

II

**JOHN LANGDON
THREE VOYAGES TO THE WEST
COAST OF AFRICA 1881-1884**

Edited by Martin Lynn

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PREFACE

The typescript of John Langdon's memoirs, 'Three Voyages to the West Coast of Africa, 1881-1884' is held by Bristol City Library. It is published below virtually in its entirety. Short passages of no more than a dozen words or so in each case have been excised from the beginning and end of 'First Voyage', the beginning of 'Second Voyage' and the beginning and end of 'Third Voyage' and have been marked in the text appropriately. These passages refer to Langdon's future wife and have no bearing on the subject of the memoirs. Apart from these excisions, few other changes have been made to the text. Where corrections to spelling and such like are appropriate, these have been made in footnotes.

Thanks are due to Bristol City Library for permission to publish this edition of Langdon's memoirs. Langdon died in January 1947 and according to his will, left one child, Lilian Elizabeth Langdon, wife of Frederick George Smith of Vancouver, Canada, to whom he bequeathed his estate. Numerous attempts were made to contact Mrs Smith and her descendants, including the publishing of adverts in the Vancouver press. Efforts were also made to trace the family solicitors, Salisbury, Light & Co. of Bristol, which ceased to do business in 1971. None of these attempts bore fruit. Apologies are hereby offered to the Smith family for publishing this edition without succeeding in establishing contact; they are urged to contact the editor at Queen's University, Belfast.

Thanks are also due to Dr Freda Harcourt who first suggested that an edition of this typescript should be published, and to Dr Steven Greer, Professor Andrew Porter, Dr Nigel Rigby, Professor Lydia White, and the staff of Bristol City Library. Other debts of gratitude are acknowledged in relevant footnotes. Such errors that remain are entirely the editor's responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

John Chandler Langdon, the author of 'Three voyages to the west coast of Africa', died in Bristol in 1947 aged eighty-three.¹ In his teens Langdon had worked as a seaman on ships belonging to R. & W. King of Bristol during three trading voyages to West Africa. Following his third voyage, Langdon left the sea and became an apprentice in the bookbinding trade, finally retiring as the owner of his own firm, Langdon & Davis of Bristol. Shortly before his death, he presented the typescript of 'Three voyages' to Bristol City Library.

The memoirs were written in 1930 and are based on his recollections of his experiences during the three voyages he made to Africa in the early 1880s; for the third of these voyages Langdon kept a diary, also held by Bristol City Library, on which the latter part of his account was based. In addition Langdon wrote a paper on trading methods in West Africa, 'Barter trade from Bristol ships, west coast of Africa', also in 1930, and an account of the attack on his ship at Sassandra, 'Our bust up with the nigger of Sassandrew River, west coast of Africa, 1883–84', in 1932. Both these accounts borrow heavily from 'Three voyages'. Although the narrative of 'Three voyages' is in places fictionalized, with accounts of conversations given that can hardly have been recollected so precisely some forty years later, the overall accuracy of the memoir, its use of dates and geography, and its detail of the voyages, when confirmed against other sources, cannot be faulted.² For all its unsophisticated language and colourful depiction of characters, it gives the reader an accurate picture of life on board a sailing ship in the West African trade in the 1880s. Its importance is that it tells us much about the place of Bristol and its merchants in the African trade, the techniques used in that trade, and the commercial potentialities of parts of West Africa just as the scramble for the region was getting underway.³

¹ Langdon died on 8 January 1947 and his Will, a copy of which is available in Somerset House, was granted probate on 21 February 1947.

² For example, where possible the dates of his voyages have been confirmed against *Customs Bills of Entry* records.

³ A more extensive consideration of these issues can be found in M. Lynn, 'Bristol, West Africa and the nineteenth century palm oil trade', *Historical Research*, 64, 155 (1991), pp. 359–374. For Bristol's broader economic history in this period see C.E. Harvey and J. Press 'Industrial change and the economic life of Bristol since 1880', in *idem* (eds), *Studies in the Business History of Bristol* (Bristol, 1988), pp. 1–32; B.W.E. Alford, 'The economic development of Bristol in the 19th century: an enigma?', in P.M. McGrath and J. Cannon (eds), *Essays in Bristol and Gloucestershire History* (Bristol, 1976), pp. 252–283; K. Morgan, 'The economic development of Bristol, 1700–1850', in M. Dresser and P. Ollerenshaw (eds), *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Tiverton, 1996), pp. 48–75.

The picture of seaboard life Langdon's narrative draws is given from the viewpoint of the ordinary seaman and herein lies its central significance. It is a long time since maritime history was conceived as being simply the history of captains and officers, yet little material exists recording the experiences of ordinary sailors.⁴ In this, Langdon's memoirs are unique for the West African trade. The descriptions produced by British participants in this commerce in the nineteenth century are very much the product of relatively educated men – supercargoes, traders, ship's officers or surgeons – writing for a relatively informed audience of businessmen, geographers, and armchair commentators. Adams, Bold, Smith, and Whitford, to name but few, were attempting to speak to their own kind, and doing so largely within the accepted parameters of contemporary travel writing.⁵ Even popular missionary descriptions of the trade, such as by Waddell, or the work of writers like Mary Kingsley, while differing in detail from these trading accounts, fall essentially within this remit.⁶ Langdon's memoir stands in sharp contrast to these volumes. His interest lay in trying to convey what life was like for the majority of those involved on the British side of this trade: the ordinary sailors who crewed the ships to West Africa and for whom the traders – an awareness of the sharp social gulf between crewmen and traders permeates Langdon's work – had little time. The value of 'Three voyages' therefore is that it gives us, albeit in ingenuous and somewhat naive language, the recollections of an ordinary seaman concerning life on trading ships to West Africa in the late nineteenth century.

In 'Three voyages' we see the crewman's experience of the stresses and strains of the voyage to West Africa spelt out vividly. Clearly, this was a hard and dangerous career. Not only were there the usual shipboard privations concerning long absences from port, hard work, pests, rats, poor provisions, and the petty cruelties of officers – all of which Langdon describes – but there was the ever-present danger of shipwreck, as experienced by him in the North Sea on his second voyage. For many sailors some of these experiences would have been commonplace, though they rarely feature in accounts of this trade.⁷ Further, in the case of the West African trade, there were the added

⁴ This argument is developed in M. Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge, 1987).

⁵ J. Adams, *Remarks on the Country Extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo* (London, 1823); E. Bold, *The Merchants' and Mariners' Guide* (London, 1822); J. Smith, *Trade and Travels in the Gulph of Guinea* (London, 1851); J. Whitford, *Trading Life in Western and Central Africa* (London, 1877).

⁶ H.M. Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa* (London, 1863); M.H. Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa* (London, 1897).

⁷ An exception to this is J. Fawcckner, *Narrative of Capt. James Fawcckner's Travels on the Coast of Benin* (London, 1837), who describes being shipwrecked near Benin.

dangers of disease and attack from the shore. Although the discovery of quinine as a prophylactic for malaria in 1854 reduced mortality rates in the West African trade, disease remained a constant threat. Langdon reports the way numbers of his fellow crewmen fell ill whilst in the Cameroons – their lack of treatment from a drunken surgeon being all too typical of the trade – and records the death of a Bristol captain on the Ivory Coast. Equally, one of the most vivid scenes in the narrative comes with the attack on the *Edmund Richardson* at Sassandra on Langdon's third voyage. Perhaps the most striking feature of the narrative however, is the sheer tedium of the shipboard life in the West African trade, with the need for speed generating pressures that were felt by the seamen. 'Work, work, from 6 till 5 on deck or in ship's hold in an almost unbearable heat', Langdon notes of the Cameroons and 'oil, oil from morning till evening' he writes concerning the Ivory Coast.⁸ Exotic encounters with Africans may characterize most narratives of commercial activity in West Africa, but the reality for the crewmen in the trade was that shipboard life was a humdrum one of cleaning and tarring the ship, fishing, loading and unloading, and maintaining watch through the night. Langdon's voice not only provides a counterpoint to the conventional picture, but deserves to be heard in its own right.

If providing the viewpoint from life 'below decks' is the chief significance of Langdon's memoirs, then its second is in reminding the reader of the continuing role of Bristol in the African trade of these years. Again, Langdon is unique as a source for this. Liverpool is – rightly – regarded as the British port with the most significant connection with Africa in these years; nineteenth-century accounts of West African trade are all based around voyages from Liverpool.⁹ In contrast there are no narratives of the trade generated from Bristol. Yet Bristol was Britain's second port for much of this period and its West African trade was of considerable and continuing importance to the end of the nineteenth century.

Bristol had at one time been the leading port in Britain's slave trade with Africa. By the mid-eighteenth century this position had been lost to Liverpool and with the abolition of British slaving in 1807, Bristol's remaining African traders, such as they were, had turned to the so-called 'legitimate trade' in produce. This produce trade encompassed a wide variety of items, not least ivory, gold dust, dye-woods, and skins, though in the early decades following abolition it was timber in its various forms that was at the heart of British imports from West Africa

⁸ See below, pp. 204 and 237.

⁹ To give one example, R.M. Jackson, *Journal of a Voyage to Bonny River* (London, 1934). See also M. Lynn, 'Liverpool and Africa in the nineteenth century: the continuing connection', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 147 (1998), pp. 27–

more broadly. By the 1830s palm oil – oil extracted from the fruit of the oil palm, *elaeis guineensis* – had emerged as the major commodity imported from the west coast and by the early 1850s Britain's imports of palm oil had reached an average of over 577,000 cwt per annum, worth over £1 million.¹⁰ Palm oil's value was as a lubricant for machinery, particularly before the discovery of petroleum resources in the USA in 1859, and as a major component in the manufacture of soap and candles. In the latter part of the century, palm kernels – the kernel of the fruit, left once palm oil has been extracted from the pericarp, and hitherto ignored by British traders – became an increasingly important part of British imports from West Africa, though its use in margarine manufacture and for cattle feed was, at least until World War I, led by the German and Dutch markets.¹¹

Though Liverpool remained at the centre of this commerce throughout these years, Bristol's share of the African palm products trade was not negligible, with the port accounting for some 14 per cent of British imports in the middle of the century.¹² African commodities found a ready market in Bristol. The city was a major soap manufacturing centre and the mid-nineteenth century saw this Bristol industry at its most prosperous. The city had long been a renowned centre for soap production and one of its soap firms, Christopher Thomas & Bros, was to be the major soap manufacturer of western England and was to hold, at one time, some 8 per cent of the UK market.¹³ Equally, candle manufacture, usually undertaken in conjunction with soap processing, was of considerable significance in the city. Tinsplate manufacture – which used palm oil as a flux in the plating process – was important to Bristol's economy, while nearby South Wales saw the largest tinsplate industry in Britain.¹⁴ The development of railways, with the Great Western opening from Paddington to Bristol in 1841, generated further demand for palm oil while also strengthening the links between the port and its hinterland.¹⁵ As the cargoes of the ships on Langdon's first and third voyages show – being primarily composed of palm oil – there was a continuing demand in Bristol and its hinterland for palm oil.¹⁶

Also important in explaining Bristol's role in the nineteenth-century

¹⁰ M. Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa: The Palm Oil Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 13–14.

¹¹ C. Wilson, *The History of Unilever*, 2 vols (London, 1954), II, pp. 25–27.

¹² Lynn, 'Bristol, West Africa', p. 361.

¹³ T. O'Brien, 'Christopher Thomas and Brothers Ltd', *Progress* (1949), pp. 43–48; C.J. Diaper, 'Christopher Thomas and Brothers Ltd: the last Bristol soapmakers', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 105 (1987), pp. 223–232.

¹⁴ W.E. Minchinton, *The British Tinsplate Industry: A History* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 55–58.

¹⁵ Palm oil was used as a lubricant for railway carriages in the period before the discovery of mineral oil.

¹⁶ Lynn, 'Bristol, West Africa', pp. 359–374.

West African trade was the manufacturing sector in the city. Far from being simply an entrepôt, Bristol in the early nineteenth century was a major manufacturing centre and its goods were exported across the globe.¹⁷ It was noted for its metallurgical industries: brass and copper in particular. Both these products played a major role in the African trade. So too did glassware, alcohol, and cotton cloth, all of which were manufactured in Bristol in this period. As Langdon's account shows, particularly important in the African trade were three items of Bristol manufacture: gunpowder, lead shot, and manillas. Gunpowder was produced on a considerable scale in Bristol, and it is notable how all three of Langdon's voyages began with large quantities of gunpowder being loaded on board. Also significant in the trade was lead shot, the lead coming from the nearby Mendip hills, while manillas – horseshoe-shaped rings from an alloy of copper and lead – were of central importance as a currency in the West African trade and particularly on the Ivory Coast; Langdon rightly stresses the importance of the manillas in the trading goods his ships carried to West Africa.¹⁸ Further, Bristol's links with its hinterland, particularly the West Midlands, provided the port with a ready source of the firearms and hardware that Langdon's ships required to trade on the coast, and that were so prominent in their cargoes, while Bristol's continuing West Indies connections provided the rum so ubiquitous in the trade.

Langdon's narrative reveals how this Bristol African trade functioned. In its structure, the trade continued to reflect the organization of the slave trade of the eighteenth century. Essentially, very little changed in the organization of Britain's African trade, both with Liverpool and Bristol, after 1807. While slaves were no longer transported in British ships – or at least not legitimately – the same mechanisms and techniques as in the slave trade continued to be utilized by British traders. The reason was that the sailing ship remained the method of transport of the African trade. In the nineteenth century, as in the slave-trade era, Bristol's trading voyage (as was Liverpool's) was organized around the despatching of a sailing ship to the coast, usually owned (or occasionally, chartered) by a trader rather than a shipper, with a cargo of manufactured goods to be exchanged for produce; these manufactured goods were then given out to local African brokers

¹⁷ Harvey and Press, 'Industrial change', p. 2; C.M. MacInnes, *A Gateway of Empire* (Bristol, 1939), pp. 381–399; W.E. Minchinton (ed.), *The Trade of Bristol in the 18th Century* (Bristol, 1957), pp. ix–xvi; Morgan, 'Economic development of Bristol', pp. 48–75.

¹⁸ W. Babington, 'Remarks on the general description of the trade on the West Coast of Africa', *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 23 (1875), pp. 245–257; A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, 'The major currencies in Nigerian history', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 2 (1960), pp. 132–150; F.J. Pedler, *The Lion and Unicorn in Africa: the United Africa Company, 1787–1931* (London, 1974), pp. 21–22.

on the basis of credit (or ‘trust’ as it was called).¹⁹ The sailing vessel would then remain on the coast until the coastal brokers had collected produce from the interior and returned to redeem their trust.²⁰ In this system, each voyage was a discrete trading venture, funded by a trader in Bristol or Liverpool, whose capital was thus tied up on the coast for a year or more before it could be realized. The costs of this system were high and the risks, from shipwreck or from brokers defaulting on their credit, were higher still.

