

## Hinton Browne's *Age at Sea*

Right: "Shipmates of Mine"—the young Hinton-Browne, wearing a tam-o'-shanter, is standing on the ladder



sacred commodity and many a time I used to put my mouth under the rail which contained the water pump to catch the odd drops that ran down; hardly hygienic but very thirst-quenching.

On we travelled—I remember, half a century after this first voyage, that we were in the North-East Trades.

In the course of time I learned to go aloft and was becoming (or so I thought) a real sailor. It was always a pleasure to me to go aloft, for one saw more of what was going on and, as time passed, I lost my first fear of climbing.

We were divided into two watches and one man at the wheel. This left only eight or nine men to find employment as we apprentices looked after the mizzen or after mast and renewed the halliards and buntlings when necessary, or replaced worn seizings. Of course, the boatswain examined our work but he rarely found any faults for we had learned that the result could mean life or death to the crew.

One night the ship seemed to come to life as a shore light was sighted. I think that it was the extreme westerly point of South America. All hands were called, although they were already on deck to see the wonderful light. It was an exciting feeling to think that we were within a few miles of land and the joys of civilisation, but this did not last long as we were commanded to tack ship and head for South Africa. I was told that we had come so far out of our way to take advantage of the trade wind, and now the time had come to prepare for the South-East Trades.

Here I must mention the albatross. These birds never come north of the Equator and while in season nest in the three continents—South America, South Africa and the rocky parts of the south coast of Australia. When a vessel leaves, for example, the Cape, bound for the U.K., a number of albatross and their fledglings will take up station with the ship and keep her company until the Equator is reached, when they will look around for a southbound ship and join up with her for the return journey south. These wonderful birds are about twelve

feet from tip to tip, white in colour, and glide rather than fly, save for the occasional flap of the wings, their heads moving from side to side looking for possible food in the water. If for any reason the ship should stop at sea, the birds would settle on the water and wait until the journey was resumed.

As the days went by we followed much the same routine; we entered the Doldrums, the calm belts that lie between the trade winds around the Equator, and all the sails were changed; fine-weather canvas was bent on, while the heavy ones were aired and put away. We were three weeks going through the Doldrums, a fringing time, as the yards had to be adjusted to every change of wind, which, although not much to speak of, was necessary to get us anywhere at all—and so on, into the trade winds.

Every now and then we renewed the rigging, fitted new seizings where necessary, washed paint, chipped off the rusty places and performed dozens of other jobs. Our decks were made of wood so we would holystone off the dead wood and, on a dry day, rub in boiled oil, which acted as a preservative.

One morning we awoke to be told that we were about 100 miles off the Cape of Good Hope—the wind was fresh and favourable, and with my six weeks' experience I should say we were doing about five or six knots. We were carrying all our canvas and were actually very comfortable, although it was too chilly to stay on deck for any length of time. We were told that the heavy weather canvas was to be bent the next day but the royals did not matter as they were furled whenever the wind freshened up a little. We were in winds known in nautical language as the Eastern Down, which came from the West and were fresh to strong most of the time.

Apart from attending to the yards and sails we sometimes made sennit, a plaited yarn to be used in various ways (privately, we made sennits into floor mats), and grumets or handles for our sea chests. These handles were made with marvellous knots, known to the experienced