

Shanghaied! J. A. West

I had been wounded while serving with the cavalry in the South African Boer war and invalided home to England. After somewhat recovering, I decided to come here to Vancouver and join in the Klondike Gold Rush. When I arrived, I heard that it was easier to get a passage from Tacoma, so I went there. While waiting to get a passage north, I went into a saloon and had a schooner of beer, not being familiar, at that time - as I am now - with the method used by some to get a crew to sail on the windjammers bound for European ports.

I came to, being vaguely aware of lying in the bunk of some ship, which ship was the County of Caithness, a four masted barque of the Scottish Family Line, owned by the Craig Bros. of Grenoch, Scotland. She had a cargo of grain and was at that time bound for Dublin, Ireland, under the command of Captain A. Buchan. I was aware of being vigorously shaken and of someone in a broad Scottish accent telling me to “shake a leg and go and lend a hand with the “upper tgangs!”. This was all foreign to me, not having the slightest idea what the upper tgangs! was. but I soon found out what it was!

When I was paid off in Dublin after a voyage of 156 days round the horn and accross the Atlantic on a diet of more or less salt junk and hard tack with an occasional tot of rum after all those all too frequent stiff blows which sometimes lasted for several days and necessatated all hands going aloft and climbing out on the yard arm to take in and make fast the sails, before they were blown to ribbons. With the roll of the ship, the end of the yard arm one minute would be almost in the water, the next minute it would be away up in the air. Whoever wrote the song “Oh for a life on the ocean wave, out on the rolling deep” should have his head examined!

A few days before I arrived home, my Father received a letter from someone in Spain saying that he was being held as prisoner, and if my Father would send him some money, he would bribe his keeper to release him. He would then come over to England and go with my father to where he had some money buried and they would share it 50-50. My father was a bit of a skeptic on those occasions, but he had not heard from me for several months, which was unusual, as I wrote home quite frequently, he wondered if I had written the letter, but for some unknown reason, did not want my identity to be known. A few days later he was talking to a neighbour, who gave him a letter to read which he had received from someone in Spain. It was an exact copy of the one my father had received from someone in Spain. It was buried in a different place. Of course, this convinced them that the whole thing was a hoax.

I arrived home a few days later and joined with them in enjoying “the fatted calf.”

Although I am well past the 92nd milestone, those little experiences are just as fresh in my memory as if they only happened yesterday. I often think of the schooner of beer and the hours spent climbing in the rigging and on the yard-arm, handling the skysls, the royals, the flying jib, the tgangs!, and all the other sails used on the windjammers. I think of the starboard watch, the 2 hour trick at the wheel, the watch on the forsl, the dog watch, not forgetting the salt junk and the hard tack.



A painting and a model of the County Caithness