

Sailors in Port

By Commander Dawson RN



(From "The Sunday at Home", 1895)

It was after a seventy-two-days' voyage across the Pacific, from south to north, that H.M.S. Trincomalee, a sailing frigate of twenty-five guns, with 240 men, anchored for the first time in Esquimault Harbour, Vancouver's Islands, having sailed 20,000 miles since leaving England. That was more than forty years ago, in the spring of 1853, the year before the Russian war, as the survivors of her crew may well remember.

British Columbia with its European population had as yet hardly an existence. The several islands named after Captain Vancouver, R.N., who had circumnavigated them 110 years ago, were beautiful park-like lands, well wooded, with a fertile bracken soil, little disturbed by the hand of men. Victoria, the capital, was a stockaded fort (so called), containing free-trading stores of the Hudson's Bay Company, near which a few officials resided, separated by a narrow harbour from an Indian settlement. There was some difficulty in finding in the woods the few farms with some 300 or 400 settlers scattered over the Islands.

A colony of seventeen men, most of them with wives and families, had recently been brought out from Haddington in Scotland by an enterprising farmer, Mr. Mackenzie, and were settling in the woods about a mile or two from Esquimault Harbour. They had brought out a steam engine with sawing and other machines, etc., and were cutting down trees, sawing planks, and building themselves houses. They were living on ship's provisions, whilst the seeds they had planted were growing up for their sustenance.

It was a delightful climate, virgin soil, plenty of elbow room, no inhabitants near the harbour, a novel experience which charmed the sailors, who had themselves to improvise a kind of dockyard and pier. Several of the younger officers invested in Indian canoes; whilst there were not wanting exciting adventures of being lost in the trackless woods, walking in recurrent circles which could not be broken away from, and interesting studies of the primitive ways of North American Indians, whilst learning the Chinook jargon (a mixture of English, French and Indian languages), which formed the medium of conversation with them.

It was on the Sunday afternoon following the arrival of the Trincomalee, that some of the people from Mackenzie's farm turned up on board the frigate. Thus began that special intercourse with the farm which has now to be mentioned. If the new colonists were curious to see a man-of-war, the sailors were no less curious to witness the foundations of a British colony. Each had something to learn from the other.

Showing them over the ship, the gunner, Mr. George Cook, ascertained that these good Scotch folk were in some danger of forgetting the worship of the Lord's Day and the religious customs of Scotland. They had been well brought up in the land, but a six months' voyage in a prayerless merchant ship, with the novelties and discomforts of such a life, without worship or privacy, on the seas, had broken up old religious habits. The

difficulties of the beginnings of life in the woods, with its ever-present struggle to provide shelter and daily food, were something so different from their Haddington homes, that the Lord's Day, though a day of rest, so far as Mr. Mackenzie's service was concerned, was not devoted to the higher service of the Divine Being.

"Would you not like your little ones to grow up with some of the religious privileges which you had in your youth?"

There could be but one reply to Mr. Cook's enquiry.

"But we have no minister, no church, no schools."

"Neither had you a house to shelter you the other day, and no architect and no builder; yet you say you have some wooden houses now! If some of us sailors pay you a return visit next Sunday afternoon, may we hold a service for worship with your people?" This offer was readily accepted.

The ancient custom of the sea for united daily prayer on board ship had not, at that period, been generally revived in ships of war, as it happily has since been, at least in the mornings, for some years. But Mr. George Cook had so denuded his sleeping cabin of ordinary furniture, and arranged its scant accommodation with a sacrifice of his personal comfort, that as many as ten or twelve sailors had been squeezed into it for daily evening prayer in the second dog-watch. Ordinarily, however, the attendance was more nearly in numbers to that fulfilment of the gracious pledge and promise that, "Wheresoever two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them." This united prayer was conducted every evening with rare exceptions, during the five years of the frigate's commission. The little meeting began ere the ship tripped anchor from Plymouth Sound, and continued round the Horn, up to the Behring Straits, whilst crossing and recrossing the two Atlantics and the Pacific, at sea as well as in port, in storm as in calm, amidst icebergs and in tropics, till the Trincomalee returned to Plymouth Sound a year after the conclusion of the Russian War. But once had the little company the honour and the advantage of the presence of a clergyman. In the absence of privacy for kneeling in individual prayer on board ship, to many sailors a sore deprivation and misery, such a daily private gathering had its personal uses to a few; but it was also a standing witness to their shipmates for the Christ, an Epiphany, felt throughout the ship.

