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978-1-107-65920-9 - Sea Passages: A Naval Anthology and Introduction to the Study of English

Edited by Geoffrey Callender

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

I

IN THE ROYAL NAVY and in the Merchant Navy, as in other professions, the capacity to write good English will always prove (other things being equal) the sure and certain pathway to Success. It is, therefore, obviously the duty of every youth who follows a sea-career to do his utmost to become proficient in expressing his thoughts in his mother tongue adequately, fluently and lucidly—on paper.

As in handwriting the most desirable quality is to be legible, so in the writing of English the most desirable quality is to be intelligible: and this is not nearly as easy as might at first appear. Indeed it is hardly an exaggeration to say that most writers assume that they themselves are always intelligible, and that it must be some relative or friend or acquaintance who is at fault, if he, or she, is unable immediately to grasp the meaning of a letter sent to him, or to her, through the post.

In order to illustrate how obscure such an ordinary everyday piece of English may be, let us examine a letter from one naval rating to another, in which the writer is describing a recent incident which took place on board his ship and which was attended by unpleasant consequences to both the parties concerned.

H.M.S. Calypso.

Tuesday, 14 October.

Dear DUSTY,

Since this old hooker left Pompey, Nobby and I have parted brass-rags. About three weeks since, Nobby was lined up by the Jaunty before the Bloke and got weighed off with fourteen penn'orth! Poor old Nobby had unhooked Buck's caulker, having dropped his own in the ditch; so the pusser got into a flat spin as slops are running low. Nobby always was a trump card

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at dripping, especially when he's been striking it down; and this time, being chocker, he threatened to coil up his cable. Why Nobby should reckon that his raggie should blow the gaff, when there are crushers everywhere, leaves me guessing; but there it is. In the last dog he rounded on me and called me a white rat. I got stropo and told him he was shooting a line: but all he said was, 'Oh! choke your luff! I'm looking for another oppo you snivelling sand-scratcher.' So that looks like paying off.

I must pipe down now. So cheerio, my old China,

Yours PINCHER. ¶

There is nothing in this letter which an active service rating could fail to understand. On the other hand it is equally safe to say that the letter would convey less than nothing at all to a Minister of Religion, a Justice of the Peace, or other responsible personage, to whom those desiring help in an hour of need are commonly advised to resort.

Let us then 'translate' or convert this letter into correct English, which would enable a Minister of Religion, a Justice of the Peace, or other adviser of those in trouble, to possess himself of the facts leading up to what Ordinary Seaman Martin describes as the parting of brass-rags.

Dear MILLER,

Since this ship left Portsmouth, Clarke and I have, I regret to say, brought our old-established friendship to a close. About three weeks ago, Clarke was paraded by the Master-at-Arms before the Commander as a defaulter and was condemned to fourteen days in cells. Clarke, it appears, had taken possession of Taylor's overcoat, having lost his own overboard. As stocks of

¶ To certain English surnames, nicknames are always automatically attached by the lower deck. All Bennetts are 'Wiggie', all Millers 'Dusty', all Martins 'Pincher', all Greens 'Jimmy', all Woodses 'Stinger', all Taylors 'Buck' or 'Snip', all Days 'Happy', all Wellses 'Kitty', all Clarkes 'Nobby', all Ewarts, or Hewitts, 'Nobby', all Youngs 'Brigham', all Welshmen 'Taffy', all left-handed men 'Lefty', all men of short stature 'Shorty', and their opposites 'Lofty'. The list might be unduly extended.

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clothing are running low, the Senior Accountant Officer took a serious view of the offence. Clarke always was notorious for grumbling especially after drinking too freely; and on this occasion, being at the end of his tether, he threatened to commit suicide. Why he should imagine that his best friend should turn King's evidence, when it is the duty of the ship's police to detect and report larceny, I fail to understand. But between six and eight o'clock last evening Clarke rounded on me and called me a sneak and a tell-tale. I naturally became annoyed and told him that such an insinuation was incredibly far-fetched. 'That's enough from you,' he replied, 'I'm looking for another shipmate, one that is above currying favour with his superiors.' This, therefore, looks like the end.

I must now bring this letter to a close; and with all good wishes to you, old friend, I remain,

Yours ever,

J. D. MARTIN.

The concealment of its meaning in the original letter was occasioned by the use of Slang. In other words, Slang is one of the chief hindrances to the writer of English, who seeks on paper to make himself intelligible.

