

## Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry

### Part XXIII: The Cutty Sark's Awkward Years



*J. S. Wallace -  
"Cutty Sark"  
1880*

*"Wallace took over the command  
of the Cutty Sark with the  
determination to give her a real  
chance to break a record, for he  
knew that he had the fastest ship  
that was sailing the seas."*

- Basil Lubbock,

*The Log of the Cutty Sark*

“Finding a suitable captain for the *Cutty Sark* after Captain Moodie’s resignation in 1872 was quite difficult. His first two successors lacked the bravado that *Cutty Sark* needed to show her true potential in strong winds. J. S. Wallace finally assumed command in 1878, and proved to be the sort of *driver* that *Cutty Sark* needed. But just two years after assuming command, Wallace’s career came to a tragic end.

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## *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part XXIII*

*Thermopylae* docked seven days before *Cutty Sark* in their dramatic tea race of 1872. Under normal circumstances, she would have been declared the winner. But having been some 400 miles ahead of *Thermopylae* when she lost her rudder, the chatter among the maritime community hailed *Cutty Sark* as the real winner. William Baker summed it up as:

Considering the fact that [*Cutty Sark*] lost five days, at the Cape, fitting the jury rudder and could not exceed eight knots up the Atlantic, for fear of having the temporary rudder torn off again, there was no question as to who, on balance, won the race.

But Captain Kimball would have none of this, and protested that *Thermopylae* had actually reached the Cape ahead of *Cutty Sark*. Had that false claim not been made, it is likely that Captain Kimball's "win" would have been acknowledged along with Captain Moodie's heroics. In *The Log of the Cutty Sark*, Basil Lubbock explains it as such:

Though *Thermopylae* had arrived first, the shipping world gave all the credit of the race to *Cutty Sark*. Captain Moodie was almost worn out when he arrived, but Captain Kimball's officers declared that the latter's anxiety was so great that life was hardly worth living aboard the *Thermopylae*, especially after leaving the Cape.

Kimball at first tried to insist that the *Thermopylae* was leading when *Cutty Sark* lost her rudder, but when Willis, Moodie and Linton went to the White Star office with the *Cutty Sark*'s log book and challenged Kimball to produce the *Thermopylae*'s, he refused to do so, and it had to be admitted that *Thermopylae* was badly beaten. Even her officers agreed that their ship was no match for the *Cutty Sark* in fresh winds, what was harder to bear, commiseration in the captains' room at Lloyd's.

What was obviously needed at this time was a rematch between *Thermopylae* and *Cutty Sark*, but by now the great tea races that defined the sport had been transferred from sail to steam. The opportunity for a rematch seemed rather remote. Furthermore, Captain Moodie's resignation created a void that

would be difficult to fill. *Cutty Sark* deserved an experienced captain like Moodie, cautious enough in navigation to avoid disaster, yet a hard *driver* when the winds were right.

"Old White Hat" Willis selected F. W. Moore, one of his retired sea captains, as Moodie's successor. Moore's driving days were long over, but he certainly had experience. Under Captain Moore, *Cutty Sark* made the 1873 run in 117 days, some 14 days longer than that of *Thermopylae*. After this uninspiring run, Captain Moore decided to retire permanently from the sea, and was replaced in 1874 by Captain Tiptaft from Willis's *Merse*.

Like Moore, Tiptaft was well experienced but not a *driver*. *Cutty Sark* was not going to show her true potential until chief mate J. S. Wallace took command upon the untimely death of Tiptaft in 1878.

Wallace was willing to push the *Cutty Sark* hard, and was the sort of captain who not only wanted to win a race, but hoped to do so by breaking records. There was, however, a growing problem that could not be ignored. According to William Baker:

Wallace knew his trade well, was confident of his ability, was sure of the *Cutty Sark*; certain of the rigging, the equipment and sail. But he was too late, for by 1879, clippers had just about disappeared from the China tea trade. While sixty clippers loaded tea in 1869, ten years later with steamships firmly in control of the tea trade, only seven were able to get a tea cargo for London and then at average freight of only 30 shillings. The China clipper was finished, and the days of racing home to London with the first of the new season's teas were over.

Unable to get a tea cargo in 1879, Wallace sailed for Manila to take on cargo of jute and sugar, destined for New York. Coincidentally, Willis had decided to give up entirely on the tea trade. Upon arriving in New York, Wallace was informed by telegram that the masts of the *Cutty Sark* would be trimmed for the *roaring forties* (i.e., the fierce winds encountered in the South Pacific, between parallels 40 and 49).

*Cutty Sark*'s future would be in the Australian wool trade, and any other trade where

steam was not dominant. Her next voyage would be transporting Welsh coal, destined for the U.S. Navy in Yokohama. Basil Lubbock devoted an entire chapter of his *The Log of the Cutty Sark* to this voyage, which he titled *A Hell-Ship Voyage*. The woeful events of this forsaken voyage inspired Joseph Conrad's short story, *The Secret Sharer*.

Wallace's style was not typical of the stern sea captains of his day. Lubbock describes him as "one of those jovial souls, full of jokes and high spirits; a trifle easy-going as far as discipline went and therefore very popular with his crew." In sharp contrast to Wallace, his first mate, John Anderson, was what was known as a *bucko mate*, a nautical term for a mate who bullied the crew and often pushed them beyond reason.

Hiring a crew at the Welsh coal port proved to be difficult, exacerbated by the "sinister" reputation of bucko Anderson. The worst of the hires included a "sour-tempered seaman [who] was a pessimist of pessimists: his yarns were all concerned with mutiny and murder, with shipwrecks and disasters, with foul weather and fearful diseases, whilst he was superstitious to the last degree." Apprentices on board promptly nicknamed the old wretch Vanderdecken, after the legendary captain of the ghost ship *Flying Dutchman*.