On Sunday afternoons, the second class boys from fifteen to seventeen years of age, about a dozen in number, formed a Bible class held by one of the officers on the main deck, between two guns. This was followed soon afterwards by the service of the National Church conducted in Mr. Cook's cabin according to the order of the Book of Common Prayer, for the members of the daily prayer meeting.

The captain himself, of course, in accordance with the ancient first Article of the Naval Discipline Act of Parliament, every Sunday forenoon, whether at sea or in port, assembled the whole crew together, and "caused the public worship of Almighty God to be solemnly, orderly, and reverently performed according to the Liturgy of the Church of England"; the fact being duly entered in the ship's log for the admiral's information. Most thoughtful men-of-war's men highly value this official recognition that they are something more than animals; and gratefully feel, when far distant from home, that thus, on Sundays at least,

“Tis something that we kneel and pray
With loved ones, near or far away;
One Lord, one faith, one hope, one care,
One form of words, one common prayer.”

The sailors attending the daily prayer-meeting in Mr. Cook’s cabin became deeply interested in the proposed Sunday service for the Scotch people ashore. One seaman collected a few tracts, etc., done up carefully in a red handkerchief, to take to shore as his contribution. A midshipman lent his canoe for the landing party, a somewhat perilous loan it was found to be at first. A few Prayer Books were lent for the occasion. Hymn books we had none, except a single copy of Wesley’s Hymns. There were, however, Tate and Brady’s psalms bound up with the Prayer Books in those days. And we had, of course, the church’s best Book, for is not “the church a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ?”

It was with no little trepidation, but with much prayer, that some of us landed that Sunday afternoon. In the depth of the great woods, the little Scotch settlement was found. Several of the men were absent with guns, trying to add to their rations some savoury game. Some of the women were washing or mending clothes. Still the scene was peaceful, and otherwise in harmony with the Sabbath day. The Sunday clothing of the sailors was itself a message from above, and their books helped to explain their devout errand.

So soon as the object was understood, a kindly welcome was accorded. Work was laid aside; one family offered their house in which a few planks supported on tubs supplied seats. The congregation had not far to come, and they did come very readily. Each was willing to condone the inexperience of the sailors, to accept their good intentions for better deeds, and to lend his or her own share of assistance to make the little service a time of real blessing from above.

The anticipated difficulty about the singing was easily surmounted, for most of the people had brought their Bibles with the Scotch paraphrases at the end; and right lustily they sang the Lord’s song for the first time in a strange land. It was a bit of old Scotland transferred to the ends of the earth, and set all hearts aglow and in tune for the further worship of the sanctuary. None of the sailors were preachers, but they could read and expound a chapter; and the little service, begun in fear and trembling on their part, ended in praise and thanksgiving to God.

Then came the question, what was to be done for the children? Another house was offered as a Sunday school. The children were accordingly assembled. There was, of course, a lack of books and other appurtenances; but there was no lack of both attention and order, as the sailors endeavoured, however lamely, yet fervently, “to tell them the old, old story of Jesus and His love.”

The ice had been broken. The sailors had found out their own powers. They were amazed at the gratitude which their little effort evoked. They were asked to come again the following Sunday; the sportsmen would surely be present; the little difficulties of the first attempt would be provided against; and the Sabbath service and school would be valued by all. God had indeed been with them and blessed them, so that the sailors returned to their ship in somewhat of the joyful spirit of the seventy whom our Lord had sent forth by twos “whither He Himself would come.”