Bristol traders utilized two trading techniques for their trade in West Africa, both of which are aptly illustrated by Langdon’s three voyages. The heart of the West African trade in these years lay in the Niger Delta and its neighbouring rivers.²¹ This area was very much the preserve of the major Liverpool firms. Here these Liverpool firms, at least before the middle of the century, followed what Langdon termed the ‘river trade’ system, namely sending a ship direct to one river to fill its cargo at one port, the ship remaining until a full cargo was purchased. This was possible where, as in the rivers of the Niger Delta or the neighbouring Cameroons estuary, there was a natural harbour where ships could wait for their goods to be sold and produce purchased. Although Bristol traders eschewed the Niger Delta, this technique was followed by them in the Cameroons estuary, as can be seen from the description of Langdon’s second voyage. The Cameroons had become an important centre for Bristol traders. These traders were to be found developing the ivory trade of the area early in the century, while by the 1850s an observer complained of how Bristol ‘monopolized’ the river’s trade; another noted Bristol traders’ particularly lawless behaviour in the Cameroons.²² By the 1880s Bristol traders, purchasing ivory and palm products, had been operating for many decades in the Cameroons and, as Langdon’s account strikingly suggests, were using this river to buy palm kernels to send direct to the German market.²³ This system, utilizing Liverpool techniques but trading with Hamburg, showed a remarkable degree of innovation by Langdon’s employers; there is little evidence of other British firms, whether from Bristol or Liverpool, doing this.

¹⁹ W.E. Minchinton, ‘The voyage of the snow *Africa*’, *Mariner’s Mirror*, 37 (1951), pp. 188–190; Minchinton, *Trade of Bristol*, pp. xvi–xix; K. Morgan, *Bristol and the Atlantic Trade in the 18th Century* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 128–151.

²⁰ C.W. Newbury, ‘Credit in early nineteenth century West African trade’, *Journal of African History*, 13 (1972), pp. 81–95.

²¹ M. Lynn, ‘Change and continuity in the British palm oil trade with West Africa’, *Journal of African History*, 22 (1981), pp. 331–348.

²² Hutchinson to Clarendon, 23 February 1857, FO 84/1030; Burton to Foreign Secretary, 14 January 1862, FO 84/1176.

²³ The development of the Hamburg market can be traced in L. Harding, ‘Hamburg’s West African trade in the 19th century’, in G. Liesegang, H. Pasch, and A. Jones (eds),

The other trading technique used by Bristol traders, which has not received due attention in studies of the African commerce, was 'coasting'. This technique, of which no direct accounts have survived apart from Langdon's, was utilized on those other parts of the West African coast where Bristol traders were prevalent – particularly the Ivory Coast, the destination for Langdon's first and third voyages, and known in this period as the 'Bristol Coast' from the ubiquity of Bristol ships; few if any, Liverpool firms would be found here.²⁴ The list of Bristol ships Langdon noted during his third voyage confirms this. Here the physical geography of the littoral meant that there were few natural harbours and the 'river' technique was an impossibility. Coasting required sailing along the coast buying small quantities of produce from numerous different ports and involved trading in a variety of different produce – ivory, oil, skins, grains etc. – with a cargo containing a wide variety of different manufactured products to appeal to different tastes in different areas. This meant, as with Langdon's experience, the ship might pass along the coast three or four times on a single voyage; given that this required beating against the wind when returning westward, this was a very time-consuming activity for a trade where time meant money. Langdon's two coasting voyages to and from the Ivory Coast took around eighteen months each, while his river voyage to and from the more distant Cameroons took only five months. Coasting's advantage however, was that it enabled traders to spread their risk across a variety of produce and a variety of markets in West Africa. It clearly was a robust system and, as Langdon's narrative shows, it still thrived in the late nineteenth century.

Profitable it might have been for Langdon's employers, but as he makes clear, the coasting system was a laborious system of trading and one that generated considerable stresses among the crew. Although sailors preferred it to the river trade, seeing it as healthier and less risky than the river trade – though there is little evidence to confirm this²⁵ – it generated much work for the crew. 'We had to do battle with a very strong current, head winds and calms', notes Langdon of sailing back along the coast, adding that occasionally the ship ended the day further down wind than it had started.²⁶ His narrative is characterized throughout by the efforts required by the length of time coasting involved: 'it was nag, nag, nag, day after day'.²⁷

Figuring African Trade (Berlin, 1986), pp. 363–391.

²⁴ Pedler, *Lion and Unicorn*, IV, p. 153. Coasting was a long established mechanism and fitted into local structures of trading on the coast; D.N. Syfert, 'The Liberian coasting trade, 1822–1900', *Journal of African History*, 18 (1977), pp. 217–235.

²⁵ Mortality rates among sailors were high whichever system was used, until the discovery of quinine as a prophylactic in 1854.

²⁶ See below, p. 209.

²⁷ See below, p. 208.

Whichever technique of trading was used – river or coasting – considerable quantities of goods had to be given out to coastal brokers as trust. The main goods used in this system, as Langdon's description of the cargo on his first voyage makes clear, were firearms and gunpowder, salt, cloth, or spirits; gin, rum, and Dutch schnapps were particular favourites.²⁸ The development of a trade direct to Hamburg no doubt enabled the loading of a cargo of schnapps for the return to West Africa.²⁹ In the middle of the century, textiles made up around half of British exports by value to West Africa to the east of the River Volta, spirits some 20 per cent and firearms some 16 per cent.³⁰ Contrary to Langdon's view, there is little evidence that shoddy or second-rate goods were acceptable to brokers on a wide scale; African brokers were skilled and perceptive purchasers in their own right. Nonetheless, adulteration – by both European and African – was a problem in the trade. Palm oil could be adulterated by the addition of water or impurities; for this reason, as Langdon describes, it was boiled on board ship before being purchased. Less prominent in Langdon's account – though certainly recognized – is the repeated adulteration of manufactured goods, particularly spirits and gunpowder, by British traders and the all-too common practice by British traders of selling short measure.³¹

The trust system took time for goods to be turned into produce, and the risks in it for Bristol traders were obvious, with brokers liable for a variety of reasons to default, and with traders, keen to increase their cargo, tempted to give out more trust than a port could ever realistically hope to redeem in produce. Such situations often degenerated into conflict, with traders calling on the nearest British authorities for help in redeeming their goods, or on occasion, taking the law into their own hands through violence.³² In the longer term no-one benefited from this. Thus ship's captains and supercargoes had to build relationships over time through liberal use of 'dashes' (gifts) and symbolic and ceremonial ties. Langdon notes the way Captain Swan ('Pincher') had done this and shows how such relationships – and conversely their breakdown in a 'peppering' – were at the heart of the success or failure of trading voyages such as these.

²⁸ J.E. Inikori, 'West Africa's seaborne trade, 1750–1850: volume, structure and implications', in Liesegang, Pasch and Jones, *Figuring African Trade*, pp. 49–88, examines the issue of West African seaborne imports in more detail.

²⁹ W.I. Ofonagoro, *Trade and Imperialism in Southern Nigeria, 1881–1929* (New York, 1979), pp. 95–96.

³⁰ Inikori, 'West Africa's seaborne trade', pp. 84–85.

³¹ Ofonagoro, *Trade and Imperialism*, pp. 78–81, 114–120.

³² This is the theme of K.O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–85* (Oxford, 1956).

One other way traders guaranteed themselves against brokers defaulting on their trust is startlingly revealed by Langdon. This was through the taking of pawns on board ship, whom Langdon refers to with the euphemism of ‘passengers’, to be redeemed once the trust was repaid. This practice was illegal under English law – and, being effectively slaving, had been so since 1807 – and its existence on British ships in the 1880s is surprising, to say the least. Langdon admits that it was a practice that had to be concealed from passing Navy vessels, yet it is also clear from his narrative that it was routine on the Ivory Coast in these years. Lack of other evidence, due to its clandestine nature, means that it is impossible to establish how widespread this practice was outside the Ivory Coast.³³

Langdon’s memoirs are also of significance in a third way. His employers on his three voyagers were R. & W. King and Langdon’s narrative throws important light on the history of this firm.³⁴ While there were several Bristol firms that participated in the African trade, not least Lucas Bros, Edward Gwyer & Son and Francis Bruford, the leaders of it in these years were undoubtedly the King brothers.³⁵ Kings had their origin in the career of Thomas King (1759–1841), a Bristol trader who came to prominence in the West African and West Indies trades in the late eighteenth century. In the early 1830s his two sons, Richard (1799–1874) and William (1806–1887), took over his business and renamed it R. & W. King. The King brothers were to be of considerable prominence within Bristol life, their rise to prominence coinciding with the prosperous years of the African trade. Richard was elected a City Councillor in 1835 and remained so until his death in 1874. He was mayor between 1844 and 1845 and was regarded as, in effect, the leader of the City Council throughout these years; he led the Docks committee, was prominent in the Chamber of Commerce and in the Merchant Venturers, and was master of the latter in 1851–1852. William King was elected councillor in 1841 and master of the Merchant Venturers in 1850–1851 and became sheriff in 1871–1872.³⁶

The King brothers concentrated the activities of the King firm on West Africa and, more particularly, the Ivory Coast and Gabon areas

³³ See below, p. 209. The only other area for which evidence exists of this practice in this period concerns the Loango coast; P.M. Martin, *The External Trade of the Loango Coast, 1576–1870* (Oxford, 1972), p. 103.

³⁴ The history of this firm is outlined in M. Lynn, ‘British business and the African trade: Richard & William King Ltd. of Bristol and West Africa, 1833–1918’, *Business History*, 34 (1992), pp. 20–37.

³⁵ Lucas Brothers derived from the late eighteenth-century cooperage firm of Thomas Lucas and was developed by Edward Thomas Lucas (1824–1863) and John Frederick Lucas (1831–1893). Lucas Brothers often operated in tandem with Edward Gwyer & Son; Lynn, ‘Bristol, West Africa’, pp. 366–367.

³⁶ Lynn, ‘British business and the African trade’, pp. 25–26.

that their father had pioneered, while also developing important markets on the Gold Coast and Slave Coast; they specialized in palm oil but also traded extensively in other commodities, especially ivory. In following this pattern they were avoiding the areas of West Africa the big Liverpool firms concentrated on, such as the rivers of the Niger Delta. This allowed them to avoid the pressures and costs that competition with these major firms would have generated – Kings' ships were small, on average some 216 tons in 1850 compared to a Liverpool figure twice that; it should be noted that Langdon's first voyage in 1881 on board a barque of 293 tons was on a relatively small vessel for the African trade of that time.³⁷ Nonetheless Kings' timing was good. They focused on the West African trade just as produce prices began to rise during the 1830s and the firm correspondingly flourished. Indeed by the time Langdon sailed on their ships in the 1880s – just at the moment that William King finally retired from the business and handed it on to his son, Mervyn (1844–1934) – it was one of the ten biggest African firms in Britain. It was to survive as an independent business until it was taken over by William Lever in 1918.³⁸

Langdon's experiences reveal much that lay behind Kings' long-term success. Clearly they knew the Ivory Coast market well. Here their choice of captain for their voyages would have been critical, for the African trade was a highly specialized trade, requiring detailed knowledge of a series of different markets both along the coast and in Britain, and one where, as Langdon shows, that detailed knowledge was jealously guarded by participants.³⁹ Repeatedly, Langdon notes, efforts were made to ensure competing traders (even from within the same firm) did not have access to the market information that was critical for success. Much indeed rode on the skill and knowledge of the individual ship's master and/or supercargo in choosing where to trade and who to give credit to. Striking in Langdon's account is the fact that Kings clearly trained younger captains in the details of the trade. Further, their willingness – unlike the other Bristol firms – to take on the Liverpool giants in the Niger Delta and its environs can be seen in Langdon's voyage to the Cameroons. In 1879 indeed they began trading in Old Calabar, one of the major entrepôts for the African trade in this region and a Liverpool centre for many decades. Moreover their willingness to employ steam in West Africa – as seen in the steam vessel that towed the *Edmund Richardson* out of the Cameroons estuary – and

³⁷ Indeed these ships were not markedly larger than Bristol ships used in the African trade in the 1790s; Morgan, *Bristol and Atlantic Trade*, p. 44; M. Lynn, 'From sail to steam: the impact of the steamship services on the British palm oil trade with West Africa, 1850–90', *Journal of African History*, 30, (1989), pp. 227–245.

³⁸ Pedler, *Lion and Unicorn*, pp. 8–26, 151–156.

³⁹ See below, p. 205.

their willingness to enter the relatively new Hamburg and Rotterdam trades, is clear evidence of the enterprise and innovation that characterized this firm up to World War I.

Langdon's narrative is of less value in a fourth area of interest, namely in the picture it gives of the West Africa he visited. In one sense at least, this might be seen as understandable; Langdon remained a seaman, whose interests remained the ship and its life and whose attitudes reflected the society he came from. Nonetheless, although he did spend time on land in West Africa, there is little here on the people of the Ivory Coast that Langdon spent so many months sailing along. Such information that he does give on the region is characterized by crude stereotyping.

The area of the Ivory Coast that Langdon visited was one of considerable complexity in terms of its political organization.⁴⁰ The western part of the coast, between modern Liberia and the Bandama river and Grand-Lahou, was an area of immense political fragmentation inhabited by Kru-speaking clans and with only limited resources for external trade. This was an area of small-scale, so-called 'stateless societies', where political authority remained diffused and where no centralized, large-scale states existed – though clearly Sassandra was of significance in its own right as a trading entrepôt.⁴¹ To the east of the Bandama river was a region of considerable economic importance, linked to the Akan speakers of the Gold Coast and an area that had attracted European traders for centuries.⁴² The Avikam brokers of Grand-Lahou had sold slaves, cloth, gold, and ivory to European traders and had established a major trading system, linked via the Bandama to interior producers like the Baule and others.⁴³ Bosman, writing of the early eighteenth century, stressed the commercial acumen of the traders in this area, a theme taken up by Adams a century later.⁴⁴ The closing of the Bandama and the move in trade routes to

⁴⁰ There is little detailed work in English available on the history of this area. For a general introduction see Y. Person, 'The Atlantic coast and the southern savannas, 1800–80', in J.F.A. Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds), *History of West Africa*, II (2nd edn, London, 1987), pp. 257–262; Y. Person, 'Western Africa, 1870–1886', in R. Oliver and G.N. Sanderson (eds), *Cambridge History of Africa*, VI (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 227–228.

