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CRABTREE AND THE SEA  
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Fluellen Crabtree, cobbler of Chipping Sodbury and former master mariner one night in 1753 stealthily regained his breeches, girded on his sword and bade a silent farewell to the now submissive subsiding form of Mary, his wife. Fluellen's need to depart arose from that prescience which was the curse of all the Crabtrees. For he knew that in two and a half short years the Seven Years War would erupt and that England would need all her seamen.

What then of Mary when, on the dawn, she regained herself only to discover the empty bed and that her captain, being discharged of his mutinous semen, had cast them adrift to make what way they might within that narrow vessel? Her thoughts and words are unfortunately lost to posterity, but that she had been blest by the fruits of the sea she was soon to realise, and in 1754 at Beth Tapullah Lodge in the township of Chipping Sodbury there was safely brought to birth Joseph William Crabtree. So conceived, it would have been an affront to nature had Crabtree not made a mark upon the sea, and it is to Crabtree and the Sea that I address myself this evening.

The first eight years in the life of Crabtree passed largely without incident. With the passing of but one year more, however, as we are told, he became aware of a thrusting virility unusual in nine-year-olds even in those more forward days. But how to gain knowledge of these new affronts? Certainly the little town of Chipping Sodbury was not noted as a centre of experimentation. I can now supply the answer to this problem. The year is of course the clue, 1763, the end of the Seven Years War. What patriotic lad could help but make his way to the port of Bristol where, free now from the fears of possible impressment, he might join the seething mass of celebrating humanity and go aboard those mighty men-of-war. I do not doubt but that it was here that some town beauty, captivated by the already obvious qualities of this precocious nine-year-old, led him up the rope ladder of the main mast to the place which later Victorian morality was to corrupt from its original designation, the crew's nest. There, high above the old port, stays belayed, fetlocks furred, did Crabtree become a man.

Alas, that gilded aerial maiden who chose so to open his horizons was only slightly better than she should have been and her personal hygiene less so. When we find Johnson commenting obliquely upon him at that time in the following vein, 'To be sure he is a tree that cannot produce good fruit; he bears only crabs', the remarks reflected not only on Crabtree's literary ability; they were somewhat more encompassing.

There is one further piece of Crabtree's future which was to stem from that night. Remember that this was but a boy of nine, and surely even Crabtree's heart must have quailed slightly as he began that perilous journey up to the rigging of fulfilment. To what could he turn in aid at such a time but to that quintessence which we know had sustained him in his infant weaknesses, that elixir which had seen him through his schoolboy doldrums, that tranquillizing medicament with its high proportion of opium, Mother Bailey's Quietening Syrup. Here it was, air born, with the squared yet opiate-distorted majesty of sails silhouetted against the luminous night, that the first tortured thoughts surged in Crabtree's brain, thoughts which would later yield to the world that infinite piece commencing with the immortal line 'Great unaffected vampires and the moon'.

For the next few years, Crabtree was to content himself with occasional visits to Bristol, and it was in the course of one such visit that he was to come into contact with James Lind, the man later to become known as the 'father of nautical medicine'. Lind was in a dispirited state, his treatise on the use of lemons as the cure for the curse of scurvy having received scant respect from their Lordships of the Admiralty, and chances to rectify this somewhat few. Between Lind and Crabtree there developed a mutual respect and thus it was that Crabtree agreed to help Lind obtain the information he required. This he did by persuading his cousin George to accompany him aboard *The Endeavour*, signing on as flute boys, for Cook's first great voyage. You will remember that last year's Orator forgot to mention the reason for their being there. In the list of provisions you will find included 1,200 gallons of beer and 1,600 gallons of spirits, but not a lemon in sight. That lemons were in fact on board was only admitted much later, but now those responsible for their admission stand revealed. Thus it was, nightly during the long voyage, Joseph and George stole to the newly prepared grog and administered one tablespoonful of lemon juice for each member of the ship's company. No man died of scurvy on that trip, though some discerning souls did complain about an odd taste to the grog. Lind, regretfully, was later to take full credit for continuing to press the cause of the lemon against seemingly all the evidence.

