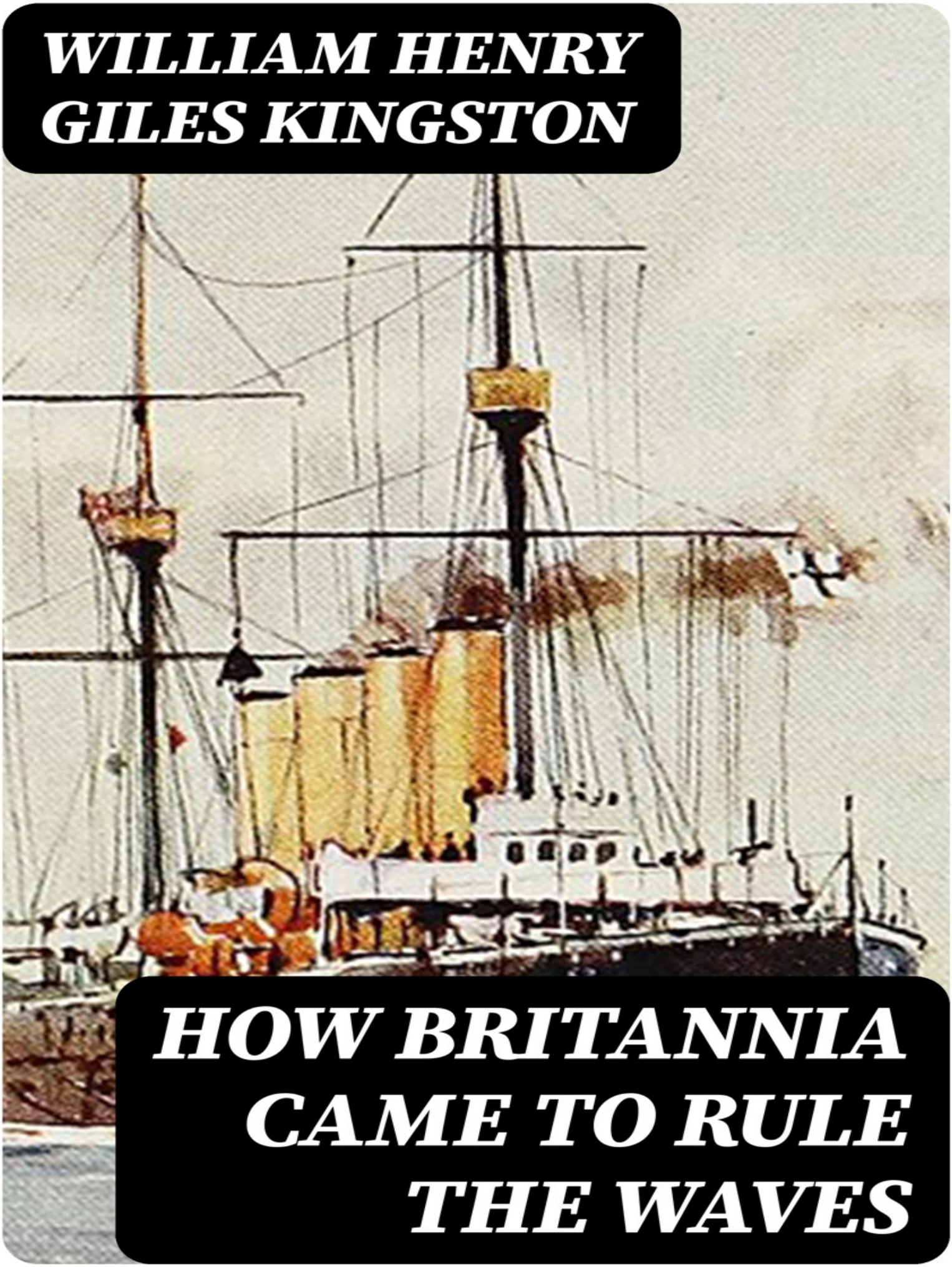
WILLIAM HENRY GILES KINGSTON



HOW BRITANNIA CAME TO RULE THE WAVES

William Henry Giles Kingston

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Chapter One.

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Introductory Remarks.

Rome was not built in a day, nor has the glorious British Navy attained its present condition except by slow degrees, by numerous trials and experiments, by improvements gradually and cautiously introduced, and by the employment of a vast amount of thought, energy, and toil. We are apt to forget when we see an elaborate machine, the immense quantity of mental and physical exertion it represents, the efforts of the united minds perhaps of many successive generations, and the labour of thousands of workmen. I propose briefly to trace the progress which the British Navy has made from age to age, as well as its customs, and the habits of its seamen, with their more notable exploits since the days when this tight little island of ours first became known to the rest of the world.