⁴¹ G.E. Brooks, *The Kru Mariner in the Nineteenth Century* (Newark, DL, 1972); C. Behrens, *Les Kroumen de la Côte occidentale d'Afrique* (Bordeaux, 1974); R.W. Davis, *Ethnohistorical Studies on the Kru Coast* (Newark, DL, 1976), pp. 5–9; E. Tonkin, 'Creating Kroomen: ethnic diversity, economic specialism and changing demand', in J.C. Stone (ed.), *Africa and the Sea* (Aberdeen, 1985), pp. 27–47; J. Martin, 'Krumen "down the coast": Liberian migrants on the West African coast in the 19th and early 20th centuries', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 18 (1985), pp. 401–423.

⁴² T.C. Weiskel, *French Colonial Rule and the Baule Peoples* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 5–32.

⁴³ Person, 'Atlantic coast and southern savannas', pp. 262–265.

⁴⁴ W. Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (1705, repr. 1967), p. 487; J. Adams, *Remarks on the Country Extending from Cape Palmas* (London, 1823, repr. 1966), p. 3.

the east due to changes among interior producers during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, saw the relative decline of Grand-Lahou and the shift of trading power towards the Alladian brokers of Jacquville. By the 1880s indeed, a French agent reported that Grand-Lahou was in serious decay compared to its former trading prosperity and that Half Jack and Grand Jack were now the major trading centres of this region.⁴⁵ Certainly the pattern of Langdon's two voyages to the Ivory Coast reflected these shifts in economic power towards the Alladian brokers; in each voyage, Half Jack, which Langdon notes was the largest trading town on the coast, was the final destination visited before the ship returned home. Yet, regrettably, his narrative tells the reader little of this region, beyond details of which were the major entrepôts, and predictable comments concerning conflicts between various ports such as Sassandra and Grand Drewin.

Langdon's narrative gives no more detail on the Cameroons, though admittedly Langdon was only in the river for a relatively short period. This was an area where, by the 1850s, palm oil and kernels had largely replaced the earlier trade in slaves and ivory.⁴⁶ The two main lineages of the Cameroons estuary, whose leaders were recognized as 'Kings' by Europeans – Bell and Akwa – were now facing considerable political problems, generated partly by the new trade and more particularly by the rise to prominence of Deido, the third of the three main towns of the estuary. Only following the execution of the leader of Deido in 1876 did a rough equilibrium come to be re-established and the stability necessary for trade to flourish return.⁴⁷ None of this appears in Langdon's memoirs and it is striking that no reference is made to him actually landing in the Cameroons.

The limitations of Langdon's views of West Africa would have been shaped by the society he came from. Further, as a seaman, his activities would have been tightly controlled by his captain, making it unlikely that Langdon could have undertaken the sort of examination of local customs that other visitors to West Africa were able to. Nonetheless, the lack of information on African societies in Langdon's account is striking, given that a good proportion of the crewmen he shared his shipboard work with were Kru from the Ivory Coast. They are constantly in the background of Langdon's narrative. Such Kru were regularly employed on British ships both for coasting and for the river trade for, as seen in Langdon's narrative, traders preferred to sail out

⁴⁵ Weiskel, *Baule Peoples*, pp. 30–32.

⁴⁶ M. Johnson, 'By ship or camel: the struggle for the Cameroons ivory trade in the nineteenth century', *Journal of African History*, 19 (1978), pp. 523–578; R.A. Austen and J. Derrick, *Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers: the Duala and their Hinterland, c1600–c1960* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 55–57.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92.

to the coast with only sufficient men to handle the ship at sea and then recruit Kru labour to undertake the physical work of loading and storing produce.⁴⁸ On occasion, as Langdon notes, British crew would be returned home by other ships belonging to the firm. The Kru had a long history of this employment on board British ships; in addition to their maritime skills and extensive seafaring experience, they were less likely to fall ill than British sailors and most importantly, were significantly cheaper, being paid substantially less in wages.⁴⁹ Yet they remain peripheral figures to Langdon's story, the butts of jokes and figures of fun but little more. 'Koffee' is ridiculed for his pretensions, his English is caricatured (as in considering 'the grand debil'), while Langdon's creation of a kite is used to poke fun at Kru beliefs in 'witchcraft'. Kru are portrayed as prone to violence, and easily seduced with poor pay and an unseaworthy boat.

Indeed Langdon's views of the Africans he met on the coast are overtly and heavily racist. The term 'nigger' is used repeatedly to describe Africans and the 'talented' Africans he describes on one occasion are explained in terms of their European 'crossings'. Langdon loses no chance to portray those he meets in patronizing and stereotypical terms. His accidental stumble over an African woman on board is termed 'the horror', while on his first voyage he relishes the way he fools the African crewmen in his pretence of swallowing a knife, using this to highlight their supposed childishness.⁵⁰ The Africans portrayed in Langdon's narrative are either simple, easily-fooled 'children', prey to superstition and myth, or are seen as overly violent, threatening, and prone to cannibalism. The Cameroons is dismissed as in thrall to the 'witchcraft business'. Alternatively he reflects contemporary views on alleged African sexual appetites with his comments on King William's 700 wives. Similarly the contempt he expresses for the West Indian missionary – a typical 'trouserred black' as they came to be stereotyped – he encountered at the Cameroons is considerable, with slighting references to his size, the number of his children, and his cupidity in 'cadging' goods from the ship. Undoubtedly, Langdon was not unusual among British sailors of his time in holding these views of Africans, and the image he portrays is quite clearly that which he brought with him from Bristol. What is difficult to establish however, is how far the

⁴⁸ G.E. Brooks, *Yankee Traders, Old Coasters and African Middlemen* (Boston, MA, 1970), pp. 224–225. Kru employment on British ships was clearly long established, according to G.A. Robertson, *Notes on Africa* (London, 1819), p. 43.

⁴⁹ Smith, writing in the 1850s, gives Kru wages on ship as 5s per month; *Trade and Travels*, p. 103; D. Frost, 'Racism, work and unemployment: West African seamen in Liverpool, 1880s–1960s', in *idem* (ed.), *Ethnic Labour and British Imperial Trade: A History of Ethnic Seafarers in the UK* (London, 1995), pp. 22–33.

⁵⁰ See below, p. 206.

racism of the narrative was shaped by the 1930s Langdon was writing in, rather than the 1880s he was writing of.⁵¹

Despite this limitation in Langdon's memoirs – serious though it is in restricting the picture he drew of West Africa – his account remains of value. In its description of shipboard life, of the organization of the West African trade and of the activities of R. & W. King, Langdon's narrative gives a viewpoint not revealed in any other account from this period and historians' understanding of the West African trade is the fuller for it. Moreover, there is a further dimension of Langdon's memoirs that pervades the entire narrative and that is of critical importance. Permeating 'Three voyages' is the fact that this was a trade that in the 1880s was undergoing considerable changes.

These changes were partly economic and partly political in origin. A ubiquitous motif in Langdon's narrative is the appearance of the mail steamer along the coast. On the first voyage the mail steamer carrying the King of Cape Lahou is encountered, another steamer is used to carry Captain Swan's note to Cape Coast, later still SS *Roman* is met; on the third voyage a doctor on the steamer is contacted and a sick crewman is despatched home on board. The steamship arrived in the West African trade in 1852, with the development of a steamship service from London (operating from Liverpool from 1856).⁵² A government mail contract was taken up by the African Steam Ship Co. in that year, and shared with the British & African Steam Navigation Co. from 1869. In time a German line, Woermann's, operating from Hamburg, entered the west coast commerce and developed a significant German trade, particularly from the Cameroons. The mail steamers had an immense impact on the African trade, not only by shortening voyage times but also by allowing traders to operate at a wide variety of ports along the coast. Further, the steamers allowed fresh staff to be despatched to the coast, new supplies to be forwarded to traders, and information about prices and markets to be updated readily. The arrival of steam thus led to increasing specialization of function between trader and shipper, and allowed traders to reduce costs by abandoning the purchase or chartering of ships and despatching their produce as freight. Over the years, the advantages of steam drove out sail and by the early 1880s, when Langdon went to sea, only some 10 per cent of palm products were being shipped from West Africa to Britain by the old methods.⁵³

⁵¹ A useful introductory survey of British ideas about race is P.B. Rich, *Race and Empire in British Politics* (Cambridge, 1986); M. Dresser, *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port* (London, 2001) considers Bristolians' attitudes to Africans and to the slave trade. See especially pp. 53–95.

⁵² P.N. Davies, *The Trade Makers: Elder Dempster in West Africa, 1852–1972* (London, 1973).

⁵³ Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change*, p. 110.

In particular, the steamship services had a major impact on the river trade. Some of these changes can be seen in Langdon's second voyage. By obviating the need for traders to own their own ships and employ their own masters or supercargoes to undertake their trade, the steamer service encouraged the use of resident agents, based for a season or more in West Africa, and the use of hulks as store ships to bulk produce while waiting for the steamship to arrive. Langdon encountered one in the Cameroons, the *Lord Raglan* of Bristol, with its white clerks 'ghastly white, bloodless, dressed in immaculate white, walking corpses [...] no manual work (above it)'.⁵⁴ For all Langdon's sarcasm these white clerks were to be the future of the trade and the system represented by the *Edmund Richardson* and its crew would soon be obsolete.

Moreover, these new trading techniques, by allowing in small-scale traders who had hitherto been blocked by the high capital cost of purchasing their own ship but who could now survive on much lower profit margins, sharply increased competition in the trade and drove down prices, a problem that came to be seen acutely in these years. Langdon's account does indeed reflect the fact that he was writing of a time of considerable difficulty for the West African trade as prices fell, at least partly because of the changes generated by the steamships. Indeed Langdon picked the right moment to leave the trade – 1884 – for African produce prices were soon to slump to the lowest level of the century. With hindsight, the early 1880s marked a brief rally in a longer-term fall in prices that had begun in the early 1860s; by 1887 palm oil prices had fallen to £19 a ton, the lowest for several decades.⁵⁵ As Langdon realized, this had broader implications for the African trade and its organization; 'the barter trade was near its ebb' he noted of this period.⁵⁶

Langdon's brief career on board Kings' ships unquestionably occurred at a moment of considerable transition in the African trade. The commerce was about to be transformed. Not only did the depression of the late 1880s drive many firms out of business – though not, it should be noted, Kings – those that survived were amalgamated into increasingly fewer hands; Kings merged their Old Calabar business into the African Association in 1889.⁵⁷ Further, the impact of the steamship lines was to make the techniques and practices outlined by Langdon largely redundant. 'Coasting' such as Langdon experienced it, no longer made economic sense in the steamship era; indeed the practice of traders owning their own ships, as Kings did, represented

⁵⁴ See below, p. 237.

⁵⁵ Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change*, p. 111.

⁵⁶ J.C. Langdon, 'Barter trade from Bristol ships, west coast of Africa, fifty years ago', I, typescript in Bristol City Library.

⁵⁷ Pedler, *Lion and Unicorn*, p. 139.

an increasingly outmoded form of commercial organization in a trade that was moving to specialization of function between shipper and trader, resident agents, and land-based factories. The 10 per cent of the palm oil trade that had been carried in sailing ships in 1880 had fallen to around 1 per cent a decade later.⁵⁸ Kings themselves, who held out longer than most, turned to using the steamship services during the 1880s, and abandoned the type of trade that had characterized the African commerce for so long and which is described in ‘Three voyages’. The trade system that Langdon had been a participant in disappeared very quickly indeed after his final voyage in 1884.

Equally striking in Langdon’s narrative are signs of the political changes that were occurring in West Africa, as represented by an increased external presence. One element of this was the missionary. Missions had been present on various parts of the coast since the start of the century; missionary activity quickly followed the establishment of Freetown as a base for freed slaves in 1787.⁵⁹ The establishment by the American Colonization Society of the settlement of Liberia in the early 1820s – and in 1834 at Cape Palmas by the Maryland equivalent – had also been followed by considerable missionary endeavour in the area.⁶⁰ In the 1840s a further wave of missions had arrived in West Africa; not least among these had been the Baptist Mission Society that, prompted by West Indian churches and staffed partly by West Indian missionaries, had established itself in the Cameroons in 1841.⁶¹ Langdon encountered several representatives of these missions during his voyages, such as the American missionary encountered at Cape Palmas and the West Indian at the Cameroons, though, like many involved in the trade, he reveals considerable cynicism concerning them, castigating their behaviour particularly towards the men below decks.

Whatever Langdon’s views might have been, missions saw their function as spiritual rather than temporal. A more politically charged presence on the coast was the growing British activity in the area that is referred to repeatedly by Langdon. Although both the Ivory Coast and the Cameroons were still independent of foreign rule when Langdon visited them in the early 1880s, the British presence was growing steadily. By the 1880s the problems generated by the trust system and by low prices were increasingly involving the British authorities in the west coast trade. Striking in Langdon’s narrative are the numerous references

⁵⁸ Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change*, p. 110.

⁵⁹ A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450–1950* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 177–188, 242–247.

⁶⁰ M.B. Abasiattai, ‘Sierra Leone and Liberia in the nineteenth century’, in Ajayi and Crowder, *History of West Africa*, II, pp. 301–339.

⁶¹ H.H. Johnson, *George Grenfell and the Congo*, 2 vols (London, 1908), I, pp. 19–29; J. van Slageren, *Les Origines de l’Eglise Evangélique du Cameroun* (Yaoundé, 1972), pp. 11–37.

to British officials, particularly to the Consul and to the Governor of the Gold Coast at Cape Coast Castle. Equally important is Langdon's reference to the Navy, as seen in the arrival of HMS *Electro* on his third voyage; since the ending of the French wars in 1815, a Royal Navy anti-slavery squadron had been based along the coast, though its function had largely changed by this period and the numbers of ships involved had been reduced.⁶² British consuls had been appointed along various parts of the coast – though not the Ivory Coast – since 1849, while British traders had been established on the Gold Coast for centuries; in 1874 the Gold Coast was annexed to the Crown.⁶³

Although the German presence in West Africa, at least before 1884, was largely limited to shipping and commercial interests, particularly in the Cameroons, French activity was more extensive. The French were present, as they had been for some time, in the colony of Senegal. Minor French garrisons, following Bouët-Willaumez's voyages in this area, had been established on parts of the Ivory Coast in 1843 – though a short-lived French fort had been opened earlier at Assini in 1701 and a factory at Grand-Lahou in 1787 – and during the 1860s and 1870s sporadic negotiations had occurred between the British and French authorities to exchange these for the British territory of the Gambia, but little came of these proposals and the French garrisons were eventually withdrawn during the 1870s.⁶⁴ Yet, as Langdon shows, by the 1880s French traders were once again active on the Ivory Coast and his third voyage ends with reference to growing French ambitions in the region.