What is Slang?

Slang, believed by some authorities to be a Gypsy word, may have stood in times past for words and expressions which Gypsies employed among themselves, to the bewilderment of ordinary men. To-day it stands for words and expressions employed by ordinary men and women in familiar conversation among themselves; and often serves among like-minded folk of similar occupation or similar tastes as the badges, labels, watchwords or trademarks of their class and a mystery to all outside it.

Sailors are by no means the only lovers of slang; their preference is shared by hunting people and racing touts; by cockneys, tinkers, housebreakers and cracksmen, schoolboys, undergraduates and stockbrokers. But it is open to question whether any of

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these rivals can compete on equal terms with the sailor at his breeziest.

There are two main reasons why sea-going folk should make such extensive use of slang.

In the first place, sailor language proper paves the way to it and encourages new developments. Sailor language comprises all words and expressions properly applied to a ship; words and expressions which may not on any account be replaced by shore-going terms. The sailor, once on board, stands, not on floors, but on 'decks'. Around him rise not walls, but 'bulkheads'. To proceed from one level to another he does not use staircases, but 'hatchways'. He does not go upstairs, but 'topsides'; and being on the upper, or uppermost, deck, he does not proceed downstairs, but goes 'below'. He does not go to bed, but 'turns in'. He does not get up at the call of duty, but 'shows a leg'. He does not get one half-day off a week, but indulges in a 'make and mend'. These terms and many others are *not* slang; but professional phraseology. None the less, the sailor, forcibly reminded at every turn by the contrast between sailor language and that used ashore, can hardly be blamed if to objects of everyday life he attaches a salty vocabulary of his own. He refers to his own uniform, jumper, collar and bell-bottomed trousers, as 'square rig'; the double-breasted coat and peaked cap of other ratings as 'fore and aft rig'. With some slight irreverence he calls the Chaplain the 'Devil dodger' and the ship's Surgeon the 'Sawbones'. Torpedo-dropping aircraft he dismisses as 'cuckoos'; torpedoes as 'tin fish'; and when he dons his steel helmet, he calls it his 'battle-bowler'. On the mess deck he makes merry with his bill of fare: eggs are 'farmyard nuggets', sausages 'mystery torpedoes', tapioca pudding 'fish-eyes', tins of potted meat or potted fish 'depth charges'; and the pepper-pot is the 'lighthouse'.

It must not be supposed that, when he comes ashore, the sailor is incapable of any language but that which he uses afloat. Such is very far from being the case. Except in foreign parts, he has no difficulty in making himself understood: and as his appren-

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ticeship to the sea involves a close study of a number of text-books on technical matters such as gunnery and seamanship; and, as he is in daily contact with officers, who in their orders and instructions provide excellent models of correct English, he talks to his friends and intimates ashore in a style conforming closely to their own, though more fluent and picturesque. And where shore-dwellers and home-keeping folk halt or falter in their narrative, he gladly and instantly comes to the rescue with a word or phrase coined at sea. When, for example, the wooden ship in the eighteenth-fifties found the shell-gun too much for her, she protected her vitals with steel plates and the Press began to wonder what the new craft should be called. With ready wit the men in blue, who had already christened themselves 'Bluejackets', invented the word 'Ironclad'; and the editors of dictionaries took it to their hearts at once. In the same manner 'Jack Ashore' has enlarged and indeed enriched the English language with words and expressions many of which are hardly recognized at times as having a maritime origin—'Above board', 'Look out for squalls!', 'The coast is clear', 'Under false colours', 'Davy Jones's Locker', 'Stand by', 'Carry on', 'Sheet anchor', 'Mainstay', 'Take the wind from his sails', 'By and large', 'Taken aback', 'Catch a crab', 'Plain sailing', 'On his beam ends'. These words and expressions, with hundreds more, came into existence in the same manner as those used by Pincher Martin in the letter quoted above; but in the passage of time they have lost their identity and risen, through adoption by the world at large, from Slang to Idiom. No doubt history will repeat itself; and some slang words, current at the present time, will perhaps undergo the same promotion. But that possibility does not entitle the young writer of to-day to utilize sea-going slang, if he wishes his written English to be correct. We speak of our language as the 'King's English'. It is not for the King's lieges to take liberties with what is universally admitted to be a proud national inheritance.

