

# Ten Decks and No Keel by Charley Wood

**I**T was nearly midnight. Rare silence reigned in the cottage wherein lived the retired mariners Captain Henry Wagg, Captain William Stubbler, and Captain John Swiggles, skippers of sailing craft up to six hundred tons. They were enjoying the exclusive brand of sleep with which sailors are blessed.

And then, suddenly, there came a clatter and roar as an anchor chain rushed over its wildcat into the reach of bay, off Tompkinsville. The skippers were all but startled out of their bunks.

"I'll bet my fav'rite marlinspike that's a down-east hooker sneakin' in with a cargo o' conterband," said Skipper Henry. "Them down-east skippers does anything for money."

"Conterband your bobstay," scoffed Captain William, ex-ship's carpenter; "that's one o' them big Standard Oil tankers. I can tell 'er by the holler sound."

Captain Swiggles, ex-ship's cook, stuck his head through the tasseled curtain of old sail that hung over his bunk and glared sleepily about.

"That ain't nothin' but a British tramp steamer," he grated. "Avast your bluddy noise so a man can go to sleep."

The trio then slid off to sleep again with the difference of opinion still standing and a prevailing determination to prove the truth of their assertions in the morning.

With the first sparkle of dawn Swiggles jumped from his bunk, armed himself with a marine-glass, and tip-toed into the yard. There was but one ship off Tompkinsville, and when he

stuck the glass on it he beheld the largest Yankee battleship he had ever been blessed with a sight of.

He hastened in and hauled his mates bodily from their lairs. Each seized what he believed to be the best sea-glass in the world and followed him into the yard.

"Now where's the hooker and tarn-ker you was speakin' of?" asked Swiggles as they aimed their individual glasses. "There's wot must be the biggest and newest battle-ship in the world."

Chagrined tableau on the part of his mates.

"She's a reg'lar steel island," continued he. "I think I'll go down for to look 'er over and have a talk with the ardmiral."

"They wouldn't let us aboard," asserted Skipper Henry.

"Why not?" asked Captain William. "We captains with captain's tickets?"

"There ain't none o' them dressed up figgerheads aboard there any better by the standards o' seafarin' than us," said Captain William truculently.

Skipper Henry thought that over as he closed his glass and encased it in four separate coverings.

"Certainly," he agreed at length. "They wouldn't know how to command the hard ships we have. We could go aboard there an' learn them lubbers more things in two minutes than they could learn in a lifetime on a steel scow like her."

"Wot do you say if we does it?" asked Captain William.

Swiggles started abruptly into the cottage. "

I'm goin' in for to rig up in my best clothes," said he, "an' see wot kind of a lubber they got commandin' of 'er."

His mates rolled hastily in his wake.

After breakfast there was some turmoil and fuss as sea-chests were over hauled, and dunnage highly valued and worn only on great occasions brought to light.

"Here's them pants I wore at that sailors' ball in Nagasaki, when all them Japanee girls was hangin' to my booms," said Captain William as he stepped carefully into them from his sea-chest.

"They was only arter your pay," answered Skipper Henry. "Here's that suit I got in Hong-Kong to wear when I was pall-bearer for old Cap'n Judd. Pure Chile wool, it is."

Swiggles merely glanced at the suit as he affectionately dusted off a cap.

"There's the very cap I wore when the President o' Liberia was interdoocin' of me to his wife," said he proudly.

They polished boots, shined brass buttons, whisked at the lint, and argued on the relative value of their apparel for two full hours. Then they stepped carefully and proudly toward the waterfront of Tompkinsville.

There they hired a two-oared dilapidation, termed a dory by its owner, and went out under their own power.

Owing to the pull of the tide, they came up on the Texarkana from astern and unseen from her quarterdeck.

There was not one particle of hesitation in the manner in which they committed the sin of making their painter fast to an accommodation ladder stanchion.

But they were somewhat taken aback when they stepped on deck and saw the massive turrets with guns as long as their old spanker-booms, bridges that towered as high as their old t'gallants, and a company of gaily uniformed marines lined up for inspection in a line as straight as a taut bowline.

A bugler standing near them sounded mess call.

"Listen to the horn they got!" remarked Swiggles over his shoulder to Captain William. "Wot is modern sailarin' comin' to, anyhow?"