This external presence which is such a feature of Langdon's narrative, reflects the fact that the West Africa he visited in the 1880s was undergoing considerable political change, and particularly on the Ivory Coast. Although Bristol traders were the main maritime traders to be found on this coast throughout the nineteenth century, it was the French not the British authorities that moved to assert their presence on the Ivory Coast in the 1880s, ignoring not least in this process long-standing Liberian claims to the western end of the littoral. In 1886, two years after Langdon's last voyage, the French occupation of the Ivory Coast began, and three years later was recognized by the Anglo-French agreement of August 1889. By 1890 Grand-Lahou was occupied by France and by 1891 the whole of the eastern end of the coast lay in

⁶² C. Lloyd, *The Navy and the Slave Trade* (London, 1949).

⁶³ E. Reynolds, 'The Gold Coast and Asante', in Ajayi and Crowder, *History of West Africa*, II, pp. 215–249.

⁶⁴ P. Atger, *La France en Côte d'Ivoire de 1843 à 1893* (Dakar, 1962); J.D. Hargreaves, *Prelude to the Partition of West Africa* (London, 1963), pp. 125–129, 145–195. Bouët's voyages are described in E. Bouët-Willaumez, *Description Nautique des Côtes de l'Afrique Occidentale* (Paris, 1849).

French hands; in 1893 a formal declaration of a colony was made.⁶⁵ Bristol traders experienced a similar fate in the Cameroons, where a growing German trading presence made it an easy target once Germany's bid for colonies in Africa began; in July 1884, to the considerable chagrin of Bristol traders, the German flag was raised over the estuary.⁶⁶

Not only was the system of trading represented in 'Three voyages' coming to an end, but so too was the West Africa to which Langdon travelled between 1881–1884. In November 1884, just four days before Langdon returned to Bristol from his final voyage, representatives of the European powers and America met in Berlin to discuss the political future of West Africa.⁶⁷ In July of that year, the Germans had moved into the Cameroons; in 1886 the French began their expansion on the Ivory Coast. As far as trading interests were concerned, it was those of Bristol, in particular, who were to lose out from this expansion by Germany and France into areas that the city had traded with since the start of its slave trade in the sixteenth century. Significantly, the German and French moves were accompanied by numerous protests – ineffectual in the event – from the Bristol Chamber of Commerce.⁶⁸ In more ways than a few, the picture drawn by Langdon of Bristol trade on the Ivory Coast and Cameroons in the 1880s is one that represents the end of an era.

⁶⁵ J.D. Hargreaves, *West Africa Partitioned*, I, *The Loaded Pause, 1885–89* (London, 1974), pp. 242–246; II, *The Elephants and the Grass* (London, 1985), pp. 51–60.

⁶⁶ Hargreaves, *Prelude*, pp. 316–338; Austen and Derrick, *Middlemen*, pp. 91–92.

⁶⁷ S.E. Crowe, *The Berlin West African Conference, 1884–1885* (London, 1942); S. Förster, W.J. Mommsen, and R. Robinson, *Bismarck, Europe and Africa: the Berlin Africa Conference 1884–85 and the Onset of Partition* (Oxford, 1988).

⁶⁸ Bristol Chamber of Commerce Annual Report, 1884, pp. 97–98; 1885, pp. 9–10; 1890, pp. 14, 90–92; Minutes of Bristol Chamber of Commerce, vol. 8, 27 November 1889, 22 January 1890; R. & W. King to Granville, 23 December 1884, FO 403/48, R. & W. King to Salisbury, 18 January 1892, FO 854/2240.

FIRST VOYAGE

1 March 1881 to 10 September 1882

'Hurrah! Hurrah! I've a ship at last.' Such was my inward exclamation, when the Master of the barque *Ceara*¹ of Bristol told me that I was to become ship's boy on a trading voyage to the West Coast of Africa. This occurred towards the end of February, 1881, one of the coldest winters of the 19th century. Could it be true, after months and months of sea lust, and, during my spare time walking along the quays, looking longingly and lovingly at the smart windjammers, which were to be seen in our harbour at that period. My time had not been wasted, however, for whenever a ship was laid up, and the watchman absent, I was climbing the rigging and yards, and well remember the glow of pride, which was occasioned by my first venture 'over the top' on the old barque *Look Out*. Hitherto, the lubber-hole² had been freely used for that purpose, being the easier way.

Was it a dream?

I was to sail in a week, and until then I had to work on the ship for which I was to receive fifteen shillings: during the voyage my wages were to be one pound per month.³ Visions of exalted wealth rose before me, and I there and then sported ten-pence half-penny for a cheese-cutter cap with a gilt cord.

Kind folk advised me not to go: they said it was a dog's life; and my employer offered me an increase in wages. But no, I was a free lance. My mother had passed away some three years ago, and there was no one to say to me thou shall, or thou shalt not. Besides, had I not for a year fended for myself on a very small wage, and known what it was to tighten my belt towards the end of the week? Even if my new venture was to be a dog's life, it could not be worse than the one I had been living: indeed, I anticipated that it would be better. Moreover, I fully realised, even then, that for me it was either get on, or get off, and here was the means to an end.

¹ 293 tons, R. & W. King, owners, *Bristol Presentments*, 14 September 1882.

² The lubber-holes were holes which afforded easier access for the inexperienced sailor while climbing a mast than using the ratlines.

³ Langdon may have been receiving the going rate for an apprentice seaman; however, his wages were low compared to ordinary seamen in the African trade; M. Lynn, 'The profitability of the early nineteenth century palm oil trade', *African Economic History*, 20 (1992), pp. 77-97.

I spent that week stowing away cabin stores, until all the lockers, store-rooms and ‘lazaretto’⁴ were filled to overflowing. My word! What cart-loads of tinned provisions, fruit, vegetables, rice, flour, wines, and ‘bass’s’,⁵ a huge medicine chest, with twenty-eight pounds of Epsom salts, etc.

At last signing-on day came, and even now I can hear the shipping master (Attwood) reading the ship’s articles, with Thompson and Learway, the Board of Trade ‘runners’, standing by.⁶ The articles were duly signed. Outside the pimps and parasites were waiting to fleece the sailormen of their advance notes. ‘Hi, lad, I’ll cash your advance note; come and have a drink.’ It did not come off with me, oh no; for although young in years I had some knowledge of boarding-house runners and shanghai tricks. My note was cashed by a respectable tradesman.

Eventually, the great day arrived. ‘Sailing day March 1st. Join your ship at Bathurst Basin, 6 a.m. Attwood.’ Well do I remember that early morn, as [...] I [...] trudged the dear old streets of Bristol. The snow from the recent great snow-storm was piled high in the Haymarket.

On board at last. Good-bye was said. ‘Bon voyage’ from the shore; and away we went.

What confusion! The crew were drunk, but it did not matter, for there were runners on board to handle the gun-powder, which was to be taken in at Kingroad, where the ship swung to the tide.⁷ ‘Let go!’ came from the pilot. What a clatter and vibration are caused by the letting go of the anchor; it was a terrific din to a green-horn.

‘Fires out!’

A lighter hauled alongside and fifty tons of powder were stowed in the magazine aft. Bum-boats brought beer from Pill for the crew.⁸ The skipper was absent, and the mate in charge. Both this latter and the second mate made a raid on the bass in the cabin, and, having told me to get a corkscrew, which I could not find, they gave me my first lesson in cutting off the neck of a bottle with a knife, and pouring out the liquid without making a froth.

⁴ The lazaretto was the space between decks used as a store room or quarantine bay.

⁵ Presumably Bass ale.

⁶ The Board of Trade was responsible for regulating the merchant marine. Its responsibilities included administering the Merchant Shipping Acts, examining the seaworthiness of ships, checking officers’ certificates and the supervision of the engagement, payment and discharge of seamen. Langdon is using ‘runner’ in the sense of agent.

⁷ Given the dangers associated with loading gunpowder in port, it was the practice for this to be loaded at sea. Kingroad referred to the stretch of water between Portishead and the mouth of the Avon, where this could be undertaken safely.

⁸ Bum boats were responsible for carrying provisions to vessels. The village of Pill lies on the left bank of the Avon near the mouth of the river.

The mate 'had the wind up'.

The second mate had a great thirst – almost 'dead-o', but still wanted more – more, until at last he was full and had to be carried to his bunk, which was over mine. Besides, he had done much hard drinking ashore. The rats were now coming on. It may be said, what did I know of these things? I got to know much from observation, and without any revelation my mind was then and is now fixed to keep to the tea-pot.

It was evening, at early tide, the barque *Cambria*,⁹ bound for Cameroons, West Africa, and in charge of Captain Williams, passed us at Kingroad. One of our crew remarked 'There goes another coffin-ship, she's loaded right to the plimsoll mark.¹⁰ Salt in bulk.¹¹ Her bottom will drop out. When I was in her on such and such a voyage, we spent three out of every four hours at the pumps. Nobody would take her except young Williams, and he only to get a first command. Somebody is going to get the insurance.' That night it blew great guns – the sunset and sailormen were right. The *Cambria* was never again heard of, and it was supposed that she had foundered near Lundy.¹²

The second evening. The skipper returned with the pilot, ready to sail early the next morning. At the last moment, a Mr Smith, the second mate on the barque *Mervyn*,¹³ was to sail with us as a passenger. We already had a negro boy as passenger, and there were only three bunks for five sleepers. Something had to be fixed up. The skipper had a look round and there was a fuss made about the bass and the state of the second mate, who was very ill, and would not be fit for duty for some length of time. It was blowing too hard to have him sent ashore. The mate too wished to leave, but on account of the weather he had to carry on. It was arranged that Mr Smith was to act as second mate, and have my bunk. I was to be in his watch and sleep on a locker, and the negro boy was to sleep on the other. This, however, did not answer, for our second mate was kicking up a terrific shindy in his delirium, and Smith could not sleep, so he shared the first mate's shake-down.

The next morning we manned the windlass, and there was a feeble attempt at a shanty, but singing was impossible, the fumes of the drink had not worn off. The topsails were shaken out, and we sailed

⁹ 231 tons.

¹⁰ This refers to the loading line marked on ships, established by the Act of 1876 following the campaign led by Samuel Plimsoll.

¹¹ Bulk salt was a staple of the African trade in the nineteenth century and much in demand on the coast for trading inland in order to purchase palm oil and other produce; A.J.H. Latham, 'Palm oil exports from Calabar, 1812–1887, with a note on the formation of oil prices to 1914', in G. Liesegang, H. Pasch, and A. Jones (eds), *Figuring African Trade* (Berlin 1986), pp. 265–296

¹² i.e. Lundy island in the Bristol channel.

¹³ 288 tons, R. & W. King, owners. Presumably named after Mervyn King (1844–1934), son of William King.

before a north-easterly gale. How I itched to be with the men who were manning the yards, but I was feeling too queer. ‘Well, Jerry (my ship’s name), how do you feel?’ ‘Alright, sir.’ But I didn’t. For some time I had tried to hide the fact that I was feeling queer, but no, I had to go to the lee rail, and up it came. I here received my first baptism in salt water, for we shipped a lee roller, which soaked me up to the neck.

We were then off Rat Island (Lundy), and had been sailing for seven hours. I heard the skipper say, with a Yankee twang, ‘Waal, Mr Pilot, I guess as your boat is not here to pick you up, I shall have to take you to sea, and land you at Madeira.’ ‘Waal, Mr Captain’, the pilot replied, ‘if the boat was here, I guess I could not board her in such a running sea. I’m going below, your course is so and so’.

I lay on my locker in my wet clothes, and to add to my discomfort, a flashlamp filled with turpentine had got adrift from its hook, and crashed down upon my head, saturating my pillow and clothes. What a night! I heard the mate calling ‘Pilot, will you come on deck, there are lights all around, and land to the south?’ As far as I was concerned, I did not care if she went ashore. At last morning came round and the skipper said, ‘Jerry, you’re in a bad way, go for’ard, get a bunk and stay there until you are better.’ I found a bunk in the fore peak of the fo’c’sle, dark and smelly; just the place into which a cat would crawl to die, away from the vulgar gaze of everybody. It was heaven to me, away from the grinning face of the negro boy. I was now with the so-called common sailormen. Thank God this was not true, although, poor devils, most of their misfortunes were caused by the pimps and parasites on shore. ‘Hi, lad, have a dish of tea and a bite.’ That tea! How delicious! No milk in it, except the milk of human kindness. Four nationalities were represented in that crowd, and with only one exception they were real white men.

We were then three days out, and I felt better, especially after taking some food, which I had been without for thirty-six hours. During the late afternoon watch I heard a cry of ‘Sail O’, and went up on deck for a peep. I was spotted by the skipper, who called out, ‘Jerry, come aft’, and I received my first lesson in flag-wagging. The sail turned out to be the barquetine *Queen of the South*, bound for Bristol. ‘Will you take a Bristol pilot?’ ‘Rather!’ Both the ships heaved to. Getting out the gig took some time because it was inboard and filled with lumber, and the sea being very choppy, great care had to be taken in dropping her at the right moment. However, it was managed at last, and, with the mate in command, the gig, now on the crest of a wave, now in the trough, sped towards the *Queen of the South*. The return was safely accomplished without a smash. It appeared to me at the time that the boat was thought to be of more value than the men’s lives. ‘Square the

yards!' and away we sailed southward. The skipper was elated at having saved the pilot's fare home from Madeira.

I was now getting my sea legs, was sent back to duty in the cabin, and was told to share a watch at night with the acting second mate. I got very little sleep, but I didn't mind. I was not allowed to mix with the scum for'ard, and on the whole I was happy. The black boy, 'Koffee', whose native name commenced with a big B, was bumptious. 'He was the son of a King.' We scrapped, and I came off second best, for the simple reason that I kept the rules of fair play, and he didn't. Later on we scrapped again, and that time I used his own tricks. Just as I was about to give him 'fum-fum' (native word), I was pulled off. Of course, it would not do for 'Koffee' to return home with marks on his beautiful visage. Mine did not matter. After this he was more respectful, and we were chums.

In future I shall indicate the officers and some of the crew by their nicknames, as this will greatly facilitate what I have to say with regard to their characteristics. Mine, as already stated, was Jerry.

The skipper was known as 'Pincher', and he was; just your pound and pint in rations; pompous.¹⁴ When dealing with any transgressors he always said the same thing, 'There was a time when I could have flogged you for that', or for a more serious offence, 'I have power to shoot you for that'. It was said that on a former voyage a real old devil dare sea-dog replied, 'Shoot, Captain, shoot, but, by —— if you miss, you will never shoot again.' Of work-up Joe (punishment) he had many, the worst being that of polishing the copper on the ship's side down to the water edge, slung in a bowline. We were in shark-infested waters!