Some writers, indulging in the Darwinian theory of development, would make us believe that the ironclad of the present day is the legitimate offspring of the ancient coracle or wicker-work boat which is still to be found afloat on the waters of the Wye, and on some of the rivers of the east coast; but if such is the case, the descent must be one of many ages, for it is probable that the Britons had stout ships long before the legions of Cassar set their feet upon our shores. I am inclined to agree with an ancient writer who gives it as his opinion that the British were always a naval

people. “For,” says he, in somewhat quaint phraseology, “as Britain was an island, the inhabitants could only have come to it across the ocean in ships, and they could scarcely have had ships unless they were nautically inclined.” The same writer asserts that the Britons had vessels of large size long before the invasion of the Romans, but that they either burnt them to prevent their falling into the hands of the invaders, or that they were destroyed by the Romans themselves, who then, adding insult to injury, stigmatised the people as mere painted barbarians, whose sole mode of moving over the waters of their coasts and rivers was in wicker baskets covered with hides—the truth being, that these wicker-ribbed boats were simply the craft used by the British fishermen on their coasts or streams. How could the hordes that in successive ages crossed the German Ocean have performed the voyage unless they had possessed more efficient means of conveyance than these afforded? I must, therefore, agree with the aforesaid ancient writer that they had stout ships, impelled by sails and oars, which were afterwards employed either in commercial or piratical enterprises. The Britons of the southern shores of the island possessed, he says, wooden-built ships of a size considerably greater than any hide-covered barks could have been. It is very certain that many hundred years before the Christian era the Phoenicians visited the coasts of Cornwall and Devonshire, and planted colonies there, which retain to the present day their ancient peculiarities and customs, and even many names of common things. It is probable that these colonists, well acquainted as they were with nautical affairs, kept up their practical knowledge of

shipbuilding, and formed a mercantile navy to carry on their commerce with other countries, as well as ships fitted for warfare to protect their ports from foreign invasion, or from the attacks of pirates.

Many English nautical terms at present in use are clearly of Phoenician origin. Davit, for instance, is evidently derived from the Arabic word *Davit*, a crooked piece of wood, similar in shape to that by which the boats of a vessel are hoisted out of the water and hung up at her sides. The word Caboose was the name given by the Phoenicians to the temple dedicated to the god of fire, whom they worshipped, built on the decks of their vessels; when a purer faith was introduced, it being found convenient to cook dinners in the no longer sacred *Caboose*, the name being retained, Blackie the cook took the place of the officiating priest. Caboose is at the present day the name of the kitchen-house on the deck of a merchant-vessel. Many other terms even now used by seafaring people are derived directly or indirectly from the same far-distant origin, as are several of the customs observed at the present day. I may mention some of them by-and-by.

Ships of the Ancients.

The ancient Greeks and other Eastern nations had ships of considerable size many hundred years before the Christian era. The earliest mythical stories describe long voyages performed by vessels of far more complicated structure than the simple canoe. The ships engaged in the Trojan war each carried a hundred and twenty warriors, which shows that at the period referred to they could not

have been of very small dimensions. Although they might have been open, they had masts and sails, and were propelled by rowers sitting on benches, while the oars were fastened to the sides of the ship with leathern thongs. Some were painted black, others red. When they arrived at their destination, the bows were drawn up on shore; or when on a voyage, they at night anchored by the stern, with cables secured to large stones. At an early period they had round bottoms and sharp prows. We hear of ships with three ranks of rowers, called triremes, B.C. 700, and long before that time biremes, or ships with two ranks of oars, had been introduced. In the time of Cyrus, long sharp-keeled war-ships were used, having fifty rowers, who sat in one row, twenty-five on each side of the ship. About B.C. 400, the practice of entirely decking over ships was introduced; Themistocles induced the Athenians to build a fleet of two hundred sail, and to pass a decree that every year twenty new triremes should be built. The Greeks even at that period, however, seldom ventured out into the open sea, steering in the daytime by headlands or islands, and at night by the rising and setting of different stars.

The Greeks possessed ships of war and merchant-vessels. That a war-galley was of large size may be inferred from the fact that she carried two hundred seamen, besides on some occasions thirty Epibatoe—literally, marines, trained to fight at sea. These war-vessels moved with wonderful rapidity, darting here and there with the speed of a modern steam-vessel. The ordinary war-ships were triremes, or had three banks of oars. The merchant-vessels or transports were much more bulky, had round bottoms,

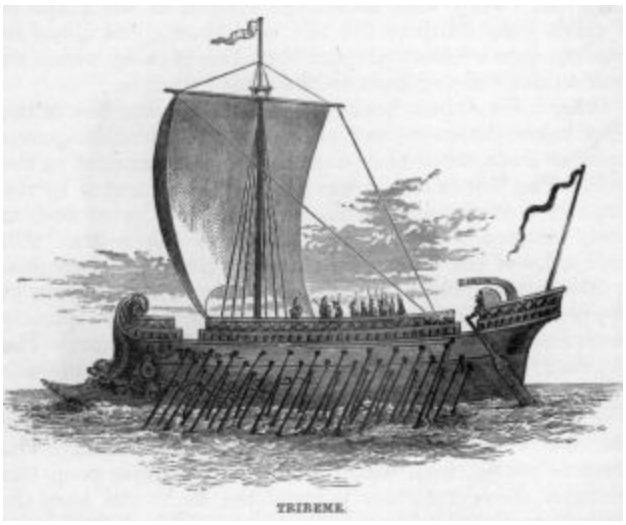
and although rowers were employed on board, yet they were propelled chiefly by their sails. After the time of Alexander, vessels with four, five, and even more ranks of rowers became general, and ships are described with twelve and even thirty ranks of rowers and upwards—but they were found of no practical use, as the crew on the upper benches were unable to throw sufficient power into the immensely long oars which it was necessary to employ.