"Look how them swabs stands like wooden men," answered Captain William, eying the

marines. "If they was on my old ship they'd work or get a capstan-bar acrossst their peaks."

They advanced toward a natty young lieutenant, who was officer of the deck.

"Who's goin' for to be the spokesman?" asked Swieeles, pausing.

"You are," said his mates in unison, and made haste to get behind him.

Swiggles set his cap, pulled down his coat, twisted his mustache, and took the lead.

"Are you the commander o' this frigate?" he asked the officer.

"I am in command at present, being officer of the deck," replied the lieutenant.

Swiggles noted a pleasant gleam in the officer's eye, and immediately took advantage of it by slapping him sociably on the back.

"You're too young for to marster such a big ship," said he. "On my ship I would 'a' had you swabbin' the caboose deck for five year yet."

The lieutenant had trouble to smother a smile, and a distinct snicker ran from one end of the line of marines to the other.

"Who do you wish to see?" asked the officer.

"The ardmiral," replied Swiggles, growing bolder every moment. "Tell him that Captain Swiggles, Captain Wagg, and Captain Stubbler warnt to see him."

"You are not navy captains, are you?" asked the officer.

"Not on your blighted life!" answered Swiggles. "We knows more about the old navy, when they had men wot was real sailors an' real fighters on men-o'-war. You young bullies is patriotic, an' you means all right, but you don't know nothin' about sailarin' an' fightin'."

During the conversation there was a continual increase in the number of heads which bobbed up from behind everything to listen without being seen by the officer of the deck, and these heads shook with suppressed laughter. The marines, who had now been dismissed, lingered as near as possible, and their teeth gleamed as white as their belts as they grinned broadly.

"We seen ships in the old navy runnin' blood a foot thick on their decks." spoke up Skipper Henry.

"An' 'er scuppers plugged with dead men," put in Captain William. "Then was when they had sailors in the navy. Bein' patriotic an' meanin'

well don't make fighters."

A loud laugh from all points of the compass greeted this, and the officer joined it.

"They didn't wear all them dude clothes an' fancy gear, neither," said Swiggles, with an eye on the lieutenant's attire.

"They don't know how to make sailors' clothes no more," asserted Skipper Henry, and held his arm under the officer's nose. "See the goods in that coat? It 'll wear ten times longer'n that fancy sailmakin' wot you got on there."

Some of the tars curled up with mirth at this.

"Are you——" smiled the lieutenant.

"Them boots you got on ain't no foot gear for sailors," interrupted Captain William, pointing to the officer's polished low shoes. "Lay your lamps on these Paddy Doyle's I got on. *There's* sailor boots for you!"

Owing to the increased number of listeners, the laugh that followed this was like that of an army.

"I thank you for the information," said the officer, bulging with merriment.

"Work smart now, an' tell the ardmiral we warnt to see him," said Swiggles. "We can learn him things he didn't ever hear of afore."

"Are you friends of the admiral?" asked the officer.

"We can tell that better arter we look him over," answered Swiggles. "We're skippers with skipper's tickets—men wot's sailed every ocean, tell him - an' we' arsts expectin' the respect an' honor of the navy for men like us."

The officer smilingly despatched a marine orderly to the admiral's quarters with the message. He returned and saluted.

"The admiral sends his compliments," said he, "and will be delighted at the honor of having Captain Swiggles, Captain Wagg, and Captain Stubbler to luncheon, sir."

The skippers swelled with gratification and importance.

"Follow the orderly, captains," said the officer, "and he will show you to the admiral's quarters."

The orderly walked ahead. "Right this way, sirs," said he.

"Get out, you bluddy soldier," said Swiggles. "We been on ships long enough to find our way."

"But this is a new ship, and you might get

lost."

"Lost!" rasped Captain William. "Old seamen like us get lost! You'll lose your top if you don't haul away from us."

And the orderly "hailed," soliloquizing as he went.

The skippers entered what they termed the companionway. When they had descended the ladder they paused and looked about. They were standing on a deck covered with red linoleum and surrounded with light green walls, which angled and separated to form passages running in all directions.

They had never dreamed anything like it could be possible aboard a ship.

"This is worse than them Patagonian caves I near got lost in wunst," remarked Captain William.