Is my pen able to describe 'Mister Mate'? A gentleman. During that long voyage I never knew him to bully anyone, not even the boy. Here I must fit in one of the many bits of philosophy heard in the fo'c'sle. This one was between the ship's boy and a dog. 'Rover, do you know that the Captain is down on the Mate, that the Mate is down on the Second Mate, the Second Mate on the men, the men on the boy, and, Rover, I'm down on you.' He then commenced to pommel the dog. The reason why 'Pincher' could not get on with 'Mister Mate' was because the men always spoke of him as 'Mister', and were always ready at his commands — out of respect, not fear. Cabin boys see and hear things while waiting at table. 'Mister Mate's' table manners were above reproach. One could easily see that he was trying to heal the breach, but it was impossible, he was a new hand to the coast, and what was happening was all in the usual programme, of which more anon. The yarns 'Mister Mate' told at table would fill a book. Just one briefly: his father was a captain in the Chinese trade, piracy was rife,

¹⁴ Captain Swan.

and his mother, who sailed with him, had on several occasions been put in a barrel, given a revolver and told to shoot herself if the ship was overpowered.

The Second Mate, ‘Old Shocker’, was a Scotchman, and had always been in the West Coast trade: he was morose. When speaking to ‘Pincher’, he would take off his glengary cap and shoot his quid of tobacco into it. Nobody took any notice of him.

Then there was ‘For’ard Bung’, the cooper,¹⁵ and ‘Moses’, the cook, a nib¹⁶ when drunk and could not boil water without burning it.

Next, a well-educated Swede, an able seaman, sailing in English ships to gain experience. He had been away from home six years and was going back after this trip. He always did any cubic measurement which wanted doing. A splendid fellow, from whom I learnt much.

Then there was a Norwegian, a fine type of man, but he was not with me long; he was transferred to a homebounder, with two others. This was done to save expense, for on the Coast ‘Kroo Boy’ labour is very cheap.¹⁷

‘Old Joe’, dear Old Joe (‘I owe thee much’) had sailed the Coast many years, had a beard almost white and a head as smooth as a billiard ball. He was very muscular and a good all-round hand, especially expert in stowing the oil casks. He had been with ‘Pincher’ a number of voyages, was scrupulously clean and his clothes were always neatly mended. From ‘Old Joe’ I learnt splicing, knots and heaps and heaps of things useful to know on a ship; and above all he gave me sound advice. ‘If, lad, I had started like you, things would have been different; now its Davy Jones’ Locker or the workhouse. Beer and women have been my ruin: it’s the same with most sailormen.’ He told me several sordid yarns of Bristol Boarding Houses, naming several. ‘There’s that one on the quay, kept by old mother R——’, he said, ‘who used to give the gals on the street so much a week to live

¹⁵ As casks were needed to store palm oil, it was the practice to convey these to West Africa in shooks of staves in order to leave space for the outward cargo. The casks were then put together by the ship’s cooper when the ship had arrived on the coast.

¹⁶ A slang term for a gentleman, meaning unclear in this context.

¹⁷ It was usual for British ships involved in the African trade to collect crew from the Kru region of modern Liberia and Ivory Coast to undertake the hard labour on board ship, and particularly the loading of palm oil, once West Africa had been reached. The Kru had great experience in the maritime trade and had the further advantage of being cheaper than labour from Britain; G.E. Brooks, *The Kru Mariner in the 19th Century* (Newark, DL, 1972); J. Martin, ‘Krumen “down the coast”: Liberian migrants on the West African coast in the 19th and early 20th centuries’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 18 (1985), pp. 401–423; E. Tonkin, ‘Creating Kroomen: ethnic diversity, economic specialism and changing demand’, in J.C. Stone (ed), *Africa and the Sea* (Aberdeen, 1985), pp. 27–47; D. Frost, *Work and Community Among West African Migrant Workers since the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool, 1999).

with us men, we were soon skinned and then chucked on an outward-bounder, drunk'.

Lastly, 'Cockney', an ordinary seaman, who served on the training ship *Formidable*, was far from being wholesome in either language or ways. He was slovenly, dirty; and because of this he had a rough time. He thought the men were down upon him. Rot! They would have treated him alright if he had acted decently.

One morning, when I turned in at 4 am, after I had been keeping mid-watch, I found 'Old Shocker' in a bad way, tossing in his bunk, and murmuring 'They've got me; let go, there's thousands of 'em'. I dropped off to sleep, but later awoke and saw him getting out of his bunk, dressed only in his vest. He went into the fore-cabin, then on to the main deck, up the companion ladder to the poop-deck. (The ship's cabin was on deck, with a low bucket rail, alley-ways on each side.) The ship well heeled over, and was rolling. The helmsman was the only person who had seen what was happening, and, not daring to leave the wheel, shouts out 'Captain, come on deck, quick'. 'Old Shocker' takes a spring, but I already had hold of his vest, and we rolled on to the deck together. 'Pincher' arrived and sat on him. 'Mister Mate, why in the — don't you look after the ship? Another moment and they would have been overboard'. (This was the only time I ever heard 'Pincher' hold forth.) 'Sorry, sir', said 'Mr Mate', 'I was working for'ard'. 'Get a canvas jacket', said 'Pincher', 'and put him into it'. This had to be done for the poor fellow was raving. 'Pincher' was not unkind in this, indeed he had, and was doing, all he could for poor 'Old Shocker'. The same evening he said, 'Mr Mate, I'm going to give the second mate opium. It's kill or cure. You measure it out and sign the log'. 'Shocker' was given some weak brandy. 'Good', said 'Pincher', 'I'll save him yet'. And he did.

We now sailed into lovely weather. Every hour was an experience. 'Pincher' showed me how to make a reef-knot. I made some grannies and they were spotted. 'Jerry, what's this?' 'Reef-knots, Sir', I replied. 'They're not', retorted 'Pincher', 'if you made a grannie on a top sail it would jam, and somebody might lose his life. I shan't show you again. Make them properly, else you'll get no breakfast'. I made them properly.

I've done it. Hurrah! Been aloft. First day over the top, (not so easy as on the old *Look Out*), second day, the cross-trees, third, the royal yard.¹⁸ I was sitting on the yard and looking down on the white sails, bellied out. Wasn't it glorious! The lovely blue sea and sky. It was good to be alive. The truck¹⁹ was only five feet above me, a bare mast pole —

¹⁸ i.e. the topmost part of the mast.

¹⁹ The truck was a small block of wood through which the rigging was threaded.

no rigging. ‘Pincher’ was looking up. Could I do it? I must. I remembered my first lamp-post climb in Bristol. I stood on the yard. One, two, three, and I’m up. I put my arm over the truck and hung on for about a minute, and then slid back to the yard. My heart was going pit-a-pat. Finally, I returned to the deck and ‘Pincher’ said, ‘Jerry, you’ve been to the royal yard. In future that sail is yours. Whenever it has to be stowed, watch on deck or below, you’ve got to do it. Fetch my ruler.’ I thought I was going to ‘cop it’, but on handing him the ruler, he tied his pocket-handkerchief to it, saying, ‘This is the main royal’. He then showed me how a sail was furled. (Mr Mate, when my watch below, had ignored this order on many occasions.) A few days after a squall came on and the sail had to be taken in. ‘Up you go’, said ‘Pincher’, ‘and mind you don’t fall overboard’. It was hard work, but I did it.

On an outward-bound West Coast trader there is much work to be done in preparation for carrying on trade. Our winter sail had already been unbent and the summer suit bent (replaced). Many lengths of canvas hose had to be made to carry the oil from the starting tub²⁰ amidships to each end of the ship. Heavy planks had to be nailed over the main deck to save damage from the casks. The cooperage on the port-bow had also to be planked. ‘Bung’ had to make oaken pegs, cut up empty tins for patches, and get everything ready for cask-making. The fore-hatch was to be opened immediately the weather could be depended upon, and the Packs (casks packed in small compass) and hoops had to be got out.²¹ This, however, could not be until we had passed the Doldrums.

We saw a ship on the weather-bow without sails, and this being rather unusual we bore down. It turned out to be an American whaler, cutting in a whale. We could see the men cutting in. I could then watch the very thing which had so much delighted me to read about.

Up till then the weather had been most delightful, but, on nearing the Doldrums, it changed. What rain, lightning and thunder! It was terrific. I liked watching it nevertheless; it had always fascinated me. The sky was black with clouds, and at times very heavy squalls rose, and then a dead calm. The wind boxed the compass. While ‘Pincher’ was having supper, a water-spout was reported on the port-beam, and he rushed on deck at once; I, of course, following. ‘There are three, and another forming’, said he, ‘if they come too close we’ll put a shot into them’. I was expecting this, as I had read that anything passing through a water-spout would break it. (Moreover it was one of my

²⁰ The starting tub was the cask on deck into which purchases of palm oil would be poured.

²¹ i.e. packs of shooks.

duties to clean and oil once a week some guns and revolvers, with orders not to touch a certain one as it was loaded. I had surmised it was for this purpose.) I watched the spout forming. At a point in the dense black cloud an inverted peak was forming downwards, and underneath the water was in great commotion. A great mass of water ascended spiral-like and branched out like a vine. At last it burst, and the great mass of water fell. Everybody, except the helmsman, who had his south-wester well down, took shelter. There was no wind. Couldn't be. Breathing was affected. We felt as though we were in a glass case looking through greenish water. For a time we could not clear the decks of the tons of water. It was up to the hatches, and the ship was deep in the water, but we gradually rose, and then came heavy rain. Our fresh water tanks and barrels were filled with rain water, for the water had begun to be tasty, since it was stored in palm-oil casks. Everybody had a family wash. I washed 'Pincher's' shirts and vests. My own were a small affair, for my wardrobe was scanty, having been bought with my advance note and a few shillings I had saved. Thanks to 'Old Joe', it was kept well mended. 'Patch upon patch and patch over all.'

All, except 'Cockney' and 'Pincher', then had a nature's shower bath in the rain. It was warm; it was jolly. 'Cockney' did not like water, and 'Pincher' had a bath in his cabin every morning, regardless of water allowance.

In a week we were again in fine weather, with Old Sol showering down his burning rays. It was a lovely blue sea, with Portuguese men of war with sails set, and flying fish skimming over the surface. Yes, I know, chased by Beneto Albicore I had my first lesson in catching these fish. I had to go out on the jib-boon²² with 'Moses', and a fish-hook baited with white rag. Flip 'em on the surface to imitate a flying fish. Always hook 'em in the upper jaw. A bite! Haul up and mind the spines. Put your fingers, like this, up the gills, and bring them up through the mouth. 'He'll bite', I said. 'No, he won't, he can't breathe.' I then got an electric shock, and found myself handling a live ten-pounder, sprinkling blood. 'Take him aboard and bring out some rattling line. Don't mess up the sails with blood.' (It was a crime on ship to stain a sail, and when it did occur, one would hear 'There was a time when I could dock your wages for the damage done.' The elder men confirmed this.) To get back over the foot-ropes with a struggling fish in one hand and holding on with the other, was no easy job. But it had to be done, and it was. Thereafter I was a fisherman. Every after-watch below, and fish about, I was at it. Fine sport.

'Old Shocker' was convalescent, basking in the sun. The men were

²² Presumably jib-boom.

very kind to him and made him very comfy, for he had been very near death. He had had his hair cut and his beard trimmed, and looked more like a human being. He had become very grey.

Night after night I kept watch with the acting second mate. The men said he was a ‘Square-head, a Yaw-Yaw, a German’; he wouldn’t talk, and had much side (at least, I think so). He gave me to understand that the weathered side of the ship was his, and the lee mine. I couldn’t understand why there should be so much caste on shipboard. He had orders to ‘keep that young beggar aft’. Couldn’t be done. ‘I will report you’; said the second mate. Reprimand after reprimand followed. ‘There was a time, etc’. The men acted as a magnet to me. I drunk in their yarns. I wanted to know, to find out things, to ask questions. And the men willingly answered and helped me.

It was during the night watch with all the lee main deck to myself, that I found myself with little or nothing to do, and four hours in which to do it. I had to keep aft a bit until the last bust up had simmered down. ‘Never had such a boy. There was a time, etc’. Was I lonely? No, far from it. I had the lovely moon, the glorious stars, the phosphorescent sea, the lapping waves and the gentle breeze. It was all music. I sat and thought. Picture after picture glided by. My first day at school. Picking linen rags for the poor wounded soldiers (1871).²³ My schoolmaster – ‘Read, read, boys, it will serve you well in life’. Old King Street Free Library, eight o’clock until ten; how quickly the time went! Home through the dark narrow Marsh St, every footfall seemed startlingly loud; I had been reading *The Phantom Ship*.²⁴ That hell at the end of the street, the ‘Ship and Castle’, where boys and girls, not much older than myself, were drinking. If they only knew.

‘In the Haymarket, where all flesh is grass,

But grass makes hay, ’tis human hay, alas!’

These lines seemed to fit: I read them over several times to fix them on my memory. (I had been reading, surreptitiously, a book in the cabin, called *Evils of London Life*, but it had been locked away. I had a sort of idea that ‘Koffee’ had narked.) That proud day, when a third standard boy whacked the whole school at geography. I loved it. The inspector made me come forward and stand on a platform. ‘This boy’, he said, ‘has a wonderful knowledge of geography; he should be a sailor’. He didn’t ask how I knew. If he had, I should have told him that I had two brothers at sea, and that I just drank in everything they said. I was the fourth now. My mother was always ill; had fits. I heard the doctor say she must not be left alone. I stayed home from play

²³ This must refer to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1871. Langdon would have been seven.

²⁴ Probably F. Marryat, *The Phantom Ship* (London, 1839).

many a time, but she did not know it; and I did want to play. Then my last day at school. Didn't know it was to be the last, and I only eleven years and four months to the day. At work. I've got a ship. What had I learnt since then: Heaps and heaps. 'Mr Mate' had let me have *An Epitome of Navigation*, a most wonderful book.²⁵ Why had not my teacher at school told me what geometry was? Perhaps he did not know. The compass was easy, except the lubber's point, and 'Old Joe' put that right. Latitude was easy, too, each being equal, but longitude was more difficult as these went off to nothing at the Poles. Everything appeared to come from circles. Almost every day I held open the chart for 'Pincher', because he would not use pins, and spot how he ruled out the course. The world is round, we were sailing south, the north star every night was sinking lower, the Southern cross was rising higher in the sky. That proved it. 'Jerry, what are you doing?' 'Nothing, sir', I replied. 'The binnacle light is out and you were asleep.' 'No, sir', I was thinking. I wondered if he would tell 'Pincher' that I was asleep on watch. Although I wasn't.