Fully B.C. 500, the Carthaginians invented the quadremes, and about B.C. 400, Dionysius, first tyrant of Syracuse, whose ambition was to create a powerful navy, built numerous vessels of the same description, unused till that time by the Greeks. The rowers in these ships, with numerous banks of oars, could not have sat directly one above another, as some suppose; but the feet of those on the upper tier must have rested on the bench or thwart on which those immediately below them sat. Thus the tiers of oars were probably not more than two feet, if so much, one above another; and supposing the lowest tier was two feet above the water, the highest in the quadremes could not have been more than ten feet, and even then the length of the oar of the upper tier must have been very great, and it must have required considerable exertion on the part of the rower to move it. The most interesting part, however, of an ancient ship to us at the present day was the beak or rostra. At first these beaks were placed only above water, and were formed in the shape of a short thick-bladed sword, with sharp points, generally three, one above another, and inclining slightly upwards, so that they might rip open the planks of the vessels against which they ran. They were

sometimes formed in the shape of a ram’s head fixed to the end of a beam; and hence in modern days we have adopted the name of rams, which we give to ships of war built on the same principle.

After a time these beaks were fixed on to the bow of the ship below the water, and were thus still more dangerous to other ships, when they could strike an antagonist on the side. The bow of a ship was generally ornamented by the head of some animal, such as a wild boar or a wolf, or some imaginary creature placed above the rostra. On both sides of the prow were painted eyes, such as are seen on the bows of boats and vessels in the Mediterranean at the present day. The upper part of the prow was frequently ornamented with a helmet covered with bronze. The steersman or pilot was looked upon as the chief in rank among the crew, and after him there came an officer whose duties were similar to those of the boatswain, as he had the care of the gear and command over the rowers. The stern or puppis, from which we derive the term poop, was elevated above the other parts of the deck, and here the helmsman had his seat, sheltered by a shed frequently adorned with an image of the tutelary deity of the vessel. Sometimes he had a lantern hanging in front of him, probably to enable him to see the magic compass, the use of which was kept secret from the rest of the crew. A circular shield or shields also ornamented the stern. Behind the helmsman was placed a slight pole on which flew the dog-vane, to show the direction of the wind. In the centre of the ship was a raised platform on a level with the upper part of the bulwarks, on

which in battle the soldiers took their stand to hurl their darts against the enemy.



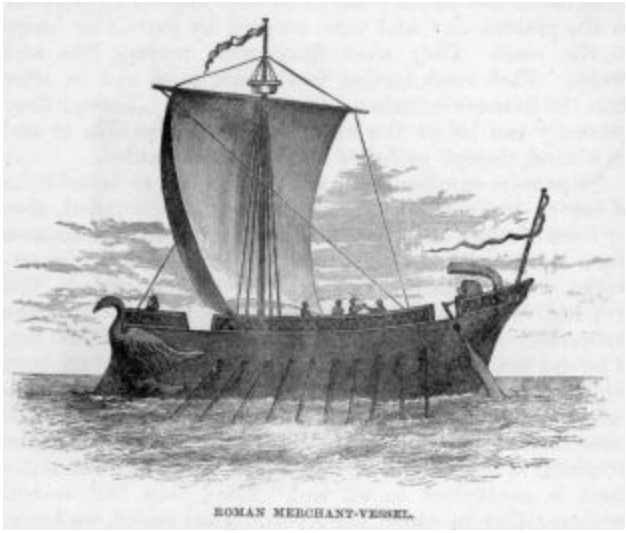
The quadremes and quinqueremes carried from three to four hundred rowers, and a ship belonging to Ptolemaeus Philopater is described as carrying four thousand rowers. From the surface of the water to the top of the prow was forty-eight cubits, or seventy-two feet, and from the water to the top of the stern fifty-three cubits, or nearly eighty feet; she had thus sufficient room for forty ranks of rowers, and the oars of the uppermost rank were thirty-eight cubits or fifty-seven feet long, the handles of which were weighted with lead, so as to balance the outer part, and thus render the long oars manageable. The lower parts of the holes through which the oars passed were covered with leather. Till the invention of the rudder, vessels were steered by two large oars, one on either side of the stern, with very broad blades. Ships were also furnished with long poles, by which they could be shoved off the ground. The triremes were fitted with two masts, and so were even smaller vessels; the larger had three masts, the largest of which was nearest the stern. They were usually of fir; and the head of the lower

mast, which is at present called the top, was in the shape of a drinking cup. Some of these tops were of bronze; the largest held three men, two in the next, and one in the smallest; and breast-works ran round them to defend the occupants from the darts of the enemy. They were also furnished with tackles for hoisting up stones and weapons to hurl at the foe. Above the main-mast was a top-mast or topgallant-mast, called the distaff; the yards were hoisted up much as in the present day, and were secured by parrels or hoops to the mast. They were fitted with topping-lifts and braces. Each mast carried two square sails, and in after days the Romans introduced triangular sails. Though they generally ran before the wind, they were also able to sail on a wind, though probably not very close-hauled.

