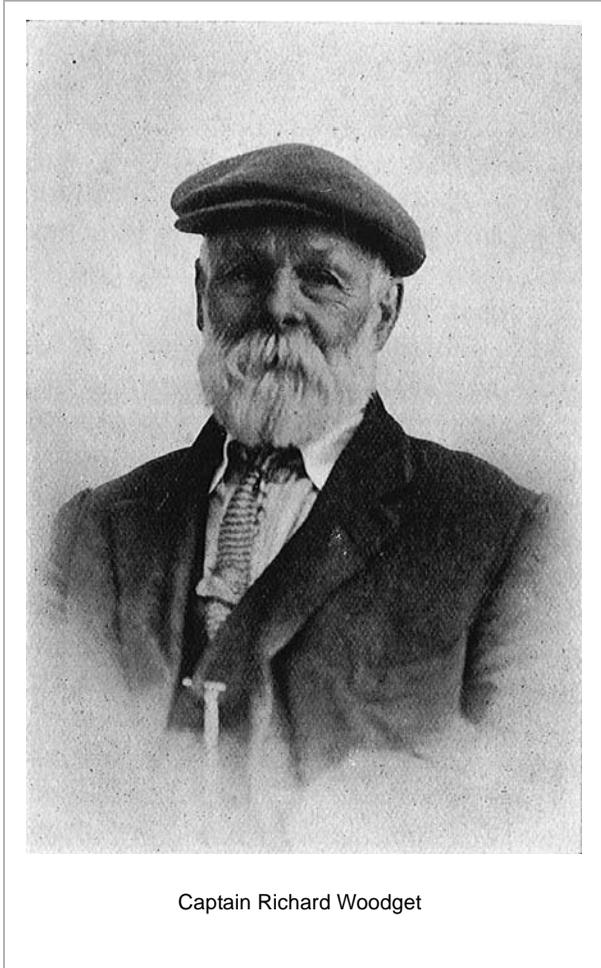


Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry

Part XXV: The End of the Hell-Ship Voyage



“It was a pleasure to see the ‘old man’ in dirty weather. He fairly revelled in it. With one side of his moustache jammed into his mouth, and hanging on to the weather rigging, I can see him now, his sturdy figure in yellow oilskins and long leather sea boots, watching aloft and hanging on till the last minute. He gave all his crew complete confidence in him and I never remember seeing him anything but calm in dirty weather.”

- from a note written by one of Captain Woodget’s officers to Basil Lubbock, author of *The Log of the Cutty Sark*

It would have been difficult to find a man less suitable than Mr. Bruce to command the *Cutty Sark*. He was a capable navigator, but that was the extent of his talents. Captain Fowler of the *Hallowe’en*, another tea clipper owned by John Willis, had recommended first mate Bruce for the position. According to Basil Lubbock, however, this was done only because, “Fowler hated his chief officer like poison and was only too delighted to get rid of him.” After the fiasco of “the hell-ship voyage,” John Willis took great care to ensure that his next appointment would be the antithesis of Captain Bruce.

Please turn to page 48.

Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part XXV

Life as an ordinary sailor in the nineteenth century has been deemed by some to have been little better than slavery. This analogy has been documented in detail by Leon Fink in a paper entitled “Liberty Before the Mast: The Nineteenth Century Sailor and the Political Narrative of Freedom.” A draft copy of this document, dated January 18, 2008, is easily found on the Internet.

The urban working class male population was granted the privilege to vote in Britain by the *Reform Act of 1867*. This was extended to the rural male “householders” by the *Reform Act of 1884*. Sailors were excluded since they did not qualify with “twelve month’s continuous residence at one address.” In fact, ordinary sailors were deemed “second-class” citizens and had virtually no representation, at least until Samuel Plimsoll took up their cause.

Captain Bruce and his first mate were taken aback when a Shanghai judge decided to formally investigate their claim of mutiny by the *Cutty Sark* crew. Perhaps it was their cocky attitude that aroused the judge’s suspicions, but it could also have been the furor that was being raised by Samuel Plimsoll in support of sailors’ rights.

Plimsoll was a social reform advocate. His early efforts were directed toward child labor reform and the betterment of factory working conditions. In 1864, however, he had a harrowing experience during an intense storm while aboard a passenger ship from London to Redcar. En route, he witnessed the sinking of four merchant ships, which capsized in the storm. While he was merely a few hours late upon arriving in Redcar, all sailors aboard the four merchant ships perished.