We were then sailing in lovely weather. Some days light breezes, others a dead calm. 'Pincher' would walk the poop-deck whistling for wind. It would be a crime for anyone else to whistle. It was very hot and the tar on the deck was melting. For some time past I had discarded boots, wearing only trousers and shirt. I was sure-footed aloft, coming down hand over hand, or if the sails were being hoisted on the halliards, I landed on the men's shoulders who would exclaim that the young beggar ought to have a tail.

The general work of the ship is now complete, and the work of a trading voyage will now begin.

As yet, of course, I was but an apprentice hand, and to try and describe trading on the West Coast, I must use mature knowledge and explain any subject or item, for the sake of clearness, as we proceed.

The fore, main and after hatches being lifted, cockroaches began to crawl out in scores, and a few rats were seen. These were to become a pest before we left the coast. A good supply of packs and hoops, with which 'Bung' was kept busy making casks, would be later loaned to the natives for oil. The after hold had the next attention, most of the cargo in which was hoisted on deck so as to get to the ground tier. Planks had already been laid to form the floor or deck and this was to be the 'Trade room'. Cases of each kind of merchandise were kept together. 'Pincher' superintended, and when finished it was a general store. I will try to remember what were the goods in stock, and later give a brief description of a few items. Gunpowder, guns, rum, gin,

²⁵ Mrs Janet Taylor, *An Epitome of Navigation and Nautical Astronomy with the Improved Lunar Tables* (9th edn, London, 1842).

ginger, wine, tobacco in leaf, pipes and snuff-boxes, flimsy fabrics of all shades and patterns (each had a special name), second-hand coats (unredeemed pledges), sheets, rugs, manillas²⁶ (native money tokens), clocks, odd pots and pans of all descriptions, fish-hooks, small needles and thick threads, neptunes, trade-boxes, odd crockery-ware, odd bedroom-ware, odd cutlery, scissors, razors, brushes, boys' tool chests (list of tools on lid, but many missing), trashy jewelry, pomade, scent, soap, salt, mirrors, glass tumblers, umbrellas, etc.²⁷

The West Coast must be a happy hunting ground for dumping goods not saleable at home. Everything was most shoddy, oddments or throw-outs.²⁸ The guns were six feet in length, with a very short curved shoulder, painted red, flint and pan, and were packed twelve in a case.²⁹ The cases were sometimes used as coffins. Neptunes were thin copper discs four feet in diameter, used for the evaporation of sea water to obtain salt. Manillas were native money tokens, valued at 2½d, made in Bristol under currency rules, and were used for exchange.³⁰ They were used also as a bond of good faith in the settlements, the debtor and creditor each taking hold of a manilla, breaking it between

²⁶ Manillas (from the Latin, *manus*) were horseshoe-shaped tokens used as a currency. They were made of an alloy of copper and lead and were common on the Ivory Coast and in the Niger Delta and its hinterland. They came in various sizes, with different varieties being utilized in different areas. First used by Portuguese traders in the sixteenth century, they ceased to be legal tender in southern Nigeria in 1911. By the nineteenth century, Bristol had emerged as a major centre of production for manillas, this being linked into Bristol trade with the Ivory Coast; W. Babington, 'Remarks on the general description of the trade on the West Coast of Africa', *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 23 (1875), pp. 245–257; A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, 'The major currencies in Nigerian history', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 2 (1960), pp. 132–150.

²⁷ This is a fairly typical cargo manifest for the African trade. Customer taste varied sharply from area to area, and consequently traders needed a great variety of goods, particularly textiles, in order to trade on a long stretch of coast. Bold, in 1822, stressed how precise and particular customers were in West Africa; E. Bold, *Merchants' and Mariners' Guide* (London, 1822), p. 60.

²⁸ In this judgement Langdon is reflecting a later view. Contrary to the belief that Africans accepted 'throw-outs' and suchlike, in the nineteenth century at least, their choice was very particular. See Bold, above, and Laird to the 1843 Parliamentary Committee on Africa quoted in M. Johnson, 'Cloth on the banks of the Niger', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 6 (1973), p. 354.

²⁹ These flintlocks were more usually termed 'dane guns'. Firearms were a major import into West Africa in the nineteenth century, and accounted for some 12 per cent of the value of British exports to the Windward Coast in 1850, second only to textiles. At the Brussels Convention of 1890 European powers agreed not to sell firearms to Africans; J.E. Inikori, 'West Africa's seaborne trade, 1750–1850, volume, structure and implications', in Liesegang, Pasch, and Jones, *Figuring African Trade*, pp. 49–88.

³⁰ Hutchinson estimated the value of manillas at 3d each in the 1850s; T.J. Hutchinson, *Impressions of Western Africa* (London, 1858), pp. 255–256. According to Babington, by the 1870s they were valued at 3d each on the Ivory Coast; Babington, 'Remarks on the general description of the trade', p. 249.

them, and retaining the two halves until settlement day, when they were returned. Trade-boxes were collapsible and put together on the coast. The native must have a box. In the 'Trade-room' there was a large cask which would hold 250 gallons, and was called the 'dash-rum cask' – 'dash' means discount.³¹ No matter how small the service or transaction, the native must have dash. He thought he was getting something for nothing. We'll see. On the main deck the casks of rum were hoisted from the main hatch, and from them were extracted, according to size, three, four, five, or six gallons, which were replaced with fresh or salt water. The abstracted rum was poured into the 'Dash' rum cask with a liberal supply of brackish water; a quantity of tobacco leaves were added to give it fillip. We were also kept busy making 'Dash' heads of tobacco – two or three leaves rolled at the top. Everything was now ready to start trading, and it was only a matter of time to sight the coast and reach our first trading town. It was here I had my first pleasure of a shark hunt. There were three large ones under the stern, accompanied by a pilot fish. A swivel hook was baited with salt pork for a bite, but it was of no use, for the shark took the hook on the side of the jaw and before a running bowling reached him, had broken away. Sharks should always be hooked in the top jaw.

Land ho! We bore towards it and soon saw a canoe making for us. 'Koffee' also made for the cabin sharp, and when he returned he was dressed in his native costume. Asked why he took off his trousers, he replied, pointing to the land and the canoe, 'Dem be grand debil land, and my people would say I had a witch if I had on trouser'. Such was one of the many superstitions of the coast. Two young fellows boarded us from the canoe – fishermen, and 'Koffee' received them with some dignity. I heard the salutation for the first time, 'I-U-I-U-Ka', and each snapped his fingers. 'What land is that?' we asked. 'Cape Palmas. Dash, cappy, Dash', and we gave them two rums and two 'Dash' heads. I noted that 'Koffee', before handing them the rum, sipped it himself, as a proof that it was not poisoned. This was the custom, and to omit to sip would be considered an insult. Nevertheless, there is much poison used, even though drinks are sipped beforehand.

We let go the anchor at Covally River,³² a few miles below Cape Palmas, and ere long two white men came aboard, an American trader and a Missionary.³³ 'What's the news of the world? Got any newspapers?'

³¹ More generally used in West Africa to mean 'present' or 'gift'; from the Portuguese, *dar* 'to give'.

³² More usually spelt Cavally River. Robertson in 1819 spoke of 'considerable trade' at Cavally, while Babington in 1875 found very little trade along the next sixty miles of the coast; G.A. Robertson, *Notes on Africa* (London, 1819), pp. 67–81; Babington, 'Remarks on the general description of the trade', p. 248.

³³ American Protestant missionaries had been based at Cape Palmas since 1838.

was their greeting. ‘Yes,’ said ‘Pincher’, ‘about eight to ten weeks old. Have a bass.’ ‘Rather!’ and three bottles were opened. ‘That’s the first we’ve had for months’, they said. ‘Pincher’ asked them to dinner, which was served in the state cabin. (I noted that ‘Mr Mate’ was not invited.) The best family plate was laid on a new table cloth, and I thought I should hear the missionary talk about his good work among the poor black men, but I was somewhat surprised at the way in which he mopped off the bass. But to see a real live missionary was great. I was disappointed, however, for during dinner nothing was said about his mission work, the conversation being all about trade and the Grand Debil, who was supposed to reside in a cave not far from this place, and to whom the natives made pilgrimages, bringing gifts and offerings from far and near. ‘Pincher’ asked whether he was ever seen. ‘Of course not’, said the missionary, ‘deities are never seen’. ‘Then what becomes of the gifts?’ inquired ‘Pincher’. ‘Oh, we both see to that’, replied the missionary.

The next day we heaved up from Covally River, and this time the men manned the windlass with a jolly rollicking shanty, well knowing that the next time she came up the Kroo boys would do it. The sails were set, and we sailed down the coast with a good sea-breeze. This wind blows from the west-south-west almost regularly every day, except during the month of November, when the Harmattan blows from the east.³⁴ This is a cold, dry wind and it makes the natives themselves shiver. In my spare time I tried to take in the coast scenery, much of which was low-lying land, with golden sandy shore, on which the white surf broke. There were also numerous palm trees.

It was Good Friday,³⁵ and I could not get the thought out of my head of ‘One a penny, two a penny, all hot buns’. How jolly to earn a few pence for an extra at Easter. ‘One box of paper collars, size 12½, and two fronts, please, Miss. Plain, or frilled? Plain, please. Eight-pence half-penny, please. Thank you.’ None of that now, but nevertheless, you’re a lucky boy, Jerry. How many Bristol boys would like your job? I remember another Good Friday, 1877 – horrible day! Shall I ever forget it? While out at play I discovered sixpence in my pocket – mother’s change. I had the bright idea to buy buns and sell them, but I speck a failure: nothing doing; I ate the buns and went home. Nothing was said, but oh, my conscience! A few days after mother had her last fit. She knows all about it now. Oh, the bitter remorse!

‘Man the port braces, we’re heading off land.’ ‘What’s up?’ I heard one of the coast men say ‘Pincher’ will give Berraby³⁶ a wide berth, for

³⁴ Usually spelt Harmattan; this wind from the east and northeast can bring with it considerable quantities of dust.

³⁵ 15 April 1881.

³⁶ Grand-Bérébi in modern Côte d’Ivoire. Given changes in economic fortunes, not all of the towns mentioned in Langdon’s narrative have easily identifiable modern

if the Berraby men catch him, he will get peppered. Peppering is a native summary justice, meted out to anyone who has incurred their displeasure, generally for over brutality or chicanery tricks in trading. It was carried out as follows. A crowd of natives would come on board in the usual way of trade, when the culprit was thrown overboard, and usually towed ashore. On reaching the shore he was peppered, i.e., every part of his body was coated with a thick solution of Chile peppers, special attention being given to the eyes and other delicate parts. He had then to run the gauntlet of the whole town armed with sticks, and lastly was given over to the women, who performed actions too disgusting to write about. He was then returned to his ship, generally to die. I heard a fully corroborated story of a man getting out of this peppering. Captain P—— when serving as mate had incurred the natives' displeasure, and was taken ashore in the usual way for peppering. He was, I know, a very tall and commanding man, who by sheer bluff and playing on their superstition, fearlessly addressed them something like this – 'Do what you like, me no care, you no savey me got witch, you no kill me; you tink so, and after, I come again your town and fita bring small-pox, crock-raw (ring-worm) and all the diseases known'. Needless to say, he so played on their imagination and superstition that he was returned to his ship uninjured.

'Man the star-board braces.' 'Pincher' had now passed his danger zone, and we were again running near the shore, and early next morning we let go the anchor at Grand Drewin,³⁷ our first trading town.

At dawn I had a good look at the land, and to my mind it was the prettiest I had seen, or was yet to see, on the coast. For about three miles the land rose some two hundred and fifty feet, well wooded. In fact, it reminded me of Leigh Woods.³⁸ I spotted a clearing near the top, which turned out to be a small village, for I could see the stockade round it, and the black people were looking at our ship. At Grand Drewin Town they swarmed through the stockade and launched large and small canoes. We watched them paddle through the surf. At times they appeared to stand almost on end. When they got into smooth water they formed up. There were six large and many small canoes.

equivalents. However, a useful map giving the position of the towns and ports of this coast in the 1840s can be found in the Appendix to the Madden report, *Parliamentary Papers* 1842, XII (551), p. 520f.

³⁷ Grand Drewin today refers to a beach and small hamlet close to Latéko, some six to seven miles to the west of Sassandra in Côte d'Ivoire. Adams refers to St Andrew's and Drewin together, 'the people here have a small quantity of ivory, for which they always wish an exorbitant price'; J. Adams, *Remarks on the Country Extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo* (London, 1823), p. 3.

³⁸ On the left bank of the Avon on the outskirts of Bristol.

In the leading one sat King Quee and his son Atto, and all were singing a monotonous chant, and after each dip of the paddle it was swung over their heads and the stock end bumped on the gunwale of the canoe. Everything was done to rhythm. (This, I was told, was showing off.) They encircled the ship three times and then boarded. The King, his son and headmen are received at the gangway by ‘Pincher’. ‘Koffee’s’ father was there and a rubbing of noses followed. All was now excitement, for some two hundred or more natives were on our deck, and there was a lot of ‘I-U-I-U-Kas’ and snapping of fingers. Palm wine and fruits were plentiful. I tasted the wine for the first time and didn’t think much of it. A taste for it had to be acquired, and, as Old Joe said, God help you when you have.

We will now see what was going on in ‘Pincher’s’ state cabin. A grand palaver³⁹ with the King and his headmen was taking place concerning the goods we had to sell and the commodities they, too, would render in exchange – palm oil, gold dust, ivory, ebony, log-wood, palm kernels, cokernuts. Rum (not ‘Dash’) flowed freely, and a good deal of tobacco and snuff was consumed. I heard some say that they expected to have ready within the next twelve months so many bonnys of oil.⁴⁰ Bonnys are casks made specially to fit in the surf boats, and hold about 110 gallons. ‘Pincher’ was now ready to accept their orders. Then came the great haggles, and, like the French onion men, the natives always asked for more than they knew they would get. The King’s son acted as umpire and his decision was final. His awards were generally in ‘Pincher’s’ favour, and his own, for he and his father drew a big commission on the transactions – via ‘Dash’. Orders now came fast and furious, contracts were made and manillas were broken as a pledge of fulfilment.

It is necessary here to describe briefly how trade was carried on. In the first place our merchandise was sold on credit, and the natives having no word in their language for credit, the simple word ‘trust’ was used, i.e. we first of all sailed down the coast giving out ‘trust’.⁴¹ We should return several times to gather in whatever goods were ready. A very reliable headman would receive 75 per cent ‘trust’, others 50 per cent, and doubtful ones 25 per cent, the balance on or near completion of the contract with the return of the broken manilla. The

³⁹ The etymology of the word ‘palaver’ is unclear but it may be derived from the Portuguese word *palavra* (speech), and by this period it had come to mean both a dispute and the negotiations to settle it.

