"

"'Aw, give over!' says he. 'You're 'Murrican, ain't you?'"

"'Sure am I!' I says. 'Long may she wave!'"

"'All right,' says he; 'you speak of 'Murrican things an' I'll listen; but give me leave to know a plasted, bleedin', bloomin', beastly, bally, bloated, blighted Briddish bucko pirate when I sees 'im, will yur?'"

"'Well,' says I, puffedly a-stounded, 'you're what eddycated people calls a pessymist—you're wuss—"

I recalls she looked a little peccoliar around the eyes. But then I didn't seem to notice it.

"We heaved up bright an' early and away we goes. Wind holdin' steady from nor-nor-east, and we a climbin'. 'Tweren't no time afore we had our foot in big water.

"Next mornin' I goes into the skipper's cabin with the cocoa. 'Thankee kindly,' says he, and swigs her off. But that afternoon he had to break up a prayer-meetin' to git some men aloft, an' I heard him swear.

"And I asked him—friendly like,



"But a prummis is a prummis."

them there Bibles an' preachin' to each other. It was hard, o' course, to get anybody to listen, so mostwise they done the thing in doots and treos. An' the feller that hollered the loudest, he won.

"If you let a cuss out of you—nothin' ter'ble, but just a simple little easy 'damn'—the hull dang ship's company would jump you and dry-dock you for the day. Now a cook haster swear. Other jobs come reasonable—you can perdict about 'em, but cookin'? No, sir! That's an art, that be; an' if you don't cuss out the old barkee from trucks to keelson wass a day, nothin' 'll go right in the galley. So it inconvenienced me a lot; but I was so struck I never peeped.

It was a beeyootiful sight, the skipthin' an' his-wife leadin' the percession to church o' Sundays, and the crew a follerin' along behind in twos, with a fresh shave, a white hankercher, and a good, fresh chaw o' ter-baccar.

"Blue-nose was third-nate. Him an' me bunked in the fore cabin. I couldn't get a fair word out o' him about the bus'ness, try like I might. No, sir!

"'Ha!' says he through his nose. 'Nice Christian cap'n, hey! Well, you wait till we gets blue water liffin' under us, an' he'll be a bloomin' pirate—I know his kind.'"

"'Cheer up, man,' I says; 'I wouldn't have a disposition like yours and try to run a brick scow. You can't see nothin' in the hull dang ocean but a place to get drowned in,

you're a regular pessyfog, an' I ain't got no use for your reasonin'."

"'No,' says he; 'well, I'll stand by, just the same, when the typhoon starts.'"

"What beat me, though, was where was our cargo? We hadn't took none aboard, but just lay a slattin' at our cables. Here, then, comes a load or two of little boxes, and the next day we sails.

"That night the skipper's wife come to me an' says, she: "'Cook, you're heavin' up tomorrow.'"

"'Yes, ma'am,' says I. "'Will you do me a favor, cook?'"

"'I will that, ma'am,' says I. 'There couldn't be nothin' you an' the cap'n would ask me for to do I wouldn't do it more'n willin'. Heave ahead, ma'am,' I says. 'There's a fair wind an' ample sea-room.'"

"'This,' says she, solemn, 'I want you to promise on your oath as a seafarin' man, that you'll give the cap'n a cup of cocoa every mornin'—never mind what happens. If you do,' says she, 'I'll give you this nice gol' watch when you come back, an' she hol's up this here very same watch I was a showin' you.

"'Well,' it looked to me like this was the place that dreams come true.

"I says: 'You can trust me, ma'am. Soon's this v'yage is over here I'll be a claimin' of this watch. Just a cup of cocoa in the mornin'—am I understandin' of you correct, ma'am?'"

"'That's all,' says she. Afterward

the way things was a going aboard ship—'Cap'n,' I says, 'where might we be bound for?'"

"'Is that any of your blighted bus'ness?' says he. 'G'wan where you belong. Be off now, you vittal scavenger, or I'll tie you in a knot!'"

