

Draft of October 22, 2002

## Poets, Sailors & Hunters

Presentation before the University of Michigan Sailing Club  
Fifty-Year Reunion Banquet

September 28, 2002

Starting a speech calls to mind a story I picked up in Russia not long ago. As you may recall, several decades ago the Soviet Union played host to the Olympic Games. At the opening ceremony the Soviet's supreme leader was called upon to make the official welcoming speech. Standing at the lectern he spoke into the microphone: "OOOH, OOOH, OOOH," but before going further his ghost writer touched his elbow, "Comrade, your speech starts lower on the page. You have been reading the Olympic logo!"

But, let's get down to business. In selecting a topic for this gathering of old sea dogs and sea doggesses I appropriately turned for inspiration to the Rime of the Ancient Mariner. There, part way through I came on these lines:

At length did cross an Albatross,  
Through the fog it came;  
As if it had been a Christian soul,  
We hailed it in God's name.

It ate the food it ne'er had eat,  
And round and round it flew.  
The ice did split with a thunder-fit,  
The helmsman steered us through!

And a good south wind sprung up behind;  
The Albatross did follow,  
And every day, for food or play,  
Came to the mariner's hollo!

In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud,  
It perched for vespers nine;  
Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white,  
Glimmered the white Moon-shine.

"God save thee, ancient Mariner!  
From the fiends, that plague thee thus!-  
Why look'st thou so?"—With my cross-bow  
I shot the ALBATROSS.

Now, wait a minute! What's this about a cross-bow? Who ever heard of a seaman having one of those things aboard ship? A cross-bow is surely too big to fit in his duffel bag. Here is a subject for intense study. What was Samuel Coleridge thinking that led him to write such an outlandish thing? Hunters, not sailors, use cross-bows.

Winston Churchill said, "Men often stumble on ideas. Most pick themselves up and go on their way." But, not I.

Could it be that Coleridge subconsciously associated sailors and hunters? Is it possible that all poets tend to make the same association? If I can find other poets who have done that, I shall have hit on a new philosophical point that could make me famous in literary circles. So I set out on a carefully constructed search through the literature to test the validity of my hypothesis.

My first step was to consider whether that ancient mariner was telling the truth. Here is what Rudyard Kipling had to say about seafarers' veracity:

When the robust and Brass-bound Man commissioned first for sea  
His fragile raft, Poseidon laughed, and "Mariner," said he,  
"Behold a Law immutable I lay on thee and thine,  
That never shall ye act or tell a falsehood at my shrine.

"Let Zeus adjudge your landward kin whose votive meal and salt  
At easy-cheated altars win oblivion for the fault;  
But you the unhoodwinked wave shall test—the immediate gulf  
condemn--  
Except ye owe the Fates a jest, be slow to jest with them.

"Ye shall not clear by Greekly speech, nor cozen from your path  
The twinkling shoal, the leeward beach, nor Hadria's white-lipped  
wrath;  
Nor tempt with painted cloth for wood my fraud-avenging hosts;  
Nor make at all, or all make good, your bulwarks and your boasts.

"Now and henceforward serve unshod, through wet and wakeful shifts,  
A present and oppressive God, but take, to aid, my gifts--  
The wide and windward-opening eye, the large and lavish hand,  
The soul that cannot tell a lie--except upon the land!"

In dromond and in catafract--wet, wakeful, windward eyed--  
He kept Poseidon's law intact (his ship and freight beside),  
But, once discharged the dromond's hold, the bireme beached once  
more,  
Splendaciously mendacious rolled the Brass-bound Man ashore....

The thranite now and thalamite are pressures low and high,  
And where three hundred blades bit white the twin-propellers ply.  
The God that hailed, the keel that sailed, are changed beyond recall,  
But the robust and Brass-bound Man, he is not changed at all!

From Punt returned, from Phormio's Fleet, from Javan and Gadire  
He strongly occupies the seat about the tavern fire,  
And moist with much Falernian or smoked Massilian juice,  
Revenge there the Brass-bound Man his long-enforcéd truce!

Did all those esoteric terms confuse you? Here is how I inadvertently confused one of our sons. He was about two or three; we were in our car and I was amusing him by singing old Michigan songs. Here was one always popular with the UM Glee Club:

Sing no more the fair Agean,  
Where the floating Cyclads shine,  
Nor the honeyed slopes Hyblean,  
Nor the blue Sicilian brine!

This onslaught of esoterica caused him to look up to me and ask, "Daddy, what does *blue* mean?"

When this same kid was in first grade we induced him to take piano lessons. At the end of the term the inevitable class recital took place. Our lad was assigned to play the fast movement from Rossini's *William Tell Overture*, a.k.a. the Lone Ranger theme. After much motherly pressure and nagging, the lad was ready and, in truth, did surprisingly well. A few weeks later, we were all packed in our car, and to pass the time, I was humming well known musical themes and asking the kids to identify the source. Turning to our erstwhile pianist, I said, "Okay, here's an easy one," and I hummed "Diddy bum, diddy bum, diddy bum bum bum!" "Oh, I know," quoth he, "Fast and Forceful!"