On leaving Oxford in 1773, Crabtree was free to reflect upon the nature of seamen's ailments and, having now learned a little from the now bolstered-up Lind, he was moved into experimentation on his own behalf. The first

matter to which he gave his attention was, not unnaturally, the discomfort which he had encountered at the age of nine. *Pediculosis pubis*, delicately defined by one naval doctor as 'litttle pattering feet on private parts', was, and I fear still is, a matter of some concern to seamen. Seamen of the Crabtree era were bound to find it an occupational hazard, for it must be remembered that whilst in port and even on short journeys between home ports, sailors were free to have on board what women they chose, suitably passed by an officer of course.

For details of Crabtree's cure, to become known as Crabtree's butter, I am indebted to a former Orator.

Between 1776 and 1780, our knowledge of Crabtree is not too well documented. I was convinced, however, that it would be during this period also that Crabtree's mind and pen would return to the sea and I was therefore delighted to hear last year that in 1776 Crabtree made off on a tour of Sweden and the Low Countries. I therefore made my way to Holland in order to seek out possible Crabtree works. It was only after considerable research that I came across a truly horrific tale of the sea which I knew could not have failed to tempt the pen of Crabtree. It is as follows: *The Zwarten Haen*, a Dutch ship, was in 1673 attacked by Barbary pirates who, having ransacked the ship, set her adrift with her crew. The abandoned and helpless ship was eventually brought up on Sunday Island in The Orkneys. Here, marooned for 17 weeks with food gone, the crew were forced to resort to cannibalism. Thus fortified by their fellows, the remnant were apparently able to repair the ship and finally made a landfall at Kinsale in Ireland. Diligent searches for a manuscript in Holland revealed nothing but, on going through a pile of old manuscripts at Greenwich one Sunday morning, I came across an epic account of that grim saga, dated 1780, and bearing the unmistakable stamp of Crabtree — 'Anonymous'. With trembling hands, I lifted up the manuscript, convinced that it was genuine, but I could be wrong, and then I remembered those splendid words of Charles Peake:

There is, I daresay, not one member of this Foundation who does not rejoice in the possession of an inner light which would enable him to recognise the Crabtree jewels sparkling in their inferior settings.

In that moment, I knew. Let me recite but one verse of this new Crabtree treasure:

Wy dreeven door den wind,  
op Gods genade heen,  
o schrikkelyk ellend  
al waer myn hert van steen  
van yzer of metael  
nog zou het moeten sehreyen,  
want ik y enns verhael,  
ons druk en de groot leyen.

I see from your faces, gentlemen, that that inner light is glowing bright in the many of you who recognise instantly in this simple dog Dutch the hand of Joseph William Crabtree. There are another twenty-one verses and the whole thing was once set to music but this, I fear, is lost. Also the manuscript has been marked as 1780; this is obviously wrong and should be 1778.

It was, oddly enough, in 1778 that Crabtree was to renew his acquaintanceship with Jonas Hanway, merchant, do-gooder, general busybody, and forerunner of today's sociologist. They had first met in 1767. Hanway had been responsible for the setting up of a Maritime School so that they might be adequately trained for naval service. Crabtree's influence, however, was to take Hanway into wider pastures, and it is due to the effect of Crabtree's influence and, I suspect, the results of Crabtree's pen, that provision was made for the proper regulation and running of the Magdalen House for Repentant Prostitutes, the rules for which were published in 1768. This re-meeting was again to prove beneficial for Hanway. For Crabtree, still remembering the difficulties experienced on that early voyage, provided Hanway with the notes he had made and, as a result, later in the year Hanway was to publish, under his own name, *The Sea Lad's Trusty Companion*. It is quite clear that Hanway's knowledge would not have been sufficient for him to compile such a work.