⁴⁰ A bonny was a large cask for palm oil, named after the port of Bonny in the Niger Delta.

⁴¹ i.e. credit in the form of goods. Trust was usually given out calculated according to a unit; on this part of the coast termed a ‘round’; C.W. Newbury, ‘Credit in early nineteenth-century West African trade’, *Journal of African History*, 13 (1972), pp. 81–95.

King or headman had often to whip up the lesser men to pay. They are responsible only to a certain extent, for it sometimes happened that the harvest was at fault, and as a last resort, to save default, they would part with some of their niggers (slaves). William, King of Half Jack⁴² and other well to do men were always ready to buy at a price. These poor wretches, by the way, were always carried as passengers.⁴³ Should a tradesman wilfully default it would mean taboo from all the other traders on that particular part of the coast.

Apart from trust trade there was what would be termed as petty cash sales. The small men and boys would bring to the ship almost every hour (save on Fetish days which occur every sixth day) small quantities of palm oil, kernels, cokernuts, etc, and these would be paid for 'on the nail' with the usual 'Dash'. These natives were so dense that they had no idea of measurement and sometimes most unfair advantage was taken.

With so many [...] crowded in the cabin it had become awfully stuffy, and having learnt much, I went out for some fresh air, if it could be got. On deck the Kroo-boys were being engaged – all Drewin boys, twenty-eight in number, thirteen to work the surf boat and the remainder for the ship. Their headman, 'Dabbery', was a fine stalwart man, prominently marked with a navel about the size of a small teacup, which was common – want of attention at birth. He tells them to give of their best to a good Cappy. And they will. He was a real leader, never expecting the boys to do what he would not do himself. He also had the power to flog, but this was not necessary, for the boys as a rule were a most cheerful set, always ready to work at any time. They now had a job for some twelve months or more, on very small pay and half a pint of rice per day. They were in 'Clover', as 'chop' (food) on shore was always very limited. Visions of wealth rose up, whereby they could save sufficient to buy a wife, which was to them the royal road to fortune. Wives and niggers did all the work on shore.

It had been a most exciting day, and I was glad to turn in at eight bells,⁴⁴ looking forward to the next day's work, when the trade room would be opened, and for some time I should be a shop assistant, serving out all manner of goods.

At six am I started my new duties. The Swede who had been with 'Pincher' on a former voyage was in charge, with two black assistants

⁴² Modern Jacqueline, close to Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire. In the early nineteenth century this was already an important source of palm oil; Robertson, *Notes*, p. 92.

⁴³ These 'passengers' were being used as pawns to guarantee trust; in effect this meant that Langdon's ship was being involved in a form of slaving. Given the abolition of Britain's slave trade in 1807, this was highly illegal behaviour; hence the captain's desire to avoid naval vessels.

⁴⁴ i.e. at the end of his watch, either 8 pm or midnight.

and myself. I might say in passing that these West Coast traders liked to train their own men for this particular kind of work, making them work up from cabin boy to trader. Years of special training were necessary before one was admitted inside the ring of traders. As before stated, our stock was in perfect order, and we knew just where to lay our hands on everything. We had many orders from yesterday to deal with. One will suffice to illustrate the lot. Take King Queen's order – one case of ginger wine, one hogshead of rum, two cases of guns, eight kegs of gunpowder, 200 heads of tobacco, six trade boxes, twelve neptunes, pomade, soap, scent – in short, something from almost every kind of merchandise we had in stock, including 40 pieces of cloth. Here I must explain that cloth means the flimsy fabrics, twelve yards to a piece. The natives had no word for calico or muslin, so the word cloth was used to cover every kind of fabric, except sheets and rugs. In addition to the orders the usual 'Dash' had to be made up in proportion to the size of the order. Cloth was also sold in small quantities of one fathom, which, before being wetted, was large enough to make a full-dress suit. Another class of customer had to be attended to – the petty cash dealer. Their small quantities of goods were brought to the ship and received by Mr Mate at the main deck gangway, who measured it, gave book (receipt), and took the order to 'Pincher', who shouted to the trade room to serve, say, four fathoms of cloth, heads of tobacco, rum, etc, with the usual 'Dash'. This kind of work was carried on day after day, until all the stock was sold.

The general routine on board a West Coast trader varied but little from day to day, save when sailing from place to place. For it was turn out at 5.30 am, have coffee, set to work at six, washing decks, cleaning brass, etc, 8 o'clock having breakfast, 8.30 start trade with Mr Mate at the main deck gangway to receive whatever might be brought on board, every [except?] ivory and gold dust, which 'Pincher' dealt with in the state cabin. The surf boat boys, who generally slept ashore, brought off next morning whatever oil might be ready, when it was sampled. Adulteration, at which they were adepts, had to be watched. The oil was then boiled,⁴⁵ and from the boiler it was poured into the starting tub, thence through the canvas hose to any part of the ship's hold, where 'Old Shocker' Joe and his gang filled and stowed away the casks. All small spaces were filled with cokernuts and the small breaker cask. The starting tub was one of the most trying jobs on board, what with the fierce sun and the heat from the boiling oil. At times it was almost unbearable. Oil, oil from morning till evening, and if one should get a splash of oil in the eye, it had almost the same effect as lime. 'Cockney' was given this work.

⁴⁵ Boiling was used to remove impurities such as water or dirt.

At night anchor watch had to be kept. 'Pincher' and Mr Mate had had another rumpus. 'Pincher' in future would keep to himself, would have his meals in his state cabin, and the two black servants would fare very little different to the crew. This, as before mentioned, was part of the programme to prevent a new officer to the coast getting a footing into the secrets of the trade. Among themselves the coast traders were very 'canny' with outsiders, and when all the trust was given out, their life became a round of pleasure. When in company with other ships, they met together for late dinner, cards and a sing-song. But if the 'scum' for'ard were to continue their sing-song beyond eight bells, there would be mutiny to pay. I felt very sorry for Mr Mate, for he became a very lone man. 'Old Shocker' would only grunt, and when off duty would turn in. Mr Mate could not, of course, chin wag with the men, but, with it all, he was a stoic. 'Well, Jerry', said Mr Mate, 'it can't last for ever'. His partiality for me I knew full well was noticed and my turn had yet to come.

We stayed at Grand Drewin about ten days, and our next trading place was Duke Walker's Town.⁴⁶ King Duke Walker was 'Koffee's' father. Almost the same scene will suffice at each place of call as that of Drewin. Our next call was Kromwell Town⁴⁷ and then Sassandrew River,⁴⁸ where the natives were the most overbearing I had seen on the coast, nearly always at war with the surrounding towns, theirs being well protected by the river, and the other people had very little chance to get at them. The Sassandrew men therefore had swollen heads, and they didn't omit to let other people know it. With a glow of pride they would point out the remains of a small ship lying on their beach, and say, 'Our fathers took that'. It appeared that a cute American some years ago had run down the coast and sold coal-dust for gunpowder. The next ship down belonged to an honest trader, and everybody except one boy were massacred. I little thought then that on another voyage my ship would get involved with these people. But that's another story.

Our next call was Trepoo,⁴⁹ where the land after leaving the river

⁴⁶ Untraced on modern maps, but clearly close to Sassandra in Côte d'Ivoire.

⁴⁷ Untraced but clearly close to Sassandra in Côte d'Ivoire.

⁴⁸ Sassandra in Côte d'Ivoire. Originally named São Andrea by the Portuguese, it was called St Andrews (or sometimes King George's Town) by the English. Its importance for maritime trade derived from the break in the surf that gave it a sheltered anchorage. Robertson in 1819 commented on the 'great trade' at this port, which he estimated as worth £4,000 pa; Robertson, *Notes*, pp. 75, 361. The reputation of its traders among visitors was however somewhat negative; an American supercargo in 1841 commented that 'St Andrews people are considered a treacherous set of scoundrels'; Brooks, *Kru Mariner*, p. 97.

⁴⁹ Untraced on modern maps but marked on the Madden report map between Sassandra and Fresco in Côte d'Ivoire; possibly modern Trepoin? In his 'Diary and

was low lying. Then we came to Kutrou⁵⁰ where we passed a cliff of iron stone, which affected our compass and also our Kroo boys, for they believed another ‘grand debil’ resided in those rocks. When passing they would turn their faces away from it, for one look might spell disaster for all time. I had no doubt a few cunning medicine men were doing good business with the iron ore. The ‘grand debil’ is only a gag. The ordinary native was so simple, he would believe anything either good or evil. I had acquired a few simple conjuring tricks, one being the swallowing of a knife. One day, while seated at dinner, I said to Booto and Dago, the two black servants, ‘See me eat knife’. ‘Quee, it fits kill you.’ ‘No kill me’, I replied, ‘I got witch’. ‘Quee, Quee.’ I so say wrapped the knife in paper, but it really fell into my lap, and pretended to swallow it, and made a few grimaces as if in pain. They were fearful that the knife was inside me and shouted to the other boys, ‘Jerry eat knife, he die, he got witch, tell cappy quick’. ‘Pincher’ came to see what was up and found me laughing. ‘Where’s the knife?’ he demanded. I showed it to him and explained. The boys really thought it had passed through me, and said ‘He got witch’. ‘Pincher’ advised me to be careful or I would get peppered.

We next anchored at Frisco,⁵¹ the King of which was named Dick Squire, and much trust was given out. Here it is that the lagoon country starts and the inland water made a pretty effect on the landscape. We stayed here for about fourteen days, and then made for Piccanny Hou,⁵² a small trading town where we did our business in a short time, and then left for Cape Lahou.⁵³ During the night a mail boat⁵⁴ came up

notebook, 1883–84’, 27 September 1883, Langdon places Trepoo as four miles from Sassandra.

⁵⁰ Untraced on modern maps but marked on the Madden report map between Sassandra and Fresco in Côte d’Ivoire; possibly modern Kotrohohou?

⁵¹ Fresco in Côte d’Ivoire.

⁵² Untraced on modern maps but the Madden report map shows Piccanniny Lahou to the east of Fresco.

⁵³ Grand-Lahou in Côte d’Ivoire to the west of Abidjan, described by Babington in 1875 as ‘a very large town’; ‘Remarks on the general description of the trade’, p. 248. Strictly speaking, Lahou-Plage is the old trading port. Adams, *Remarks*, p. 3, noted that ‘the town of Cape Lahou is built on a narrow peninsula of sand formed by the sea and river, and may consist of 150 houses, containing a population of seven or eight hundred souls. The Dutch, at a former period, carried on here a considerable trade in slaves and ivory, in which article the Lahou people have always dealt largely’. Robertson remarked on the extent of its trade ‘more business is done here than in the whole distance from Cape Mount to St Andrews; the quantity of gold and ivory sold annually, is greater than at any of the European settlements, Cape Coast and Accra excepted’; he estimated it as worth £16,500 pa; Robertson, *Notes*, pp. 82, 361.

⁵⁴ From 1852 a regular steamer service was operating between Britain and West Africa. This was generated by the government mail contract established from that year. Initially services were every month but by this period had become fortnightly. It had several consequences for trade on the coast and, not least, allowed passengers to travel between

the coast with the King of Lahou and his wives and slaves on board. Owing to the darkness they had missed the Cape, and to save going back the commander inquired if we would take his passengers and land them in due course. 'Pincher' was only too pleased to comply with his request, for the King of Cape Lahou was a great man. He was returning from a visit to another great man, William, King of Half Jack, who was educated at Bristol and christened at St Mary Redcliff Church.⁵⁵ He was now reputed to have several hundred wives. The big, fat, bleary eyed monster! If the stories I heard about him were true, and I believe they were, his cruelty to women and slaves was almost beyond comprehension.

Well, the King of Cape Lahou came on board and was received at the gangway by 'Pincher'. He had with him about fifteen wives and the same number of slaves. They were a sorry lot. Most of the women were sea-sick. The cabins were full to overflowing, some sat on the lockers, and the rest squatted on the floor. 'Pincher' decided to get away at once, and we were making good progress when suddenly the sails were 'all-a-back', and we were in a tornado. We had not seen it coming owing to the darkness, or the excitement of seeing so many ladies. Before the ship could be got before the wind, it was touch and go whether we turned turtle. Much water was shipped, and flooded the cabins. What a sight! The women who were on the lockers were pitched off, and they were all prostrate. Swish! Swish! The water rushed from one side to the other as the ship reeled. Vomit and filth! We had to hold our noses, for the stench was fearful. We had to set to and clean the cabins, and later when I opened the door of my berth to turn in, I stepped on something soft and greasy. Oh, horror! It was a black lady. We anchored at Cape Lahou, and were not sorry to see the last of our passengers, who were far from smelling sweet. Cape Lahou was the second largest trading town on what was called the 'weather coast'.⁵⁶ Half Jack was the first.

We stayed at Cape Lahou some eight weeks or more, at the end of which time all our trust had been given out, and the trade room was empty, except for cash sales and 'Dash'. My services would not be required much longer. The black boys would be able to manage, and besides, are they not 'much more trustworthy than a white boy?'

ports on the West African littoral; P.N. Davies, *The Trade Makers: Elder Dempster in West Africa, 1852-1972* (London, 1973).

⁵⁵ It was not uncommon in this period for British traders to arrange for children of African brokers to be educated in Britain during the nineteenth century, an arrangement that would be of mutual benefit. R. & W. King arranged for the education in Bristol of the son of King Bell of the Cameroons; FO 541/16, Dowell to Admiralty, 10 January 1869.

⁵⁶ i.e. Windward coast.

‘Pincher’ had had his eye on Mr Mate and myself, finding much fault – ‘can’t do things like the black boys’. This got my pepper up. I was fully aware that I was in the way, and ‘Pincher’ knew, much to his annoyance, that anything I saw or heard, I should tell Mr Mate. But I didn’t care. ‘If you are not careful’, said ‘Pincher’, ‘I will send you for’ard’. It was nag, nag, nag, day after day, and I was so fed up that one day when he said he would send me for’ard, I replied, ‘I wish you would’. ‘What! What! What!’ said ‘Pincher’, ‘you answer me? There was a time when I could have triced you up at the gangway and given you two round dozen. Get for’ard and I’ll make you sorry for this’. I was glad to go and the men were pleased to have me, for I should keep their pots and pans, and the fo’c’sle clean, which was more than Cockney did. If I couldn’t keep things cleaner than he did I should feel ashamed. I knew ‘Pincher’ was going to put me through the mill, but whatever work-up job he had in store for me, I was determined to put my best into it and keep smiling. Great Scot! To hear men talking freely among each other was like being in heaven. I turned in, thankful at last to be out of the cabin. Yes, but what of the next day? Would it be polishing the copper on the ship’s side, or what?