There is an age-old superstition among sailors that setting sail on a Friday will bring bad luck. When Wallace set sail on a Friday, superstitious old Vanderdecken was convinced tragedy would soon strike. Lubbock noted that:

The first of his prophecies was almost instantly confirmed. The Cutty Sark was barely to sea on the fateful Friday before she was compelled to anchor in the Severn, whilst a wild sou-west gale shrieked up the Bristol Channel for three days of flying scud, raging seas and howling winds, which tested her ground tackle to the utmost.

Vanderdecken was one of those odd individuals who needed very little sleep. Night and day he would chew the ear off of anyone who would listen to his foreboding, and when nobody was listening he would mournfully

mutter to himself. It was not long before first mate Anderson provided Vanderdecken fresh material for his fearful prophecies.

One of the crew members, John Francis, was particularly clumsy and incompetent. Anderson spared none of his fiery seafarer's vocabulary when chastising Francis. Several days into the voyage an exceptional display of clumsiness resulted in Francis injuring his hand. When Anderson started hurling insults his way, Francis responded in kind. This soon led to fisticuffs which Lubbock describes as a scuffle "with all the fury and lack of rules usual in sea fights, whilst the captain flourished his revolver, supplied his officers with weapons as well, and threatened to shoot the first man who attempted to interfere."

Captain Wallace eventually stopped the fight after a quarter of an hour, with neither man in a position to claim victory. The fight had settled nothing, and tensions between Anderson and Francis continued to mount.

It came to a head days later when Francis refused to obey an order from the mate. When angrily confronted by Anderson, who went at Francis with a "mouth full of strong language and [a] heart full of rage," Francis retorted with "not only an insolent tongue but a raised capstan bar." In the end, the capstan bar was wrenched from the hands of John Francis and "without a moment's hesitation he brought it down on the man's head with such force that John Francis dropped senseless to the deck." Three days later he died and was buried at sea.

Francis was not popular among the crew, but Anderson was even less popular. The crew firmly believed that Anderson was guilty of murder, and should be tried in a court of law.

Anderson spent the rest of the voyage confined to his cabin until they reached Anjer, anchoring next to an American ship, the *Colorado*. For some unknown reason, Anderson convinced Wallace to set him free, and before any of the crew was aware of his absence, Anderson boarded the *Colorado*, who happened to be searching for a mate.

Why kind-hearted Wallace allowed Anderson to go free rather than turn him over to authorities is a mystery that will never be solved. It would be the most costly mistake of his career. It would also be his last.

When the crew discovered that Anderson was gone, they quickly blamed Wallace for complicity. Within short order everything began to unravel for Wallace. Vanderdecken persuaded the crew to refuse work until Anderson was recaptured. Wallace countered this by drafting the cook, carpenter, steward and sailmaker to help the apprentices weigh anchor and set sail from Anjer. Meanwhile, the four ringleaders of the disorderly crew were put into irons.

Wallace immediately realized that he had made a disastrous mistake. An investigation would surely be held when they reached Yokohama. Wallace rightly assumed that he would, at the very least, suffer the suspension of his master's certificate, which would likely destroy his once brilliant career.

Formerly confident and high spirited, Captain Wallace became preoccupied with doom and was unable to sleep. He lapsed into deep depression, and crew, apprentices, and officers were shocked at how quickly his once jovial disposition was wholly transformed. "Night and day he stood gazing out to sea or walked with bowed head up and down the poop in a misery which was plain to see."

A general pall overtook the entire ship. Instead of the customary singing, chanting and chatter that was part of a sailor's workday, all that could be heard was the incessant droning of old Vanderdecken, whose prophecies of new disasters yet to come began to frighten some of the hands.

The stress became unbearable for Wallace. Four days out of Anjer, at 4 o'clock in the morning, he calmly jumped overboard into shark-infested waters. The crew, refusing to work until now, promptly lowered a lifeboat and attempted to rescue him, but to no avail. All they saw in the waters below deck was the torrent of sharks that had ended their cap-

tain's misery. Another life was lost. The crew now believed their actions were responsible for their captain's death. Once again, sour old Vanderdecken had been right.

With the ship's captain now dead, and first mate Anderson gone, command of the ship was in the hands of the second mate. Unfortunately, this miserable chap had very little experience, was half blind, and a poor navigator. Profoundly aware of his limitations, he ignored the pleading of others to sail on to Yokohama. Instead, with considerable difficulty, *Cutty Sark* stumbled back to Anjer, where the second mate cabled John Willis for instructions.

After the exchange of several telegrams between the "mystified" shipowner and the "incapable" second mate, Willis decided to hire a Dutch pilot to take his ship and crew to Singapore. Meanwhile, Willis contacted Captain Fowler of the *Hallowe'en* (another ship in the Willis fleet), which happened to be in Hong Kong at the time. When Willis asked Fowler if his chief officer, Bruce, was capable of commanding the *Cutty Sark*, Captain Fowler immediately assured him that he most certainly was.

Meanwhile, each crew member was given the option of continuing on or being discharged. Most opted to continue, a decision made more joyfully when Vanderdecken took the option of discharge, vowing that he would spend the remainder of his days tracking down the murderer, John Anderson.

Those who stayed on were happy to be rid of old Vanderdecken. Many believed that somehow, it was Vanderdecken who actually brought on their misfortune, and that life would surely be better with him gone.

But Captain Fowler recommended Bruce only because he "hated his chief officer like poison and was only too delighted to get rid of him." The continuing crew soon learned that the worst of their journey lie ahead.

Our series on *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry* will continue this topic in the next issue of the *Upton Tea Quarterly*.