Down one of the passages came the hum of many voices, and bounding merrily to them from another came the piano-rendered notes of a musical comedy score.

"They must have wimin aboard this blighted tin island," said Swiggles, with an ear to the latter.

Skipper Henry immediately strolled up the passage.

"That ain't where the ardmiral is," said Swiggles. "It's over this way." And he pointed up the passage from which came the hum of voices.

Captain William called them lost cabin-boys, and was of the opinion that still another passage was the proper way; and while they argued they executed several circles between the points of dispute without getting anywhere in particular.

As a last resort Skipper Henry gazed dizzily at the tiny compass on his watch-fob.

"We come down that ladder headed nor'-nor' east," said he; "an' where you're goin' is east a half south. Her bow was layin' about sou'-sou'west when we come aboard, so——"

"Sink you and your blarsted Chineese compass!"\* answered Swiggles. "I know where is the ardmiral's quarters on a ship."

At that instant a crowd of mess-boys, black, brown, and yellow, came up on their way to the galley, laden with mess-gear. The skippers were engulfed and surrounded. When they had passed

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\* Note: Chinese compasses point to the south instead of the north

Captain William was alone there. Skipper Henry was nowhere in sight, but he could see Swiggles far down the passage of his selection, and still going.

"I'm ashamed to be shipmates with old lubbers wot gets lost on a ship," he addressed himself. But, nevertheless, he was conscious of an acute feeling of loneliness, and made after the retreating Swiggles.

Swiggles continued down the passage, past many doors and strange gear, and suddenly emerged into a large compartment whose walls were white instead of a light green. Although he was not aware of it, this change of color meant that he had left the officers' quarters altogether.

There in an outboard corner he saw a young, ordinary seaman picking out a fox-trot on a mandolin, while two more, clean shaven, attired in spotless white and shoes glossy, stepped and whirled to it.

He gazed at these salty enthusiasts of the light fantastic, and was consumed with disgust.

"Wot kind o' lady swabs are you?" he asked the dipping pair.

The mandolin stopped twittering and the sailors stopped dipping.

"I been on ships all my life an' never seen anything so ladylike," went on Swiggles scathingly. "My old crew would turn over in their lockers if they seen sailors like you. When they danced they danced ashore, an' with Sallies an' Kitties—but you never seen 'em dancin' around the ship with each other. Has any of you insects ever danced a polka wi' a wrist-watch?"

The O. S.'s answered with a triple hoot.

As a hot retort was on the point of Swiggles's tongue, Captain William came up, and they continued on together.

"We lost the skipper. Wot had we better do?" asked Captain William.

"Wot do we care for him?" answered Swiggles. "We can find the admiral's cabin without a skipper."

In the mean time Skipper Henry had not been enjoying himself. He had kept on up the passage he had chosen and steered straight far the music.

He reached a door over which hung a rich, dark-green portiere, and looked in. He beheld a neatly carpeted and furnished compartment, in which were lounging several comfortably dressed

young men. One was seated at the piano, smashing out a finale.

In the center was a table covered and set for luncheon, and immediately upon seeing it Skipper Henry stepped in.

"Which one o' you is the admiral?" he asked. But, owing to the piano, the question was not heard.

He turned to the musician.

"Plug that noise so a man can talk, will you?" he bawled. The music stopped, and all eyes swung on the intruder.

"Who are you, sir?" asked a beardless midshipman, rising.

"Captain Henry Wagg," answered the skipper, advancing to the table! He seized a bottle from it, put the neck to his nose, and set it down with a nauseated snort. "Grape-juice! Sailors wot drinks grape-juice! On my ship we drunk grog, et offen bare wood, an' drove pegs in the table to hold the dishes."

The officers had recovered from their surprise and were becoming amused.

"Stewed?" whispered the ensign at the piano to a brother officer.

"Where's the admiral, I ast you?" bawled Skipper Henry.

"This is not the admiral's quarters; this is the junior officers' quarters," stated the ensign.

Skipper Henry turned angrily to him.

"Do you think I don't where I am on a ship?" vociferated he. "I was on ships forty year, an' there ain't no-buddy wot sits in parlors drinkin' grape-juice can tell me my way."

"What do you intend to do with the admiral?" asked the midshipman.