"I was that astonished I near dropped to the deck.

"'Why, cap'n,' I says, 'such a ship as this used to be for politeness I never did see! It ain't for me to give a skipper no lip, nor say nothin' unbecomin' to a seaman's place. But,' says I, 'I only wish,' I says, 'that somebody could let you know what a consarned, oily mouthed, double-eyed hipperkrit I think you be.'"

"'What!' he roars, and grabs up a belayin'-pin and comes for me. I took along furred, him across follerin'.

"It was quite a little chase, with all them able-bodies, the Blue-nose, and the little 'prentice boys lookin' on for to see, and cheerin' both, indefinite.

"I see he was a goin' to chase me plumb off'n the bowsprit, so I took up the foremast, him arter me, hollerin': 'Heave to, you soup-hound, afore I scuttles yer with this here belayin'-pin!'"

"But I didn't heave to. I kept a climbin'. When I come to the fore-truck I couldn't go no furder, but the skipper was close behind, so I hand-over-handed it across the foreskysail brace, a hundred and fifty foot from the deck, to the mainmast, but I felt the stay shaking under his weight and I kept on—climb up to the mainsky-

sail yard, threw a leg over the main-sky-sail braces, and went down to the mizzen a sailin'.

"Just as I hit the mizzen-sky-sail the old man let such a roar out'n him it made me lose my grip, and down I come a bumpin' into the slack of the mizzenroyal, from that to the mizzen-to-gallantsail, then, ker-swoop! bumpin' from mizzen-top-sails into the cro'-jack, and then on a pile of tarpaulins all right and handy-o! While the skipper sings out from the mizzen trucks, 'Thar' yer blasted Yankee! That'll hold yer sass-box shut for a while, I hopes!'"

"So I jumps up instant and touches my cap an' says: 'In no ways deservin' of them words, skipper, but allus ready for my juty, like an honest mariner, but,' says I, 'I don't see no Briddisher a followin' my steps' (lettin' on I dope it a purpose). 'On a Yankee craft,' says I, 'we don't call a man able-bodied till he can jump halfway up the foremast and all the way down the mizzen.'"

"I had him hushed. He didn't say a word, but just heaved the belayin'-pin at me.

"'What price a Briddish pirate now?' says Blue-nose, when I went by him. 'You and your Christian gentleman!'"

"'Blue-nose,' says I, 'I was mistook in my man, an' I admits it, honest. But,' I says, 'he drinks his cocoa every mornin' just the same.'"

"'Does he tho?'" says Blue-nose. 'My eye! But you got the cheek to tell me that!'"

"'Well, he drunk his cocoa, but never since I see salt spray fly was I in worse trouble.

"The next mornin' I come on him quick, while he lay a snorin' and juked the most of it into his mouth afore he was right woke up. While he was a chokin' and a splutterin' I heaved up an' got away from there. You never did hear such names as he named me! 'He come a slamm'in' agin' the galley door, but I had her locked an' barricaded.'"

"'I'm a goin' to trice you up to the foretrucks, I am,' says he.

"'You gotted get me fust,' says I. 'I understands you now,' I says. 'You come this cruise a purpose to swell up, an' that's all. There ain't no cargo, there ain't no nothin' to it but that. No wonder you don't want no nice cocoa in the mornin'.'"

"'What's that to you, you salt-horse pirate?' says he. 'You pot-rat-tin' swab! I'm cap'n of this here ship, an' I is a squiffed, and when you tries to feed me cocoa, that's mutiny, an' you'll pay dear for it.'"

"'Oh, it is, is it?'" says I. 'So that's what? Lemme tell you some more what. You gets me afore a court and I tells 'em the promise I made your wife—then you look great, don't you? Har-har-har!' I laughs, an' I could hear him a grindin' of his teeth as he walked away.

"'Har-har-har!' I hollers arter him. 'I knows who's skipper of the Cocoa! An' every mornin' you gets a cup of the same!'"