In the intervening week some sailors visited the farm, and made friends with the men at their work, becoming deeply interested in the variety of operations going on. A young brick-maker (for the time), at work shaping bricks for building chimneys to the plank houses, well educated, as Scotchmen of that social rank often are, became a fast friend and fellow-helper in the subsequent arrangements. There was, of course, no saying when the Trincomalee may trip her anchor and be off; so that, if permanence was to be given to the Divine service, and Sunday school, these must not be made wholly dependent on the presence of sailors.

The "fort," too, at Victoria had to be ransacked to find out what school-books, maps, slates, and copy-books, as well as Bibles and hymn books could be discovered amongst its ample stores of more saleable articles, chiefly intended for traffic with the Indians.

The book shelves of sailors are not ordinarily very extensive, and a copy of "Village Sermons" thereon was a grand gift to the little congregation; and "Barnes's Commentary on the Four Gospels" was rather reluctantly given up; whilst a few other books which could not be replaced, in those days, at that end of the world, were surrendered for the common good.

It was a great interest to the sailors organising an evening day school for the children under the young bricklayer, who also became superintendent of the Sunday school; and eventually, when in a few months, the ship sailed away from Esquimaux, he, by general consent, succeeded the sailors in the conduct of the Sunday service, having been gradually led to take an active part, so as to gain experience under their guidance.

As week by week the sailors landed to their delightful task, the tone of the little community underwent an observable change. The ordinary grumbling and complaints usual against an employer ceased. Cheerfulness and contentment under difficulties and privations regained sway. Family prayer was started in some houses. And it might have been almost said of Mackenzie's Farm, as it is recorded when Philip went down to Samaria, and preached Christ unto them, "And there was great joy in that city."

Presently a good Scotch mother wanted her infant baptized. This seemed beyond the commission of those sailors who had originated public worship at the farm. But Captain Wallace Houston, R.N., himself a Haddington man and no indifferent spectator of these things, who commanded the Trincomalee, hearing of the difficulty, kindly invited the family to come on board to the usual Sunday forenoon service, thoughtfully sending a boat round the bay to the point nearest to the farm for them to embark. After Divine service on the main, or gun deck, an adjournment took place to the captain's fore-cabin or dining-room, where, in the presence of a smaller, but deeply interested assembly, that good officer publicly admitted the child into the congregation of Christ's flock, "in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," in accordance with the order to be used in the National Church, much to the comfort of all concerned; entering the baptism in due form in the ship's log.

All this was half-a-dozen years before the consecration of the first Bishop of Columbia, the good Dr. George Hills, who brought out from England duly qualified clergymen to minister to the increased and increasing island population. Therefore the Holy Communion was not administered either ashore or afloat. The 240 seamen in the Trincomalee during their five

years' commission, had not a single opportunity on board their ship to "shew the Lord's death till He come."

After a delightful stay of several months at Esquimault, during which the Sunday services ashore were further built up, the Trincomalee sailed northward for the then Russian settlement of Sitka, one of the cluster of George the Third Islands which hide the coastline of North West America, a territory now belonging to the United States and better known as Alaska. We had a most pleasant visit of a few weeks, very interesting in many ways, experiencing much kindness from the Russians, which was not forgotten when, a year afterwards, the frigate again dropped anchor off Sitka, but, alas, as an enemy, the two countries being then at war, and did her hostile duty with special gentleness towards our quondam hosts. Turning south to the Queen Charlotte Islands, the Indian inhabitants of which interested us exceedingly, we reached Esquimault once more after a six weeks' absence.

Naturally, the sailors' first visit was to Mackenzie's Farm, where their return was warmly welcomed, and they were allowed to resume the lead in the Sunday services which they had been privileged to originate. It was very gratifying to find that, during the absence of the ship, the little congregation had held steadfastly together, that the Sunday school was well maintained, the day school prospering, and the young brick-maker adequately supported by the heads of families. Soon afterwards, orders came for Callao in Peru, and the Trincomalee's officers and crew sailed away from Vancouver Island full of pleasant memories, and grateful thoughts, which have still an abiding place with at least one of those who had the great honour of being thus in a small way "a witness unto Christ unto" what, in those pre-railway and pre-steamship days, might be called "the uttermost part of the earth."

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