Three years later, details surrounding the loss of the *Utopia*, departing Liverpool for Bombay, attracted Plimsoll’s interests. Upon arriving at the Liverpool dock, the surveyor noticed damage to the *Utopia’s* hull. He deter-

mined that it would be unsafe to load beyond an immersion of twenty-and-a-half feet. But the surveyor had no authority to enforce his recommendations, and coal was loaded until the *Utopia* was immersed six inches beyond the surveyor’s safe limit. There was another 120 tons of coke yet to be loaded at the Wellington docks.

Captain Lean protested, but his concerns were dismissed by the shipowner. He subsequently resigned as ship’s master and was replaced by Captain Dickie. At first sight of the *Utopia*, Dickie made a stir about the safety of his ship, only to receive the following letter from the shipping agent:

I am very much surprised to hear that you are making difficulties about going in the *Utopia*; and I must inform you that, if after I have recommended you to the owner, you do not go in the vessel, I will take care you never get any employment in a ship out of Liverpool, if I have any power to prevent you, as I will not put up with this sort of work.

Almost immediately after leaving dock, the *Utopia* had over three feet of water in her hold. All pumps worked continuously but, three days out of Liverpool, the *Utopia* sank. An article entitled “Overladen and Unseaworthy Ships – The loss of the *Utopia*” appeared in the July 1, 1867 issue of *The Lifeboat*. An excerpt read:

Far too many cases occur of vessels being sent to sea that are known to be overloaded or otherwise unseaworthy, thus verifying the Scriptural assertion that “The love of money is the root of all evil.” Any unprincipled ship owner or his agent, has the power to send, and even to force, a well-insured, unseaworthy ship to sea, against the judgment and will of her master and crew, to their almost certain destruction.

After reading more accounts similar to the above, Plimsoll realized that what he had witnessed in 1864 was likely caused by the same careless overloading that sank the *Utopia*. Further investigation revealed that the problem was epidemic and that shipowners knew what was happening. By overloading ships at the end of their useful life, shipowners could maximize their profits. If they survived, the greater load meant higher profits. Lost ships

were covered by inflated insurance, which would pay for the loss of the “coffin-ship” and cargo. Often it was enough to purchase a new ship, outfitted with the latest gear. Loss of life was not weighed in the balance.

Plimsoll appealed to Parliament to take action and pass laws forbidding the overloading of merchant ships. But many MPs (Members of Parliament) were also shipowners, or had close ties to shipowners and shipbuilders. Plimsoll’s appeal was ignored.

Unable to sway Parliament from the outside, Plimsoll decided to run for Parliament and work from within its ranks. He was elected to Parliament in 1868. While he is best known for his work toward enforcing safe loading limits for merchant ships, Plimsoll’s investigation into the shipping industry uncovered a number of abuses, which had been largely ignored.

For many years, Plimsoll tried unsuccessfully to sway Parliament. As opposition intensified, Plimsoll took his appeal directly to the public. His compelling book, entitled *Our Seamen: An Appeal*, provided ample evidence that the problem of overloading was rampant and that it was killing hundreds of sailors every year. Hundreds of thousands of pamphlets, with a summary of his findings, were circulated at his expense. In spite of the fact that the death rate among sailors was over five times that of coal miners, Parliament did not act on Plimsoll’s appeal until public pressure to do so was overwhelming.

As “the sailor’s friend,” Plimsoll fought for better safety standards, healthier conditions, and adequate provisions for all crew members aboard both military and merchant vessels. George Peters, author of *The Plimsoll Line*, states that, “The crowning achievement of Samuel Plimsoll’s life was the *Merchant Shipping Act of 1876*.” Along with several amendments that followed, the *Shipping Act* codified standards for the safety and provisioning of ships, as well as many protocols related to punishment, illness, accidents, and death while at sea.

In their treatment of the *Cutty Sark* crew, Bruce and his first mate had almost certainly violated the bylaws of the new *Shipping Act*. The formal investigation that the judge had ordered might well cost Bruce his Master’s Certificate, if not worse. He rushed back to the *Cutty Sark* and freed three sailors that he had placed in irons. According to Lubbock (*The Log of the Cutty Sark*), “... to these he came begging and whining for mercy, wailing over his dependent family, blaming the mate, and promising all sorts of redress.”

According to Lubbock, had the crew testified, Bruce and his first mate would likely have been suspended, but they let the matter drop. As it was, on the sole testimony of the hospital doctor, Bruce was severely censured and directed to provide special provisions for the recovering seamen. Additionally, he was ordered to relieve them of all but the most essential chores for a fortnight.