"'Mebbe,' says he, dark an' threatenin', 'you won't live to tell the tale.'"

"'And sometimes it almost looked like that.' The best holt I had was to grab his whiskers, give one yank down, an' shoot her in afore he was awake.

"'Sometimes I got out safe, an' sometimes no. He gives me this cut over the eye with the ship's cromo-meter. This little circular cut was where the spy-glass hit me, the other places means sea-boots an' belayin'-pins an' things.

"'Sometimes we had it all over the floor, a bitin' an' a clawin' an' a scramblin' like a pair o' cats. He was huskier'n me, but I was more soople like. But every day, without me departin' from my respect an' simple juty as a seaman, I put some o' that cocoa in his system, an' every day he took to drink worse'n ever. He couldn't talk no mutiny to me—all I had to say was I'd tell his wife, if he didn't fight it out with me man to man, an' none of his sneakin' Briddish ways, him a weighin' thutty pound more'n me at that.

"'I dunno how it would ha' ended if it hadn't 'a' been fur the waterspout. I was gettin' the caulkin' worked out o' me. It certain tired me sore.

"'But one day the lookout hollers: 'Waterspout on the lee bows! Thar she blows!'"

"'And havin' see each afore in the Injy Ocean, I grabs some grub, a water keg, 'baccy, and a can o' cocoa an' loads it aboard one of the ship's boats.

"'That waterspout stood the Cocoa on her tail. I grabbed the cap'n with one hand and Blue-nose with the other an' pulled 'em toward the boat. The skipper, he was a true Briddish seaman at heart, because he yells whiles I had him in the air: 'Cookee! See that I'm the last man to leave the ship!'"

"'I was a holdin' onto the davits with my teeth, for the ship was plumb perpendicular, but while it was quite a strain, I couldn't refuse no sech a true-hearted request as that, so I held him aloft, till the last little 'prentice boy skinned over the scupper's, then jumped aboard, pulled him arter me, an' cut the falls.

"'We dropped one hundred an' fifty foot, clear, but not straight, becous that waterspout was whirlin' things around so. We must ha' been in the air nigh on ten minutes, an', stout seamen tho' we all was, we was scorchered when at last we struck the heavin' ocean.'"

"Here my Able-Bodied paused for breath. Also to light his pipe; at the first flash of the match I grabbed one of those six-inch rapid-fire cigars in self-defense.

"I cannot tell you how engrossed I

was in this narrative. To me, havin' lived my life as far from any ocean as one geographically could, the simple interests, the directness, and democracy of the sea showed in strong contrast to my experience with the conventions and complexities of a cattle-ranch. As these thoughts idled through my head the Able-Bodied cast a glance at his empty glass.

"My, but we was thusty arter we got afloat!" said he.

"My remissness smote me.

"'Barkeeper, to the rescue!' I cried. Two trusty schooners of beer successfully navigated the passage across the bar. With the foam on his lips, my friend resumed:

"'Yus, we floated about in that ship's boat—well, I dunno how long; but it seemed like months and months. Every mornin', whilst Blue-nose held him, I fed the skipper a spoonful of dry cocoa. My soul! How he hollered! How he said he'd do for me some time! But a prummis, is a prummis. We wouldn't give him no more'n a teaspoonful of water, arter the cocoa, even at the fust, knowin' water was goin' to become a scarcity with us slattin' aroun' in the ocean. An' Blue-nose, he kicked some on that, but I got him to see reason. An' then the water give out altogether, an' the skipper had to take his cocoa dry. He got to prayin' again, but you don't ketch no Yankee seaman twice on the same hook. Pray or no pray, cuss or no cuss, beg or no beg—let him holler, rave, roar, rant, or riot like he was mad, he had to take his cocoa. 'Tord the last his mouth was that dry he couldn't swallow none but anyhow he had it there to swallow. I done my juty.