Ships were supplied with weather-boards, or broad belts of canvas, to keep out the sea, and were surrounded, also, by lines of ropes one above another, to prevent the seamen from being washed overboard. Sometimes these breast-works were made of skins or wicker-work, and in bad weather were raised to a considerable height above the bulwarks. It is said that Anacharsis, upwards of 500 B.C., if he did not invent, greatly improved the form of anchors, which were already made of iron. The anchor had generally two flukes or teeth, and was then called bidens; but sometimes it had only one. We use the same terms as the ancients, to cast anchor or weigh anchor, whence the latter term is equivalent to set sail. Each ship had several anchors; that in which the Apostle Paul sailed, we know, had four, and others had eight. The largest and most important anchor was denominated “the last hope,” hence, when that

failed, arose the expression “the last hope gone.” A buoy was used fixed to the anchor by a rope, to show the spot where it lay.

The Romans possessed no war fleets till the year B.C. 260, when a fleet of triremes was built to oppose the Carthaginians. Many of them having been sent to the bottom, however, by the quinqueremes of that people, the Romans built a hundred of the latter-sized ships from the model of a Carthaginian vessel wrecked on the coast of Italy.



ROMAN MERCHANT-VESSEL.

The Romans must have had very large merchant-vessels to enable them to transport the enormous monoliths from Egypt which they erected in Rome. These vast stones, also, could not have been got on board and brought up the Tiber without considerable mechanical appliances.

The construction of their ships differed but slightly from that of the Greek vessels; they had turrets on the decks of their larger men-of-war, and employed a variety of destructive engines; so that in battle the soldiers on board fought much as they did when standing on the walls of a fortress. Of one thing I am sure, that no correct drawings of ancient ships have come down to us, if any such were really

made; those on medals, cameos, and such as are painted on walls, are probably as far removed from the reality as a Thames barge is from a dashing frigate. They give us, certainly, the different parts of the ship, and from them we may form a pretty correct idea of what a ship really was like. Certain it is, however, that ships were built of prodigious size, and if not equal to a line-of-battle ship of late days, they must have been as large as, if not larger than, the *Great Harry*, and probably quite as well able to encounter as she was the boisterous seas. Long before the Christian era, ships boldly struck across the Mediterranean, and even passing through the Pillars of Hercules, coasted along the shores of Iberia and Gaul, and thence crossed over to Britain, or coasted round the African continent.

Advanced as the ancients were in architectural knowledge, there is every reason to suppose that they were equally capable of building ships to answer all their requirements, either for war or commerce. They were probably thus not only of great size, but well built, and were certainly finished and ornamented in an elegant and even a magnificent manner, far superior to that of many ages later. The mistaken notion as to the size of the ships of the ancients arises from the supposition that because merchantmen of the present day are smaller than men-of-war, that they were so formerly—the reverse, however, being the case. Men-of-war were generally long, narrow vessels, constructed for speed, to carry only fighting men, with a small quantity of provisions; whereas merchantmen were built of considerable beam and depth to stow a large quantity of cargo. A Phoenician vessel was able to afford

accommodation to 500 emigrants, with provisions for a long voyage, besides her crew, while her masts were formed of the cedars of Lebanon.

Nautical Customs derived from the Ancients.

Among the best-known customs of the ocean is the ceremony that takes place when ships cross the line. That, however, like many others of olden days, is getting somewhat into disuse. Few of those who have witnessed it, probably, have suspected that its origin dates as far back as the times of the Phoenicians. As the ship approaches the imaginary band which encircles the globe, a gruff voice hails her from alongside, and demands her name and nation, whence she is from, and whither she is bound. These questions being answered, she is ordered to heave to, when no less a person than old father Neptune himself, with his fair wife Amphitrite, and their attendant Tritons, climb up over the bows, and take possession of the fore-part of the deck. Neptune generally wears a crown formed out of a tin saucepan, with a flowing beard, a wig of oakum, and a robe composed of some gay-coloured petticoat-stuff, stored up for the occasion, or a piece of canvas, with curious devices painted on it, while he carries in his band a trident, made out of a harpoon or a boat-hook. The fair Amphitrite, who is more commonly known on board as Bill Buntline, the boatswain’s mate, is habited, like her lord, in the gayest of gay attire, with a vast profusion of oakum locks, and bows of huge proportions, although it must be confessed that she has very little to boast of in the way of feminine delicacy or

personal beauty, while the Tritons are at all events very odd-looking fish.

