

SAILORS NEVER GROW UP

(Written for "The Listener" by DAVID K. MULGAN)

WHAT is it that distinguishes the sailor from the landsman? Everyone's personality and character are conditioned to some extent by his occupation. For instance, a schoolteacher acquires the habit of "talking down" to those of immature mind and even to a fellow adult instead of treating him as an intellectual equal. A doctor has his bedside manner with him on social occasions. A lawyer is always fond of arguing the point. If occupational traits like these are discernible, how much more marked must be the characteristics of a sailor. His calling is not an ordinary nine to five vocation. It is not merely a vocation but a life, and unnatural one, for the sea is an element not primarily meant for man. It is an all-powerful and merciless element which man has had to fight. That fight will go on so long as men sail the seas.



Landsmen Don't Understand

Landsmen have little comprehension of the sea. For this reason tales of the sea seldom give a vivid enough picture of this department of nature. The descriptive potentialities of our language have failed us here, and writers usually try vainly for the desired result by being too dramatic. The landsman's unfamiliarity with the sea breeds fear and distrust. If he has to travel by sea he regards it as an ordeal. Great efforts have been made in the past to soften his discomfort. Bigger and bigger ships have been built in the hope that a point may be reached where their size may be such that they no longer resemble ships.

Chronic Adolescence

By the nature of his calling and the mode of living he is forced to adopt, the sailor belongs to a different race of beings altogether from the landsman. He might almost belong to another planet. He has usually been at sea since boyhood and, being always confined in a small space with others of his own sort, he never really throws off his boyish ways. In his conversation and behaviour he is more like an overgrown schoolboy. This chronic adolescence remains with him usually for the rest of his days. In any fore-castle or messroom, or wherever sailors gather, you will hear middle-aged men indulging in very personal back-chat and horseplay.

A ship is a tiny speck in the universe. Yet to the men in her she is the universe itself, and to each man he is the centre round which she revolves. His own rank or job on board is everything that matters. He is as particular about his rank as a boy scout is about his proficiency badges. A slight affront to his dignity may cause an eruption, or even physical violence to the offender. Senior officers become used to exercising wide powers without being answered back. If a sailor ever suffers from a claustrophobia he is

more likely to get it, not in the small confines of a ship, but living in a big city where he is just one among thousands and feels of no particular importance—like an ant in an anthill.

Many Teetotal Sailors

He is away at sea for weeks on end as a rule. During that time he has no opportunity to spend money, so that his pay accumulates. When he hits port he draws the lot and perhaps goes "on the bust." For a few days he can live at the rate of perhaps £2,000 a year and then—well, he's desperately looking for another ship. He is popularly supposed to have a large capacity for alcohol. Many sailors have but not all by any means, and a surprising number are teetotalers. When we see a sailor "half-seas-over" it is well to remember that he is not in that

state every day. He does not have the opportunity, as others do, to spread his drinking evenly and moderately over a period. Soldiers also are apt to have a life of short bouts of pleasure and debauchery, with long intervals between. But this irregularity in his living makes it difficult for a sailor to settle ashore and make ends meet on a weekly wage packet.

His susceptibility for bursts of extravagance make him generous by nature. This combined with his boyish heartiness is apt to make him lavish in his hospitality, even to casual acquaintances. Parsimony is alien to him and he does not stop to count the baw-bees. He just carries on until they have all gone.

Samuel Johnson once remarked that being at sea was little better than being in jail, and with the added risk of being drowned. Certainly to some extent a popular belief has arisen that to go to sea is the only course for the ne'er-do-well. But that is not what sailors are made of. If their living habits tend to shock our conventional moral concepts, it is not because they are either unmanly or immoral. They lead a different life from the landsman; a life in which men are measured by a different yardstick. If a sailor "swallows the anchor" and becomes a landsman he finds the greatest difficulty in putting aside his old life and adjusting himself to an entirely different one. Many who have tried have found the experience not to their liking and returned to sea. It is a life to which men become wedded.

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