It was whilst Crabtree was engaged in the wine business, and indeed during a wine tasting, that James Lind introduced Crabtree to Gilbert Blane, later to become Sir Gilbert Blane, who was personal surgeon to Admiral Rodney and who was to have a most profound effect on naval health and medicine. Blane liked a drink himself, but detested the evil effect of drink in the Navy, particularly through the agencies of beer and grog. Crabtree, never slow when business loomed, immediately persuaded Blane of the purity of wine and its lack of the demon qualities so readily apparent in rum and beer. To such good effect was this done that for a short time it is a true, if little realised, fact that wine was available as an alternative to grog in the Navy, until the dark clouds of

prejudice stifled this piece of opportunism and the wine trade suffered a slight recession.

Even when Crabtree left the wine business, his love of good wine and good food was to continue and was at a somewhat later time to be the saving of Admiral Dillon. In his Journal, Dillon recalls that he has been suffering from violent headaches and had approached his personal surgeon, William Beatty, for a cure. Beatty, as well as being totally useless at the death of Nelson, was also a bleeder. Dillon appears to have put up with this for a while, with no noticeable effect save an interesting pallor. When Beatty advised that it would be necessary to try bleeding from the jugular vein, Dillon, in his own words, 'Took other advice'. When one learns that this advice was to drink and eat as he wished, there can be little doubt as to the source. The headaches disappeared and brightness returned to the eye, though in one aspect Dillon erred from the advice, for he admitted to drinking a pint of port a day as part of the cure, whereas one can be sure that the prescription read: 'one pint claret — to be taken daily'.

Editing Murray's *Army List* procured for Crabtree a free passage on the East Indiaman troopship, *The Kent*, as one of only 20 private passengers permitted to travel in her for her voyage from England bound for Bengal and China on 19 February 1825. She was never to arrive. The ship was lost as were 81 of the 641 souls aboard her. Thankfully, Crabtree was saved and in a long letter which he addressed to one 'My Dear E' and which he signs so openly — 'A Passenger' — the full terror of that fated voyage is recorded. This letter was later returned to Crabtree, who showed it to Walter Scott, who insisted that it be published. Crabtree refused at first, but then agreed, as long as it appear under a pseudonym, and what better than that one used so long ago, M'Greggor. When the volume finally appeared, other letters concerning the voyage became added to it and the authorship had become attributed to a MacGreggor who had been aboard the ship at the time. The mystery of 'My Dear E' must be left to a later Orator.

In 1829 news reached Crabtree that the despised Humphry Davy was doing quite well on steamships. That such news could infuriate Crabtree is apparent, and it is self-evident that he, being now seventy-five years old and at the pinnacle of his exceptional powers, would not rest until he had bettered it. I am pleased to report that such was indeed the case. Deep in the archives of such things, lost among a collection of bizarre ships of the nineteenth century, is to be discovered a perfect example of Crabtree design and engineering. Those familiar with the Siamese engine will recall that it was somewhat unusual in steamships of the early 1840s; the ship and engine designed by Crabtree is even more unusual and there is no evidence that it was ever copied. Specifications are available for those who wish them. Does this mean that Crabtree's name appears on ship or engine? No gentlemen, he was now far too old to depart from the practices of an ordinary lifetime, but let us look at the immediate facts. In respect of the ship, we find only the name of the person for whom the ship was built and that of the builder; there is no record of the name of the designer of ship or engine. With these facts, and my inner light glowing nicely, I approached the National Maritime Museum. The launching date of 1843 appeared, and my wick moved up another inch, and then, gentlemen, came the name of the ship and the evidence became complete and incontrovertible and I became incandescent: *The Helen MacGregor*. Helen, so obviously in memory of that maiden who had launched him into manhood what may well have been eighty years ago to the day, and the anniversary of which it would be so like him to celebrate in this fashion; and, of course, MacGregor, possibly his last farewell to that name under which he had chosen to conceal some of his undeniable genius, save from those who seek after truth. At that moment, his triumph over Davy must have indeed been sweet, but Davy, mean to the very end, even then contrived to sour it, for aware that he must necessarily be overtaken, he had deliberately died some fourteen years earlier.