Another stimulus in the sailor to resort to slang is the desire, or ambition, which the young sailor shares with speakers and

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writers of every kind, to lend force or emphasis to his words; to drive home his meaning by the use of a simile or image which has not been utilized before. The story is told of a young stoker, who was being questioned about the mental capacity of a ship-mate. 'Intellect?' he replied scornfully, 'Yes! it sticks out all over him like feathers from a pig.' Another story explains the nickname given to the eighth officer to join a certain ship already in commission. The officer in question had ink-black hair and a swarthy jowl, but he stood 6 feet 4½ inches in his socks; and the ship's company promptly dubbed him 'Snow-White'. For beside him, you see, the other members of the Ward Room looked like 'Seven Little Dwarfs'. These two examples of appropriate emphasis lack nothing in drollery and wit; and they are characteristic of the British sailor's humour and inventiveness. Who but he would have christened the Long Service and Good Conduct Medal 'fifteen years of undetected crime'; or H.M.S. *Vengeance* 'the Lord's own'; or a cooked joint surrounded by roast potatoes 'a schooner on the rocks'; or a shore establishment a 'Stone Frigate'; or weak tea 'water bewitched'; or the group of warships named after garden flowers 'the Herbaceous Border'?

In the old days of oak and hemp when a ship was homeward bound with a fair wind abaft; when every sail was drawing and a big bow-wave gave the impression that, like the horse to its stable, the vessel knew where she was going, the sailors used to say that the girls at home were hauling on the tow-ropes. Another example of emphasis, though dating from times long past, is still quoted to-day, especially when anything particularly unpleasant has to be done, 'Who would not sell his farm and go to sea?'

These two quotations are of literary quality and might be borrowed from one of the older dramatists, whose plays are still performed. But the inventive brains that fashioned them also gave rein to their fancy when they called a straw mattress 'a donkey's breakfast', a useless rating 'a King's hard bargain', a rehearsal 'a dummy run', the art of visual communications by hand 'flag wagging', an empty bottle 'a dead marine', the ship's

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cook 'a grub spoiler', switching off the light 'dowsing the glim', and entrance into the blessed state of matrimony 'getting spliced'.

All of which examples and many more besides only go to show that in his efforts to lend point and emphasis to his remarks, the navigator in the perilous seas of English composition is all too apt to wreck his craft on the insidious shoals of Slang.

II

Another serious obstacle in the path of the young writer who has decided to avoid slang and write intelligible English is Vagueness; and this hindrance to progress is very difficult to surmount and can only be removed by most patient and painstaking care. Vagueness is the opposite of Clearness or Lucidity. Like the bad helmsman's 'trail of the serpent', the writer, convicted of vagueness, fails to keep a steady course, fails to make his meaning understood. The causes of vagueness are mainly two; uncertainty as to what should be written; and uncertainty as to the order in which collected information should be arranged.

The early navigators and explorers came back from their voyages very greatly impressed by the experiences they had undergone; and they were only too glad to impart information to those who were anxious to listen. But in answer to such questions as 'When was that?' 'Which day of the week and of the month?' 'Which way was the wind blowing?' 'Were you under courses and reefed topsails?' 'In what direction was the shoal of porpoises?' 'How large was the iceberg?' 'For how many days were you down to half-a-pint of water per man per day?' and scores of similar questions, he had two alternatives before him; either honestly to admit that after two years at sea he could not for the life of him remember; or else to draw upon his imagination and make rough guesses to satisfy his audience. If the audience was gathered round his own fireside, his guesses or approximations would doubtless be politely accepted, whatever responses were made: but if his audience was made up of his employers, who had sent him forth on his venture to obtain definite intelli-

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gence, then any vagueness or lack of accuracy on the part of the navigator would be most unwelcome and unsatisfactory.

English ventures into distant seas began in the reign of Henry VII (1485–1509); but the navigators were at first all foreigners like John and Sebastian Cabot. Our next king, Henry VIII, not only founded Trinity House for the training of home-bred navigators, but he insisted that all English navigators should keep journals of their voyages, or Log Books. Log Books have changed in details since then; and slightly different methods of keeping them have been adopted by the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy; but the principle is always the same. For a Sea Journal, or Log (as it is called for short), is a book wherein is registered an exact and regular account of the various occurrences that happen on board a ship during her voyage; but more particularly those concerning the ship's way, in order that her situation may be exactly known at any time required.