For a brief spell, Bruce embraced his Dr. Jekyll persona. That lasted until they reached their next port of call, Zebu, where Bruce had been instructed to load jute, bound for London. Bruce saw to it that a large stock of the local tanglefoot was also procured. This set the stage for the disaster yet to come. Lubbock describes the situation as, “... the transforming mixture, whether it was gin, whisky, or the local fire-water, was too handy to his elbow for Dr. Jekyll to last long.”

From the moment the *Cutty Sark* hoisted anchor in Zebu, life on ship became, once again, a living hell. Soon, a drinking bout between the captain and first mate during rough seas left both men so incoherent that they nearly scuttled the ship. With the ship in danger of running aground, the second mate was asked by the crew to take control, but he could do nothing legally until both Bruce and his first mate relinquished command.

A dispute between the two imbibers finally ensued. When it reached a crescendo, the first mate left in a huff and continued to binge in the privacy of his cabin. Here was the second mate’s opportunity.

With a smile on his face and a fresh bottle of the Zebu “sham shaw” in hand, the second mate merrily approached the toppling Captain Bruce. While managing to avoid the brew himself, the second mate saw to it that Bruce’s cup was never dry. The crew was quite relieved when Bruce finally passed out and the second mate took charge. Once the ship was out of danger, every remaining bottle of liquor was hunted down and cast overboard.

Bruce finally recovered two days later. His memory was foggy, but he suspected he had been bamboozled when he discovered that his stash was missing. When questioned by Bruce, no member of the crew seemed to recall events of the raucous evening.

Whether it was lack of priorities or outright incompetence, a few days later rations began to run low. First it was sugar, and then lime juice. Soon all rations were cut in half. Bruce could have restocked at several ports not far off course, but he refused to do so. Rations were again halved. Finally, the signal flag was raised to alert passing ships that the *Cutty Sark* was desperately short of rations. Bruce seems to have intentionally turned his ship into a beggar-ship.

If there was ever a doubt as to the extent of Bruce’s violation of the bylaws of the *Shipping Act*, all doubt had now vanished. The *Shipping Act* required that all crew members receive adequate nutrition, and accurate weights and measures were required onboard to assure that specified minimums were met. After ten days at sea, all hands were to be given “antiscorbutics” to fend off scurvy. One ounce of lime or lemon juice, served daily with adequate sugar and water, was specifically prescribed.

The “hell-ship voyage” finally ended when the *Cutty Sark* anchored near the span of the nearly completed Brooklyn Bridge. The second mate brought charges against Bruce and his first mate. Both were promptly suspended. The crew received a modest monetary compensation for the inadequate provisions they had received.

Cutty Sark, the pride and joy of John “Old White Hat” Willis, had once again lost its captain and first mate. In desperation, he transferred Captain E. Moore and the chief officer from another of his ships, *Blackadder*, which happened to be in New York at the time. The steward, cook, carpenter, several apprentices and a few other trusted crew members were added for good measure.

Captain E. Moore was a respected and capable captain, but not a “driver” that *Cutty Sark* needed. While she made some good runs to Australia under Captain Moore, “Old White Hat” still fancied a record-setting *Cutty Sark*. All his ship needed, he firmly believed, was the right “driver.”

Willis hired Richard Woodget in 1881, and gave him command of *Coldstream*, a 36 year-old barge, which Lubbock called an “old balk of teak.” Over the next four years, Woodget made some passages with *Coldstream* that “astonished her owner.” In addition, Woodget had good business sense, and returned a tidy profit to the company. It finally occurred to Willis that out of all of his captains, Woodget was the most likely master for his *Cutty Sark*.

One day in 1885, as *Cutty Sark* was loading cargo bound for Sydney, Willis escorted Woodget down to the East India Dock, pointed to the ship and exclaimed, “Captain Woodget, there is your ship. My agents in Sydney are Dangar, Geddes & Co. All you have to do is drive her.” And drive her he did.

In *Running Her Easting Down*, William F. Baker states, “Woodget was the man – the *Cutty Sark* was the ship. Here was a man destined for greatness – here was a ship destined for immortality.” Once again “Old White Hat” pined for the old days of the great tea races, and believed that *Cutty Sark*, under Captain Woodget, should surely set a new record for a tea shipment from Shanghai to London. In 1886 he gave it a go.

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