The captain, surrounded by his officers, with the passengers behind him, stands on the poop, and a spirited conversation, not altogether destitute of humour, generally takes place between him and Neptune—when the monarch of the main demands that every one on board who has not before crossed that portion of his watery realm where the ship then floats, shall be brought before him. None, whatever their rank, are excused. Those who at once consent to pay tribute are allowed to escape without undergoing any further ceremony, but those luckless wights who refuse or have not the wherewithal to pay are instantly seized on by the Tritons, lathered with pitch and grease, shaved with a rusty hoop, and soused over head and ears in a huge tub, while from all quarters, as they attempt to escape from the marine monsters, bucketfuls of water are hove down upon them. Uproar and apparent confusion ensues; and usually it requires no little exertion of authority on the part of the captain and officers to restore order.

We might suspect, from the introduction of the names of Neptune and Amphitrite, that this curious and somewhat barbarous custom must have a classical origin. There can be no doubt that it is derived from those maritime people of old, the Phoenicians. Ceremonies, to which those I have described bear the strongest similarity, were practised by them at a very remote period, whenever one of their ships passed through the Straits of Gibraltar. That talented writer, David Urquhart, in his “Pillars of Hercules,” asserts that the Phoenicians and Carthaginians possessed a knowledge of

the virtues of the loadstone, and used it as a compass, as did the mariners of the Levant till a late period.

The original compass consisted of a cup full of water, on which floated a thin circular board, with the needle resting on it; this was placed in a small shrine or temple in front of the helmsman, with a lantern probably fixed inside to throw light on the mysterious instrument during the night. The most fearful oaths were administered to the initiated not to divulge the secret. Every means, also, which craft could devise or superstition enforce was employed by the Phoenicians to prevent other people from gaining a knowledge of it, or of the mode by which their commerce beyond the Straits of Hercules was carried on, or of the currents, the winds, the tides, the seas, the shores, the people, or the harbours. A story is told of a Phoenician vessel running herself on the rocks to prevent the Romans from finding the passage. This secrecy was enforced by the most sanguinary code—death was the penalty of indiscretion; thus the secret of the compass was preserved from generation to generation among a few families of seamen unknown to the rest of the civilised world. The ceremonies, especially, were kept up, though in a succession of ages they have undergone gradual alterations.

The lofty shores which form the two sides of the Straits of Gibraltar were known in ancient days as the Pillars of Hercules. Here stood the temple of the god, and hither came the mariners before launching forth on the more perilous part of their voyage, to pay their vows, and probably to bind themselves by oaths to conceal the secrets

to be revealed to them. Perhaps in all cases the temple on shore was not visited, but, at all events, the oaths were administered to the seamen on board, ablutions were performed, and sacrifices offered up. The introduction of Christianity did not abolish these observances, and through the ignorance and superstition of the mariners of those seas they were for century after century maintained, though the motive and origin were altogether forgotten.

A traveller, who wrote as recently as the seventeenth century, describes a ceremony which took place on board a ship in which he was sailing, when passing through the straits. Just as the two lofty headlands were in sight on either side of the ship, an old seaman came forward with a book, and summoning all those whose names he declared not to be registered in it, made them swear that they in future voyages would compel their fellow-seamen to perform the same ceremonies in which they were about to engage. Behind him appeared a band of veteran seamen dressed up in a variety of fantastic costumes, with a drum and other musical instruments. These forthwith seized on all whose names were not registered as having before passed through the straits, and dragging them forward, thrust them into tubs, and soused them thoroughly with water. No one was altogether exempt, but those who had before passed were allowed to escape a like process by the payment of a fine.

These same mariners, when they extended their voyages to the southern hemisphere, very naturally postponed the ceremony which they were in the habit of performing on passing the straits, till they crossed the line. They also, not

altogether abandoning classical allusions, changed the name of their *dramatis personae*. Hercules, who had no connection with the ocean, whatever he might have had to do with the Straits of Gibraltar, had to give place to Neptune, the long-honoured monarch of the main, and Amphitrite was introduced to keep him company. We recognise in the duckings, the sacrificial ablutions, and in the shaving and fining, the oaths and the penalty.

When the hardy seamen of Great Britain first began to steer their ships across the line, they were undoubtedly accompanied by pilots and mariners of the Mediterranean. These, of course, taught them the ceremonies they had been in the habit of performing. The English, as may be supposed, made various additions and alterations suited to their rougher habits and ideas, and what at one time probably retained somewhat of the elegance of its classical origin, became the strange burlesque it now appears.

Another nautical custom still in vogue is also derived from remote antiquity. At the present day, with doubtful propriety, in imitation of the rite of baptism, we christen a ship, as it is often called, by breaking a bottle of wine on her bows as she glides off the stocks. The custom is of thoroughly heathen origin. A similar ceremony was practised by the ancient Greeks when they launched a ship. We ornament our vessels with flags; they decked theirs with garlands. At the moment the ship was launched forth into the deep the priest of Neptune raised to his lips a goblet of wine, and after quaffing from it, he poured the remainder out as a libation to his deity. The modern Greeks still perform the ceremony much in the manner of their

ancestors. Clearly, the custom we have of breaking a bottle of wine is derived from the libations of the ancients. In most instances, at the present day, the ship is named at the moment she is launched by a young lady, who acts the part of the priest or priestess of old.