"'Well, sir, you wouldn't b'lieve how provokin' the little rain squalls was. Time arter time we see them here an' you all aroun' us. We'd row fur 'em, an' they'd slip away, an' it looked like when a gent is chasin' his hat ashore. You know how it just rolls along from under his finger-tips, an' stops when he stops and starts when he starts? Well, blast me figger-head, if we didn't chase the edge o' one o' them squalls a hour, with the skipper a rowin' to bust hisself and Blue-nose stretchin' as far over the bows as his long arms an' his long legs would let him—me a settin' on my feet—an' it just rained on the edge of the hat he held! That's all.

"'Pull like we would, and stretch like an annycondy snake, we couldn't more'n wet the edge o' that hat. Whiles two foot furder away it was pourin' scupperin'—an' we with our tongues a dry as rope yarn an' stickin' out a foot!'"

"'Again he paused. I distinctly heard a rattling in his throat. How potent a thing is memory! Why, even to me there came a time of three days in the Bad Lands with a hammering sun, and my throat shriveled to an aridity so great the barkeeper could scarcely hear my cry but that his ears were of uncommon acuteness.

"'Thankee kindly, sir!' exclaimed the Able-Bodied, as again we lipped the foam.

"'Yes, siree,'" he continued—I thought I saw a change in his face—the past danger suddenly realized. His speech grew hasty, as taut nerves are wont to serve.

"'We sailed an' we sailed, despairin' an' sad an' broken-hearted. There won't be no gol' watch for me, I thinks, nothin' but Dacy Jones an' a lecker with no number on it. One night a mist come on the ocean. It covered all, an' that was the lonsest, wuss thing you ever did see. You talk about bein' all alone! Why, there wasn't nothin' at all! Even Blue-nose an' the skipper didn't seem like they was real.

"'Am I dead?' thinks I. 'Am I a rowin' through purgatory?'"

"'When, all of a sudden, there come a flash of read light, a bump, an' a bad sing, an' there ahead, 'What's the matter of you fellers? Don't you know a dock when you see one? Drunk agin, or what now?'"

"'An' there we was, sir, right back agin to that same, identical dock we started from. We'd rowed a straight course to it, through a thousand mile o' ocean!'"

"'Next thing I knows the skipper's wife was whispertin' in my ear: 'Did he take his cocoa?'"

"'Every mornin', ma'am, reg'lar,' says I.

"'Oh, verry good! So verry good!' says she. 'Take this—' and she shows the watch into my hands. 'Good-bye!'"

"The transition was so sharp I sat a moment stunned. The Able-Bodied was gone. I could not tell whether the last words were addressed to me or whether they formed part of the narrative.

"The barkeeper volunteered.

"'Seen his wife comin'—had to skin,' said he.

"'Remarkable story, that,' I answered, to gain time.

"The barkeeper grabbed at his counter for support.

"'Say, where you from?' he gasped. I told him.

"'Oh,' said he, 'that accounts for it. I wondered who was stringin' who.'"

"'You don't believe that story?'"

"'There is a tone that renders words needless.

"'Prentice boys on a hooker!' snorted the barkeeper. 'My Mary Ann! Captain drinkin' cocoa! Glory be!'"

"'Who is the old cuss, anyhow?'" I cried in wrath.

"'Him?' said the barkeeper. 'Old Tom? Second deck-hand on a garbage scow all the days of his life. Fished a kid out of the drink with a boat-hook once, and the kid's old man gave him that watch. Come around another day and he'll tell you another story about it. Have a drink?'"

"I walked to the door and gazed upon the desolate scene. There lay the old, old dock, and there, scurrying along before an irate female person, nimbly fled my old, old friend.

"'Gray' was the day, and gray my thoughts.

"The hollowness of things bore sharply on me—with such an impudence and vehemence that I fled across the way and ordered one broiled steak, two plates of fried potatoes, one dozen raw oysters, and a pot of coffee. After all, I had a fine appetite.