I beg you to note that this particular musical movement is intended to represent a group of galloping hunters. Thus you will see that we have been adhering to a carefully planned and rigorously followed logical path in seeking to find other poets who seemed to link sailors and hunters.

Now, returning to "Fast & Forceful," what other team of artists might we consider in this analysis? Clearly, the most admired pair this world has ever known are Gilbert & Sullivan, and let it be noted that Gilbert owned and enjoyed a sailing yacht. He was, indeed, well versed in nautical matters as evidenced by such operas as *H.M.S. Pinafore* and *The Pirates of Penzance*. Even *The Mikado* contains this verse sung by the tenor, Nanki-Poo, while disguised as a wandering minstrel:

And if you call for a song of the sea,  
We'll heave the capstan round,  
With a yeo heave ho, for the wind is free,  
Her anchor's a-trip, and her helm's a-lee,  
Hurrah for the homeward bound!

To lay aloft in a howling breeze  
May tickle a landsman's taste,  
But the happiest hour a sailor sees.  
Is when he's down  
at an inland town,  
With his Nancy on his knees, yeo ho!  
And his arm around her waist!

Even saltier lingo comes in a lesser-known G&S opera, *Ruddigore*, which pokes fun at old time melodramas. The sweet and simple heroine, Rose Maybud, is wooed by a the fearless sailor Dick Dauntless, who flatters her thus:

For she *is* such a smart little craft--  
Such a neat little, sweet little craft--  
    Such a bright little, tight little, slight little,  
Light little, trim little, slim little craft!

Now I happened to think those words nicely described my own tight little boat, a Sunfish. You know what a Sunfish is: a sailing surf board made comfortable with a foot tub. So I named her *Rose Maybud*, and I loved that tight little craft. Indeed, I went on sailing her year after year long after I grew too old for a boat more suited to an acrobatic teenager than to a grown man. In ripe middle age I considered buying a comfortable middle-sized day sailer, but then I noted the inverse relationship between a boat's size and how often it's sailed. So, when I reached fifty years of age, I kept *Rose Maybud*, and felt pretty cocky about meeting the challenge. The same at age sixty. The same at age seventy and even age eighty! Finally, at age eighty two I was out sailing by myself in a fairly gusty wind and all was going well. In due course my bladder told me it was time to go ashore. Following my usual technique, I sailed to a point about fifty yards downwind of our pier. My intent was to come about and sail close hauled, then glide in slowly and come to rest gracefully along the end of the pier. As I essayed to come about, however, a sudden shift in wind capsized *Rose Maybud* and plunged me into the lake. This indignity was not lethal. *Rose* and I had experienced occasional capsizes over the years, and I had never had trouble in climbing on the dagger board, righting the boat, and climbing back aboard. In this case, however, old age had caught up with me; I simply could not pull old *Rose Maybud* back up and make her behave herself.

Betty, as was her custom, was on the pier waiting to help me pull the boat up and furl the sail. Seeing my problem, she jumped in our little rowboat and came out to help. Now, I should mention that she had broken her arm a few weeks earlier and had abandoned the sling only days before, so she was far from full strength. Thus, when she reached my vicinity she found she could not row upwind. Meanwhile, some nice people in a large motorboat had shown up, and before long had *Rose Maybud* upright with me safely aboard. So I sailed in with no further problems, except that poor Betty was still struggling out there on the lake. Did I try to rescue her myself? No, because I could see those nice people in the motor boat were intent on doing the rescue bit themselves and I was not the one to spoil their heroic act. Thus, in short order Betty and I were reunited on our pier, tired and happy, but with me considerably abashed. And so I decided right then and there that my sailing days were over.

This retiring from my seagoing career calls to mind Robert Louis Stevenson's proposed epitaph. And, his sentiment brings us at last to the peroration of this carefully constructed analysis. I hope you will shortly agree that we have nicely succeeded in our aim, which was to answer the question: Do sailors somehow tend to make poets think of hunters?

Now, before I recite Stevenson's lines I want to ask all of you, please, to rise up out of respect for the great poet's epitaph, and also to enjoy a sort of seventh inning stretch. [The audience stands.] Robert Louis Stevenson's sentiments were about as follows:

Under the wide and starry sky dig the grave and let me lie.  
Glad did I live, and gladly die, and I lay me down with a will.  
This be the verse that you grave for me:  
    "Here he lies where he longed to be;  
    Home is the sailor, home from the sea,  
    The hunter home from the hill."

Having thus proven my point, and having nothing more to say, I turn the floor back to the chairman, *but let the record show that I received a standing ovation!*