Of late years a religious service is usually performed at the launch of a man-of-war. The heathen libation is not, however, omitted, and the whole ceremony presents a curious jumble of ancient and modern forms suited to the tastes of the day. Still we are bound heartily to pray that the gallant sailors who will man the stout ship may be protected while in the performance of their duty to their country; and, still more, that they may be brought to a knowledge of the Gospel.

The Greeks invariably gave feminine names to their ships, choosing, whenever possible, appropriate ones; while the less courteous Romans bestowed masculine names on theirs. Though we may not have followed the Greek rule, we to the present day always look upon a ship as of the feminine gender.

The mariner’s compass, the most important instrument used in navigation, demands further notice. The magnet, or loadstone, was known to the ancient Greeks many centuries before the Christian era. The legend runs, that one Magnes a shepherd, feeding his flocks on Mount Ida, having stretched himself on the ground to sleep, left his crook, the upper part of which was made of iron, lying against a rock. On awaking, and rising to depart, he found, when he attempted to take up his crook, that the iron adhered to the rock. Having communicated this extraordinary fact to some

neighbouring philosophers, they called the rock after the name of the shepherd, Magnes, the magnet.

The Chinese, of still more ancient date, so their traditions affirm, discovered a mountain rising out of the sea possessing an intensity of attraction so great that the nails and iron bands were drawn out of their ships, causing their immediate wreck. Those sea-arabs whom we call Phoenicians had, at a very early date, made use of their knowledge of the property of the loadstone to turn towards the North Pole; though, like many other discoveries, as I have just mentioned, it was kept a profound secret among a select few, and concealed from the public by having an air of religious mystery thrown over it. Lumps of loadstone formed into balls were preserved in their temples, and looked upon with awe, as possessing mystic properties. With these round stones the point of a needle was rubbed, as often as it required fresh magnetising.

I have already described the compass used by the Phoenicians, and how, long after Islamism had gained the ascendency, it was possessed by their descendants. At length the secret was divulged, and it came into general use among the mariners of the Mediterranean in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Its original form was unaltered for nearly four centuries, when, in 1502, Flavio Gioja of Positano, near the town of Amalfi, on the coast of Calabria, a place celebrated for its maritime enterprise, improved upon the primitive rude and simple instrument by suspending the needle on a centre, and enclosing it in a box. The advantages of his invention were so great that his instrument was universally adopted, and hence he gained

the credit of being the inventor of the mariner’s compass, of which he was only the improver.

Long before the compass was used at sea, it had been employed by the Chinese to direct the course of their caravans across the desert. For this purpose a figure, placed in a waggon which led the caravan, was so constructed that the arm and hand moved with perfect freedom, the magnetic needle being attached to it; the hand, however, pointed to the south, the negative end being fixed in it. The Chinese also used a needle which was freely suspended in the air, attached to a silken thread, and by this means they were able to determine the amount of the western variation of the needle. It is possible that both the Chinese and Arabs discovered the magnetic powers of the loadstone, although the latter in their long voyages may have allowed the knowledge they possessed to have been drawn from them by the astute Chinese; or, *vice versa*, the Arabs may have obtained the knowledge which the Chinese already possessed, and kept it secret from the western nations. We all remember the wonderful adventures of Sinbad the Sailor, as narrated in the Arabian Nights—how the ship in which he sailed was attracted by a magnetic mountain, which finally drew all the iron bolts and nails out of her. Now it happens that the author places Sinbad’s mountain in the same part of the world in which the Chinese say their magnetic mountain exists. Ptolemy, in his geography, also describes a magnetic mountain existing in the Chinese Seas. We may therefore, I think, come to the conclusion, that the mariner’s compass was known to the ancients long before the

Christian era, and that although disused for centuries, the knowledge was never altogether lost.

Chapter Two.

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Early English Ships (from A.D. 600 to A.D. 1087.)

We Englishmen undoubtedly derive a large portion of our nautical spirit from our Saxon ancestors, the first bands of whom came to the shores of our tight little island under those sea-rovers known as Hengist and Horsa, invited by the helpless Britons to defend them from the attacks of the savage Picts and Scots. The enemies of the gallant heroes I have named were apt to call them pirates; but as might made right in most sublunary affairs during those dark and troubled ages of the world's history, they looked upon the roving commissions they had given themselves as perfectly honourable and lawful, and felt no small amount of contempt for the rest of mankind who chose to stay at home at ease by their firesides, while they were ploughing the ocean in search of plunder and glory. I suspect that they had a strong preference for the former.