When Nelson sailed the seas, there was kept in the steerage, or some other convenient part of the ship, a large blackboard, called the Log Board, which was divided vertically into six columns; the first for the hours of the day, the second and third for the knots and fathoms which the ship ran in half a minute (or miles and tenths of a mile in an hour); the fourth for the course or courses steered by the compass; the fifth for the wind; and the sixth for various remarks, such as the state of the weather, the sails set or taken in, and whatever else appeared necessary or remarkable. The log was hove once every hour; and at noon every day the particulars, as ascertained by observation or calculation, were neatly entered in a book, divided exactly like the Log Board and called the Log Book. The resulting fair copy would appear as on the page opposite.

Finally, with the help of this page, the navigating officer could not only render a precise account of the varied happenings of an eventful and busy day, and the order of their occurrence; but with the calculations made at the close of the previous day's work and by a knack acquired during long experience and perpetual

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practice he could very quickly inform the Captain of the ship (unless of course he was himself the Captain) that the *Britomart*, shaping a course to the south-west had, in spite of bad weather, made forty-one miles in the twenty-four hours; that her position

SHIP BRITOMART FROM ENGLAND TO MADEIRA

H.	K.	F.	Courses	Wind	Remarks Saturday, 19 June 1805
1	6	6	W. by S.	S. by W.	Strong breezes with rain, attended with hard squalls, thunder and lightning In first reef of topsails
2	6	2			
3	6				
4	5		S.E. by S.	S.W. by S.	Tacked Squally. In topgallant sails In second reef of topsails Down top-gallant yards
5	5				
6	5				
7	5				
8	4		S.S.E.	S.W.	Hard squalls. Handed the mainsail and mizzen top-sail
9	4				
10	4				
11	3		*12 3		Close reefed; handed the fore and main topsails, and brought the ship to under a foresail, mizzen, and main staysail
1	—				
2	—		{ Up S. by E. Off S.E. by E.	Variable	Wore ship
3	—		{ Up W. by S. Off N.W. by W.		
4	—		W. by N.	S.W. by S.	At daylight more moderate. Set the topsails doubly reefed and the mainsail. Up top-gallant yards
5	3				
6	3				
7	4				
8	4	6	West	S.S.W.	Fair weather. Out all reefs of the topsails. Set top-gallant sails
9	4	2			
10	4				
11	4				
12	4				

* Called by landsmen 'midnight'.

at the moment was in 43° 50' North Latitude, 11° 17' West Longitude; and that Cape Finisterre, bearing S.E. by E. $\frac{1}{4}$ E., lay one hundred and two miles away.

There are thus three processes to be observed in the keeping of a Log. There is, firstly, the voyage itself with its accompaniment of entries on a surface which admits of erasure and amendment,

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when an accidental slip has been made, or a wrong letter entered. Secondly, there is the transcript, or fair copy, in which the details collected are set out in their final form, tidily and concisely; appealing to the eye almost as much as to the brain; abbreviated like shorthand, simple as the A.B.C. And, finally, there is the narrative, the recital, or the report, based on the fair copy of the notes compiled; exploiting to the limit of their usefulness the facts laboriously collected; omitting mere details that are now superfluous, and concentrating on the pith or essence or real substance of the matter in hand.

He who would write clear, intelligible, lucid English could not do better than imitate the procedure of the 'Master' (as he was called in the olden days), that is, the navigator of the ship. Let him first make the voyage with its accompaniment of rough notes; then the carefully set forth summary, or compendium of the facts observed; and finally the completed work, the attempt at connected English prose, the composition, or Essay.

The 'voyage' may take the essayist into the country to study the nesting of birds, the varieties of wild flowers, or the habits of wild animals; to the city or town to watch the thronging streams of traffic, the business of the market-place or the entertainments of the theatre or the cinema; to the local or central library to consult the books of reference on the open shelves or special volumes dealing with a hobby or pursuit; to the long cross-country walking-tour; the passage of a coastwise steamboat; the ascent of a mountain, the descent of a mine; the visit to a museum or an art-gallery; to a concert or to private theatricals; to dreamland after a busy day; or to fairyland on the flying carpet of Imagination. But the impressions made by such 'voyages' fade almost as quickly as they are registered. Like the camera which, in addition to its eye or lens, needs a sensitized film, or plate, behind it on which to register the impressions which it brings to a focus; so the busiest and liveliest mind will require rough notes, from which the summary of things observed can be compiled. In this summary, which should be compiled without undue haste,