"Eat with him, you whiskerless jackstay," returned Skipper Henry curtly.

All but the midshipman laughed. He summoned the mess steward, and despatched him for a master-at-arms and irons.

"Is there anything in the regulations that would prevent us throwing him out?" asked a junior lieutenant. "One of you middies ought to know."

"Tell him where the admiral's quarters are and get rid of him amicably," advised a past assistant surgeon.

"If you want to go to the admiral's cabin," said the ensign, "go out the doors you came in,

turn to your left——”

“Left my Benny’s mud-hook! “ disgustedly interrupted the skipper. “If you had any sailerin’ knowledge, you’d say port, not left.”

The ensign heaved a sigh. “Somebody else try it.” he suggested.

“Listen, cap,” said the junior lieutenant. “Head for the door, starboard your helm, and lay a straight course for the ladder; when there go off on a port tack and reach for the second channel on your port bow, hold your sheets till you have a door broad off your starboard beam, box haul——”

“Tryin’ to make a fool o’ me, you unederated cabin roach?” broke in Skipper Henry, unaware of the fact that a huge master-at-arms was advancing on him from astern. Then a hand larger than Skipper Henry’s head closed over his mouth.

Meanwhile Captains Swiggles and William had kept on their way till they came to a carpenter’s bench. There Captain William paused to observe a carpenter engaged in sawing in lengthwise, halves a beam longer than the table and as thick as a boom. The sweat was popping from his bald head.

Captain William, having been a ship’s carpenter for many years, was immediately interested. He halted and stared captiously at the exhausted carpenter, while the latter laid down the saw, grumbled, and mopped his brow.

At that moment Swiggles made for a steel network a short distance updeck in which were lines of ranges and tiled decking. On that tiled decking stood a number of men dressed all in white and poking about at various giant cooking gear.

Then Captain Swiggles was at home, for he had spent twenty years of his life catering to the romping stomachs of ships’ crews.

“Can’t you saw a little beam like that without gettin’ all tired out?” Captain William asked the carpenter.

“Shove off and mind your own business!” returned the carpenter irritably.

“I could saw a beam like that in half in five minutes,” persisted Captain William. “You don’t hold your saw right, or else you must be weak.”

“I’ll show you how weak I am if you don’t shove off!” flared the carpenter. “Who the heller

you to tell me how to saw wood?”

“I was carpenterin’ afore you knowed a hammer from a marlinspike,” answered Captain William hotly. “An’ I know enough about it yet to take a farmer like you an’ trim a garboard strake out o’ him in one second.”

Several tars were collecting and forming a grinning, interested circle around them.

“Try it, you meat-headed crab; try it!” dared the carpenter, jumping from the beam. “Come on an’ make a strake out o’ me.”

“Do you think I can’t do it?” asked Captain William, sticking his face malevolently into the carpenter’s.

The carpenter answered by shoving the face as far from him as possible, and the owner of it precipitated into a group of tars.

Ten feet away, Captain William snatched out his false teeth, laid them on the bench, and doubled his fists.

“Just hold your moorin’s, you flat-faced swivelhead!” he bellowed.

And then, with swinging arms, he dived at the carpenter with the speed of a projectile from a twelve-inch turret-gun.

While this was happening Swiggles had stepped into the galley with the air of a king and stared critically about. It seemed to him as if all the cooks in the world were mobilized there.

“Get out o’ my galley before I hang this beanpot over your head! Get out!” commanded a cook, irritated at the supercilious carriage of the entrant. “What are you comin’ in here for?”

“I’ll bash your greasy eye,” retorted Swiggles. “I was hookin’ salt pork afore you was born—for twenty year I was cookin’ for sailors.”

“My pots!” answered the cook. “I been a ship’s cook for twenty-nine year.”

“Nobuddy wouldn’t know you was a cook unless you told ‘em,” declared Swiggles. “Look at the lubber cook-in’ gear you got! How can you make good coffee in them copper pots? How can you make good soup in a big tarnk? All them is good for is to shine up.”

They bore a remarkable resemblance to each other as they stood there arguing, with all the other cooks gaping on and a crowd of jackies collecting outside the galley door.