After the Saxons had driven the ancient inhabitants of the island out of the more fertile portions of the country, and had made themselves, according to their notions, pretty comfortable in their new homes; they, in a little time, in their turn, were sadly pestered by foreign invaders. These were the Danes. Those hardy sons of the North, still more

wild and fierce than the Saxons, and still less scrupulous in their proceedings, pleased with the appearance of the country which they had come over to look at, settled themselves in every nook and corner of Old England in which they could haul up their ships, and find a resting place for their feet. I cannot help feeling a great respect for those old sea-kings. They were heathens, and we must judge of them by the light which they possessed, and not by any standard acknowledged in the present civilised world. Bold, enterprising, and sagacious, their own country confined and barren, they looked on the wide ocean as the only worthy field for the employment of their energies. They loved it for itself, too; they were born on it, or within the sound of its surges; they lived on it, they fought on it, and it was their wish through life to die on it, as if only on its boundless expanse their free spirits could be emancipated from this mortal coil. This same spirit still exists and animates the breasts of the officers and men of our navy, of our vast mercantile marine; and, though mentioned last, not certainly in a less degree of the owners of the superb yacht fleets which grace the waters of the Solent, of the Bay of Dublin, of Plymouth Sound, of the mouth of the Thames, and indeed of every harbour and roadstead round our shores. No people, unless animated by such a spirit, would go to sea simply for the love of a sea-life as do our yachtsmen. We may depend upon it that they are the lineal descendants of those old sea-rovers, somewhat more civilised and polished certainly, differing as much in that respect, it is to be hoped, from their remote ancestors as do their trim yachts, which will go nine knots or more within four and a-half points of

the wind, from the tubbish-looking sturdy craft of the Danes, which had no idea of sailing any way except dead before the gale.

There was something barbarously grand in the notion of the old Norse kings which induced them, when worn out with age and fatigue, to sail forth into mid-ocean, and then, lighting their own funeral pile, to consume themselves and the stout ship they loved so well in one conflagration. Seriously, however, we must not forget that they were influenced by a very terrible and dark superstition, and be thankful that we live in an age when the bright beams of Christianity have dispelled such gross errors from this part of the globe. I cannot help fancying that the late Lord Yarborough, that chief of true yachtsmen, had somewhat the same feeling I have been describing, refined and civilised of course, when, his vessel, the *Kestrel*, being in Malta harbour, he found death approaching, and ordered her to be got under weigh, to stand out to sea, that he might breathe out his spirit surrounded by that element on which he had so long made his home, and in which he so truly delighted.

The tribes, now so closely united, which make up the British race, were the most maritime people of their time, and it is not, therefore, surprising that we should now possess strong nautical propensities. The Normans, it must be remembered also, who afterwards conquered England, were descended from the same bold sea-rovers, though, having paid sundry visits to Paris, where they learned to write poetry, to sing, and to dance, with many other accomplishments, they had wonderfully improved in civilisation since the days of their ancestors, of whom I have

been speaking. Still the same enterprising spirit animated their bosoms, afterwards to shine forth with splendour, when their descendants became the leaders of numberless exploring expeditions to all parts of the world, and of the victorious fleets of Old England.

There is no doubt, as I have shown, that the English possessed trading vessels, if not also ships, built exclusively for war, from a very early period.

The first regular war-fleet, however, which we hear of was one built by our great King Alfred, to protect his dominions from the attacks of the Danes.

He designed a ship from the model of those used by the Greeks, Romans, and Carthaginians, similar to the Maltese galley employed down to a very recent date in the Mediterranean. His ships are said to have been twice as large as any vessels of war used by other nations at that period. They were large galleys, propelled by sixty oars, with a deck above that part where the rowers sat. On the deck stood the fighting men and mariners, who managed the sails, for they had masts and sails as well as oars. There were besides probably small towers or breast-works at the stern and bow to contribute to their means of attack and defence. These ships were built of well-seasoned materials, commanded by experienced officers, whom the king had collected from all quarters, and manned by expert seamen. The commanders were ordered to go forth in quest of the Danes, to attack wherever they encountered them, and to give no quarter; orders which were strictly obeyed, and which for the time were most efficacious in clearing the coast of pirates. In consequence of the ease with which the

ships were moved through the water, and from their being always able to keep the weather-gauge, as likewise from the strange appearance which they presented to their enemies, Alfred’s commanders were not afraid of attacking twice or thrice their own number of the enemy, and invariably came off victorious. Indeed they had nearly the same advantage over the Danes which a steamer at the present day has over a fleet of Chinese junks. Alfred, it is said, caused surveys to be made of the coasts of Norway and Lapland, and sent out ships to the polar regions in search of whales.