I turn now to my last and, to my mind, perhaps greatest contribution of Crabtree to the sea. In the course of all my researches, I became more and more aware that a man of Crabtree's mental stature and virility would surely have sought to give to the sea one in his own image, possessed of those qualities of steadfastness and bravery. I found myself, therefore, reflecting upon that night in 1790 at the 'Inn of the Happy Valley' at Porlock, when Crabtree admitted the landlord's daughter to the subtleties of that mystery practised by sailors the world over and known affectionately by its lower deck as *una amore nox transitorius*. Was it possible that this had been a barren union, one to be accepted as an admission of failure? This I refused to believe. Obsessed now with the conviction that of this awesome union a male child dedicated to the sea must have been created, I made my way to Porlock. Nothing. The old records, alas, proved no help at all. Next I began to search the Naval Lists, but the Naval Lists of 1810 onwards brought only bitter disappointment. Then, belatedly, I recalled that a much earlier time must be investigated. Young men then began their careers somewhat younger than the postgraduates of today. Was not Horatio Nelson but twelve and a half when a friend exclaimed: 'What has poor Horace done that he above all the rest should be sent to rough it out at sea?'

Refreshed by these thoughts, I returned to the Naval Lists, commencing at 1800 this time. No Crabtree emerged,

but, wait, here is a Crabbe, a Crabbe with no apparent family background or relatives, a Crabbe admitted midshipman in 1803 when 13 at the most. From the record I then had in front of me, we find that he then rose to lieutenant in 1809, a brave young man, always in the van of battle, always favourably mentioned in reports. That Crabtree would have no difficulty in procuring a midshipman's rating for such a son is clear; that he had frequently used the name of Crabbe we know. But was this enough, could further evidence be found so that the high standards of this Foundation might be maintained? Gentlemen, it could and it was. Calling for Byrne's *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, I turned with trembling fingers to Crabbe and there, gentlemen, was the proof that was to turn hope into certainty, for there for all to see, standing out almost in letters of gold to my now flooding eyes, was the name JOSEPH WILLIAM CRABBE. Crabtree at surely his most transparent, as if even he feared that we might otherwise miss this one great gift.

Why then did not the career of this dashing young officer continue to flourish, having promised so much; why do we find no later reconciliation between father and son, no grandchildren to soften the occasional leaden time of Crabtree in his last few years? This, gentlemen, is where the sea exacted a cruel and bitter excise for the bounty she had already bestowed. On 10 January 1810, whilst pursuing an armed ship and convoy off Toulon, Lieutenant Crabbe received a langridge shot in the groin, a shot which the same naval commentator melancholily records 'was never extracted'.

For those who do not know the make up of a langridge, its most usual form is a piece of metal of an irregular shape, normally heavily spiked, a number of them being fashioned together and fired from a cannon at one time.

Joseph William Crabbe did not die — indeed he continued in service for another year, when ill health forced him to the shores and thus was he to remain until 1851, regretful owner of a tripartite sac, impossible progenitor, and on half pay. In 1851, a grateful country advanced him to the permanent rank of Commander and permitted him to retire. Neither father nor son ever again sought the company of the other, for between two strong men words would have been an interruption and their tears become a river. Thus in this one strand foundered the Crabtree line.

I am in a position to add one further sacred remnant to the Crabtree collection. May I say that this has only been possible through money received from countless donations, through the Friends of University College, the National Maritime Museum and the Victims of Trafalgar Benevolent Fund? Had they all not so gallantly subscribed, this exhibit would certainly have been on its way to the proposed Crabtree Room in the Washington museum. Chairman, gentlemen, it is with a pleasure, not untinged with sadness, that I present before you a purchase made from the direct descendant of that landlord at Porlock and left to the family on the death of Commander Crabbe:

that which sought such spiteful refuge in the flesh which the questing seed of Crabtree once begot.

Gentlemen — The Langridge Shot.