“There ain’t a admiral in the service that ain’t tried to get me to cook on his ship,” stated the

cook; "an' I got the reputation of makin' the best beans in the navy."

"Shut up your bluddy sarss! " said Swiggles, and removed his cap. "If you had any brains behint that round peak o' yourn, you'd be a skipper, instead of a cook, an' wear clothes like me. Lay a eye on that cap."

The cook took the cap, looked at it, and threw it into the stove.

Swiggles sprang after it, but too late to save it.

"I'll knock your teeth down your hausepipe for that!" he roared.

"Start it, an' I'll smother you with this beanpot!" snarled the cook.

"Wait till I get off my coat," croaked Swiggles in a voice thick with rage. "Wait till I get off my coat."

He thrashed out of his coat and carefully hung it on an oven handle.

"Stand there jest one more second, you round-peaked, sail-eared, bluddy sea-biscuit," grated he, "till I get my sleeves rolled up!"

Then, all of a sudden, he rushed on the cook with a roar which a lion would have turned tail and fled from.

In a snarling, venomous ball they rolled about the galley deck, playing havoc with the culinary equipment; while just down the deck Captain William and the carpenter and a mallet were in a tangled, ferocious knot under the bench.

It so happened that about the same time Swiggles's head was enclosed in the beanpot and he was held on his back by a breathless master-at-arms, Captain William was defeated on points by the carpenter, and Skipper Henry, down in the junior officers' quarters, succumbed to the efforts of his strapping enemy and had the irons clapped on.

Swiggles was also ironed while still on his back.

"I guess these 'll keep you where you belong for a while," said the cook.

"I can cook a better meal right now, with these irons on, than the best blighted slop you can make," fired back Swiggles as he was hustled aft through applauding groups of man-o'-war's men.

Captain William was hustled after him with his teeth clinched in his fist.

Skipper Henry's valuable suit had been badly mussed in the snappy struggle, and his necktie and

rubber collar were left where they shot into the sugar as he and the master-at-arms went tugging and arguing into the passage.

The junior officers breathed a soulful sigh of satisfaction and hung up the neckgear as a souvenir.

While these happenings had been taking place there was one more person who was becoming disgruntled. That was Rear-Admiral Hemmington, who, incidentally, had gained his admiral stars just the previous week.

He paced impatiently about his new quarters, wondering as to the whereabouts of his expected guests. And, too, his best meal was luncheon, and it was growing cold on the table.

He finally summoned his orderly.

"Have you seen anything of three captains who were to lunch with me?" he asked.

The orderly had not

"Then have the word passed for them. My guns! I can't be expected to have my luncheon ruined for the sake of etiquette. Their names are Captains Swiggles, Wagg, and Stubbier. And if they won't come, *haul* them down," commanded the admiral.

"Aye, aye, sir," said the orderly with his hand to his cap, and dodged through the door.

The admiral had taken ten more turns around his after cabin when he heard a mingling of savage voices and a jingling of irons. Through the door came a disheveled, capless, fuming skipper sandwiched between two masters-at-arms.

"Who are you, sir?" asked the astonished admiral.

"Captain John Skinley Swiggles," came the irate answer.

"What? Not the Captain Swiggles who——" began the admiral.

"You bet your bluddy lamps I am," interrupted Swiggles loudly. "Leggo my arms, you blarsted sharks! Wot kind o' treatment is this for to give a skipper, ardmiral?"

"This man——" began the master-at-arms.

But he was clicked off by another jingling of irons, and through the door popped another worse-for-wear skipper in the arms of a huge master-at-arms.

The admiral gazed astoundedly over the head of Swiggles at the new arrival.

"Now who the devil is this?" he asked.

"Captain Henry Wagg is my name bawled that one. "Is this the way your swabs treats a captain wot comes to pay you a friendly visit? Haul your hand away from my mouth, you——"

He was in the junior officers' quarters looking for you, sir," said the master-at-arms while he held a hand over Skipper Henry's mouth. "He insisted——"

"Let them go for a moment till I find out what is what," commanded Admiral Hemmington. "Get yourselves together now and talk calmly."

But at that instant another pair of masters-at-arms appeared with one more snarling, bedraggled captain. The trio was now complete.