I have met with an old writer, who describes a far more remarkable achievement than any of these. He was a monk, of course, and his knowledge of geography we may suspect was rather limited, when he tells us that in the reign of Alfred a voyage was performed to the Indies by the way of the north-east—that is to say, round the north of Asia—under the command of a certain monk, Swithelm, who, as his reward, was made Bishop of Sherburn. The mission was undertaken to aid the Christians of a place called Saint Thomas, on the continent of India, and we are assured that the curiosities which were brought back, and are fully described, are exactly like the productions found in India, when it became more fully known. The expedition, if it ever took place, must have proceeded down the African coast and round the Cape of Good Hope. If so, the seamen of Britain, with a monk as their commander, succeeded in an enterprise which, having been totally forgotten, immortalised Bartholomew Diaz as the discoverer of the Stormy Cape full six centuries afterwards. We must not place more faith in the narrative than it deserves, but one

thing is certain, that if any long or perilous voyages were performed, the prints of ships pretending to be those of the days of King Alfred found on tapestries, old illustrated histories and other works are not slightly incorrect. When a boy, I used very strongly to suspect that if a ship had ever been built after the model of the prints exhibited in the History of England, she would either, as sailors say, have turned the turtle directly she was launched, or have gone boxing about the compass beyond the control of those on board her; but as to standing up to a breeze, or going ahead, I saw that that was impossible. I have since discovered, with no little satisfaction, when examining into the subject, that the verbal descriptions of the ships of those days give a very different idea to that which the prints and tapestry work do, which so offended my nautical instincts.

Large substantial vessels, we may depend on it, existed in those days, and though encumbered with much top hamper, and rigged only with square sails, they did not carry the high towers nor the absurdly cut sails which they are represented to have done in all the illustrated histories I have seen. The celebrated galleys of King Alfred are described by an old writer as very long, narrow, and deep vessels, heavily ballasted on account of the high deck on which the soldiers and seamen stood above the heads of the rowers. Of these rowers, there were four to work each oar, and as there were thirty-eight oars on a side, there must have been upwards of three hundred rowers to each vessel. Whether these vessels had more than one mast is uncertain. From their want of beam they would have run

much risk of turning over had they attempted to sail except directly before the wind. They moved with great rapidity; and in an engagement off the Isle of Wight, they ran down the Danish vessels in succession till the whole fleet of the enemy was either sunk, driven on shore, or put to flight.

The navy of England still further increased during the reign of Alfred's immediate successors, till, in the time of King Edgar (A.D. 957), it had reached the number of three thousand six hundred ships at least, "with which," as say his chroniclers, "he vindicated the right claimed in all ages by the sovereigns of this island to the dominion of the seas (meaning the seas surrounding England), and acquired to himself the great title of *The Protector of Commerce*."

This navy was divided into three fleets, each of twelve hundred sail, which he kept in constant readiness for service, one on the eastern coast, another on the western, and a third on the northern coasts of the kingdom, to defend them against the depredations of the Danish and Norman pirates, and to secure the navigation of the adjacent seas; which, that he might the more effectually do, he, every year after the festival of Easter, went on board the fleet on the eastern coast, and sailing westward with it scoured the channel of pirates; and having looked into all the ports, bays, and creeks between the Thames' mouth and Land's End, quitted this fleet and sent it back, and going on board the western fleet did the like in those parts, as also on the coasts of England, Scotland, and Ireland, and among the Hebrides or Western Islands, where being met by the northern fleet, he went on board the same, and came round to the Thames' mouth. Thus encompassing all his

dominions, and providing for the security of their coasts, he rendered an invasion impracticable, and kept his sailors in continual exercise. This he did for the whole sixteen years of his reign.

May our rulers ever possess the wisdom of Alfred, the greatest of England's kings, and by the same means preserve inviolate the shores of our native land.

It would have been well for Old England had all its monarchs imitated the excellent example set by King Edgar, and had never allowed any decrease in the naval establishment. Let the present generation do as he did, with the modifications changed times and circumstances have introduced, and then, although we may not be able correctly to troll forth "*Hearts of oak* are our ships," we may sing truly —

> "Iron coats wear our ships,
> Lion hearts have our men;
> We always are ready;
> Then steady, boys, steady;
> We'll fight and we'll conquer again and again."

King Edgar appears to have been the last great naval sovereign of the Saxon race. When his son Ethelred, by the murder of his brother Edward, came to the throne, his navy was so neglected that the Danes made incursions with impunity on every part of the coasts of England, and in the year A.D. 991, they extorted no less a sum than 10,000 pounds from that wicked monarch, or rather from his unfortunate subjects (who, depend upon it, had to pay the

piper), as the price of their forbearance in refraining from levying a further amount of plunder.

This circumstance might have served as a strong hint to the English of those times to keep up the strength of their navy, but it does not appear to have had any such effect; and even that wise monarch, Canute the Great, had only thirty-two ships afloat. We find, however, that when Harold, son of Earl Godwin, was striving to maintain his claim to the crown of England (A.D. 1066), he fitted out a numerous fleet, with which he was able to defeat his rivals. Now, as we are elsewhere told that one of these rivals alone had a navy of three hundred sail, his must have been of considerable magnitude. After his death, at the battle of Hastings, his sons and several of his chief nobility escaped in the remnant of their fleet to the coasts of Norway, and gave no little annoyance to the Norman Conqueror, William.

It must be remembered that the Duke of Normandy, as he was then styled, had, to bring over his army, nine hundred transports; but he burnt them when he landed, to show his own followers, as well as the Saxons, that he had come to die or to conquer.

Such is a very brief account of the navy of England up to the time of the Norman Conquest.