"I never seen such crool, inhuman treatment," stormed Captain William, "as these United States navy swabs give me. Wot kind of a way——"

"Crool an' inhuman! Them's the words for it, admiral," cut in Swiggles. "Don't a man wot's skippered a ship for five year get no respect in the navy?"

"Of course, but——" started the admiral.

"If everybuddy knowed the treatment Americans visitin' battle-ships gets, there wouldn't be no more navy, admiral," said Skipper Henry.

While these lurid complaints were progressing the admiral had been looking from one to the other of the speakers with the air of a connoisseur; and as they talked his brow slowly cleared, for there, surrounding and radiating from the three skippers, was the atmosphere of his youth.

Here were the bold, rip-roaring masters of sail he had seen from the tops as a midshipman, the men who had carried crimp bills, rope's-ends, and romance in their bulgy pockets, and made Yankeeland famous for her clipper ships all over the seven seas.

A little exaggerated they were, of course, in their old age; but old age is given to magnifying its youth.

In the admiral's mind were visions of tall-masted, white-coursed ships when he sent away the masters-at-arms and their irons with them.

"Sit down at the table, Captain Swiggles. Captain Wagg, and Captain Stubbler," said he, "and we'll have a bite of luncheon while we get calmed down a little."

Without another syllable of urging, the captains slid into the indicated chairs and tucked napkins about their necks. And suddenly a steward appeared with delicious eatables incased in shimmering silverware. They will never forget that meal in the admiral's cabin.

"You," said Swiggles, addressing their host through a mustache full of diced potatoes in cream, "are the only man we seen on this whole ship wot knows how to treat men with marster's tickets."

"Quite a compliment, I assure you, Captain Swiggles," smiled the admiral. "You evidently ran afoul of somebody."

"I could have swabbed up the deck with twenty o' those powder-monkeys with one hand, admiral," asserted Captain William. Then he deftly absorbed a half slice of bread.

"Perhaps," chuckled the admiral.

Skipper Henry dodged around the steward and forked another french chop.

"I'd like to get 'em on my old hooker," said he. "I could go without breakfast, dinner, and supper, an' still be able to boxhaul fifty of 'em."

"Why, ardmiral," said Swiggles, reaching for the third helping of chicken salad, "when I was in the Solomons wunst, I shivered twenty-nine o' them black saveeges so quick they never——"

"Admiral," interposed Captain William, "that was boy's play. One time, in New Guinea, I took thirty-four o' them cannerbals who tried to board me, single hant, an' tied 'em into roolin" hitches, garrick bends, an' sheepshanks."

Admiral Hemmington laughed heartily.

"You can go to the mouth o' the Congo right to-day, admiral," spoke Skipper Henry jealously, "an' see dozens o' them black lubbers stooped over an' hump-backed from when I drove their necks into their hulls the time they tried to steal a cargo o' salt pork from the Benny Boy."

When the last course was served Swiggles produced a long plug of tobacco, and they each gnawed off a generous mouthful.

"That was the best meal I ever had, ardmiral," said Swiggles.

He turned and shot a jet of tobacco-juice at a cuspidor, but it was badly aimed, and only made a startling change in the figure on the Axminster rug. But Captain William, who was all of twenty feet from it, hit it repeatedly without the slightest

trouble.

Skipper Henry, however, made no attempt at it, but ingeniously placed a finger-bowl on the floor beside him. When they rose to go they made an onslaught on all portable dainties, and their pockets bulged with fruit and cakes and cigars as they went toward the ladder.

"You are the greatest commander in the navy, admiral," said Skipper Henry, and the others enthusiastically approved it.

The admiral himself conducted them to the deck. There Swiggles pointed to a cottage far over on a hill, with a flag-pole rigged like a ship's mast.

"That's where we live, ardmiral," said he. "Come up an' see us any time you warnts—but

don't bring none o' them young brats you got here for crew."

Shortly after they bade the admiral a hearty good-by and climbed into the dory, which, thanks to the bailing efforts of an O. S., was still on top.

"Why don't you let one of my launches take you ashore?" asked the admiral.

"Not by a darn sight!" said Swiggles, hastily shoving off. "We wouldn't trust our precious lives to the young hammerheads wot runs them there boats."

And as the dory fell away from the accommodation-ladder they might have heard a soft but hearty cheer from the direction of the forecastle.