The next morning I turned out with the men. ‘Jerry’, said Mr Mate, ‘tar down all the standing rigging, back stays, fore and aft stays, and mind, lad (in a kindly way) you don’t leave any holidays (parts not tarred), or you will have to shin up and put it right. From six to six’. ‘Aye, aye, Sir’, I replied. No doubt it would have been nuts to ‘Pincher’ to make me shin up a newly tarred back stay to cover up the holidays. But the men had warned me about this particular. The tarring took about two weeks – tar, tar from six in the morning till six at night. It meant that I had my supper an hour after the men, and then I had to do the fo’c’sle work, which, by the way, Cockney refused to help with. He said it was the work for the youngest hand to do, so I sparred up to him. The men insisted on his taking a share of the work. (White men again.) My next work-up job was to scrape and varnish the masts and yards, which took about three weeks, but was a much cleaner job, and as nothing was said of working from six till six, I had my supper when the men went below. I expected to have been called up again, but I was not, and I thought this is victory number one.

The barque *Watkins*⁵⁷ had arrived from home and we were all anxious, of course, for news. I heard that my elder brother, Harry, was aboard serving as cook and steward. He had sailed with ‘Pincher’ on a former voyage and was given permission to visit our ship. ‘Pincher’ had told him of my bad character, and one evening I was severely admonished by my brother for my evil ways. He said I was losing a

⁵⁷ 278 tons.

good chance in life by not staying aft, and if I was not careful in mixing with the men for'ard I should become a blackguard. Brotherly advice no doubt, but I hit back pretty strongly. The flunkey business would not lead to quarter deck, and the men for'ard were real white men. Harry was much concerned that he could not convert me to his own views.

In due course we left Cape Lahou and beat to windward⁵⁸ to gather in any cargo that might be ready at the towns where our trust had been given out. But before doing so we had to deliver a number of passengers (slaves) to William, King of Half Jack, and on our way down some cash trade was done at Jack Lahou⁵⁹ and Three Towns.⁶⁰ At the last named there was a tremendously large tree, the branches of which extended each way for some half mile. I believe it was called a banian tree. We discharged our passengers at Half Jack, and I saw that pot-bellied bleary-eyed William, and from what I heard his Christian training and education had not made him any better than his fellow countrymen. We shipped from here our first consignment of palm oil and palm kernels for home, per steamer, and I may state here that a long and good trading voyage produced perhaps twice the amount of our own cargo.

Our decks were now clear of accumulations of casks of oil, and we started our beat to windward, which might take a few days or a few weeks, as luck determined. We had to do battle with a very strong current, head winds and calms. We sailed away from the coast close-hauled almost due south for some days, and then put the ship about and sailed in again for land. Sometimes it happened that we sighted land again below where we started. But it was good to be at sea again with all our wings spread.

'Pincher' had taught me how to steer, and from eight am till six pm Jerry had to take the wheel. It was very tiring, standing some nine hours a day under a tropical sun, or should it happen to be the rainy season, in a deluge that would last several weeks. But it was warm rain, and, wet or fine, I liked steering. I felt somewhat proud in steering a fair sized ship under sail, for really I was almost in charge. Sometimes when there was a good breeze and a choppy sea, 'Pincher' would say for a joke, 'Luff her up quick, Jerry, and give those fellows for'ard a good dousing'. I would then bring her up sharp against wind and sea, and splash would come a wave over the weather bow and some one

⁵⁸ i.e. returning along the coast to the west, against the wind.

⁵⁹ Untraced on modern maps but the Madden report map places Jack Lahou (also known as Trade Town) to the west of Half Jack and close to the position of modern Abidjan.

⁶⁰ Untraced on modern maps; not placed on the Madden report map.

would get a wetting. ‘Pincher’ would chuckle and the Kroo boys would say ‘Them Jerry no savey how to steer’. But he did.

After a run of some twelve days, we again made land at early dawn, and when we were able to distinguish we found it to be Berraby. As before stated ‘Pincher’ was wanted here for a peppering, and he became a bit jumpy, but fortunately the breeze held out and later the same day we anchored at Grand Drewin, our first trading town, and also the home of our Kroo boys. Our arrival caused some jubilation with their people.

Owing to the rainy season there was not much oil ready,⁶¹ so we dropped down the coast again calling at our trading towns, picking up small quantities of oil, kernels, and perhaps a few passengers here and there, and, of course, if there was any ivory or gold-dust about, ‘Pincher’ was on it. He needed to be very smart in buying gold-dust, because it was nearly always adulterated with brass filings or sand, but after it had been tested with acid, washed and dried, and reduced to its correct proportion, the quantity of actual gold-dust which remained caused a look of blank astonishment on the faces of the natives. And by the time ‘Pincher’ had done with it it was still smaller, at least by weight. Ivories were also bought by weight, generally short weight.

We came again to Cape Lahou, where we stayed eight weeks or more. The captains of the different ships to pass away the time organised sailing boat races. ‘Pincher’ rigged his gig with mast and sails, and it was jolly taking part in the races. We did not get a prize on that great day because ‘Pincher’ was disqualified for wetting the sails. Nevertheless, it was nuts for the others and myself.

The sides of the ship had to be painted, and Cockney and I are told off to do it with British paint (tar). We were working at it under the starboard counter, Cockney was sitting on the stage, and his legs, when the ship rolled, were well in the sea. I was on the deck pulling in the stage guy ropes or handing down things required when I spotted Mr ground shark coming up from under the keel and making for Cockney’s legs. I saw his white belly, for he had turned on his back in an instant, and was about to bite when I shouted for all I was worth, ‘Cockney, put your legs up!’ He was just in time for the great shark’s snout was then right under the stage. He is a great coward and noise will nearly always frighten him. It was now my turn to paint the port counter, with Cockney on deck attending to the guy ropes. I kept my feet well on the stage and told Cockney to keep a good look out. One should never show funk on a ship, however one might feel it.

⁶¹ Harvesting of palm fruits usually began at the start of the rainy season; it would then be some weeks before the palm oil was ready for sale. In the centre of the oil trade, the rivers of the Niger Delta, the buying season began around March.

Needless to say, I was not sorry when this painting job was finished. The shark, without doubt, is the enemy of sailormen. But it is great fun capturing him, whether by hook or harpoon. Hook 'em in the top jaw, run a bowline down, hoist on deck, stand clear of tail, which would cause much injury if it gave you one of its lashings, get axe across the tail as soon as you can, but even then he is dangerous, for in his last kick will leap many feet above the deck. Dead. Post-mortem, see what his last meal was, cut out jaws for a curio, back-bone for a walking-stick, and skin for sand-paper. The rest dump overboard. No sailorman would eat shark at any price, although the natives consider it a delicacy.

On our ship during a previous voyage a Kroo boy had been nipped by a shark, when pulling the boat through the surf. The poor fellow was bitten across the buttocks. His own countrymen refused in any way to help him because, according to their superstition, he must have a witch, otherwise the shark would not have bitten him. When the surf boat came alongside us we placed the injured boy on a hatch and hoisted him on deck. His own people were afraid to come near him. He was dying, putting out his hands and talking in his own tongue. We asked to whom he was talking. 'He say he see big river, him mother be on tother side, who say come.' One might ask where did this so-called poor benighted heathen get the idea of a future life? Christianity had not yet reached his country. Nevertheless, they had some idea of God, for in my many conversations on that point, they would say something like this about the Creation. 'When the Great Grand Debil, who is above the other Grand Debils, first made the world, and then two men, one black and one white, he said I have two things to offer you, a box or a book. You, blackman, shall have first choice. He chose the box, because it would be useful to keep all his possessions in. A big, big, fool he was. White man, of course, had the book (knowledge) and savey all things. Never mind, "softly, softly catchee monkey", blackman will have book some day.' And I was sure they would, for they were all very eager to acquire knowledge. 'Jerry, Jerry, teach me book, and then I no let white man cheat me.' Talent was there, but as yet undeveloped. Many times, in my own way, when looking at a crowd of West Africans, I was struck by the vast amount of European crossings. An untrained eye could easily detect it. They were all shades of colour, from tawny white to dark brown, with straight hair, and probably a few reds. These were very treacherous and difficult to deal with, but the true negro, with his big head, flat nose, etc was generally a good fellow to get on with.

Booth⁶² and Dago, our cabin boys, and Dabbery, the cook's mate,

⁶² [sic], Booto in the rest of the text.

were negroes, and I tried to teach them what little ‘book’ I knew, and they in return taught me their lingo. But to converse all along the West Coast it would be necessary to know at least a dozen dialects. They had few verbs (if any), counted in tens, and measured time by the moon. They had but few synonyms. ‘Light’ and ‘fire’ would be the same word, ‘kusha’, so that if any one wanted a light for his pipe he would say, ‘kusha-daddy’, fire-pipe. They were highly superstitious. Food was taken every night to the graves of the departed, and without doubt the cunning medicine men ‘saw to that’.

It was very interesting to talk to these boys about trials by ordeal. On the occurrence of any calamity, such as small-pox, fever, death, theft, some one was charged with witchcraft and was tried by fetish and medicine men. To prove his innocence the accused had to drink poison (saucy water). If death resulted, ‘Well then, he did have witch’, and members of his family would have to go under, or pay forfeit. If he should not die, however, then the accusers had to go through the mill. These trials sometimes took weeks to decide, and often held up trade. From what I gathered from the boys, the cunning medicine men pulled the strings for their own advantage. Power, power, all the world over, educated or otherwise.

The saddest event of the voyage was the passing of Captain Hunt of the brig *Dauntless*, after some days illness. ‘Pincher’ and his brother traders did all they could, but the ensign one morning was hoisted at half mast. He was to be buried at sea. At 2 pm each ship sent a boat’s crew to pay their last respects. It was a very solemn procession, headed by the boat in which lay the mortal remains of Captain Hunt. When well out from land, the committal service was read, with bowed heads and all standing. The plank was gently tilted, and the body, well weighted and sewn up in canvas, glided into the sea, which at this spot was between twenty and thirty fathoms deep. The mourners then returned to the deceased captain’s ship and were given refreshments, including much rum. The personal effects were sold by auction, and the bidders, being in a muddled rum-soaked state, paid some fancy prices. Later on I asked ‘Old Joe’ why they did not bury Captain Hunt on shore. ‘Bury him on shore, lad? Why, if he had on only a shirt [...] [they] [...] would dig him up for it. No, lad, he was a sailorman, and his proper grave was in the deep.’

It is some time since I last mentioned Mr Mate. He was still a lone man. The breach with ‘Pincher’ would continue until we left the coast for home. Every evening ‘Pincher’ gave or attended parties of brother traders, but Mr Mate was never invited. Whatever time they or ‘Pincher’ arrived or left, Mr Mate had to be at the gangway to receive ‘His Majesty’, or see ‘Their Majesties’ off. The side most of these men

assumed stuck fast to me as a boy, and it still sticks – to treat a gentleman in such a manner!

Boat-sailing with them had become flat. Big game hunting was then more in their line, so Mr Mate asked ‘Pincher’ for permission to use the gig and sails on Sundays. To the surprise of everybody leave was granted. He chose an AB⁶³ and myself to work the boat, and many happy Sundays spent in boat sailing with this gentleman, which he was, for I learnt much of his school life and family history, will always be remembered. We use to leave the ship soon after 9 am. Our provisions consisted of a keg of water, salt junk, biscuits, pipes and tobacco for the men (boys were not expected to smoke in those far off days), and fishing tackle. We beat miles and miles to windward, at times close in, at others well off shore, and selected a good spot for swimming and fishing. We would only swim, however, one at a time, the other two would keep a good look out for Mr Shark. The water was lovely and warm, and if it had not been for the man-eaters we could almost have lived in it.

Alas, these jolly days came to an abrupt end. One day we got well away to windward when the wind failed and it became a dead calm. The sea was almost like glass, and there was a thick West African mist. We had only two paddles and we did our utmost to get back before sunset. We watched the sun sink like a great ball of fire, and twenty minutes after it was pitch dark, for there was no moon. We had no compass, but we knew the set of the current and just let the boat drift in the hope of spotting our ship’s lights. Black darkness – could almost cut it! Soon we heard the Kroo boys’ boat chant, for ‘Pincher’ had sent them out to look for us. We hailed them and were soon taken in tow. Unfortunately, our Mr Mate would be in the soup, and he was, for when the boat was hoisted in, ‘Pincher’, in his best Yankee drawl, said, ‘Waal, Mr Mate, I guess this will be the last time you have my boat’. So that was the end of many, many perfect days.

‘Pincher’ had bought a parrot in a cage and hung it near the wheel, and the wicked sailormen intended to get some fun out of it by teaching it to say what they themselves would like to say if they dared. It was agreed that everyone on passing the cage should repeat certain words. In due time Polly was shrieking out ‘Pincher, Pincher, you mean ——’. (Let Polly say the last word.) When ‘Pincher’ realised what the bird was saying, our sky was black for a long time, and mean and petty work-up jobs were the result. But it did not matter for we had had our money’s worth. Later on Polly was sold to another trader.

The crew of the barque *Burnswark*⁶⁴ sent us a very peculiar request,

⁶³ i.e. Able Seaman.

⁶⁴ 252 tons. The *Burnswark*, Capt. Venning, returned to Bristol from ‘Lahon’ with a

‘Can you supply us with a consignment of cockroaches, we are swarmed out with bugs and fleas’. It was generally understood that if the first named predominated they would eat up all the latter. We had often grumbled about our cockroach pest, but thank goodness we were not in the same boat as our friends. A hunt was there and then organised, the result of which was that a bucket three parts full of cockroaches was collected in a very short time and sent to the *Burnswark*, who acknowledged it with thanks.

While dealing with this subject I may say that our pests were very troublesome at times. They were two or three inches long. Unless the smaller kind predominate the larger ones eat them up, for both kinds are cannibals. At night, before wet weather, they fly many yards, sometimes extinguishing our fo’c’sle-hole light. Look out if you get one in the face. Another annoying trick of theirs was to nibble the hard skin on the bottom of your feet while you were asleep, and, my word, you would know it next morning when washing the decks with salt water. Our men, who had been in those dreadful West African rivers, said that when a man was down with the fever, it was always a sure sign that his number was up when these pests commenced boldly to attack a few hours before death. Our pigs and fowls would snap them up with relish, and the hens in return would give us some decent eggs – at least we presumed they were.

Rats, too, were legion, and gave us much sport. In the early morning we would find many aloft drinking the dew in our furled sails, and we chased and shook them from rope to rope, whilst the men on deck were ready to do the mighty deed when Mr Rat lost his hold and fell.

Ants – these were almost too interesting to call pests (I had read a little about them, and here was a chance to see for myself.) Hour after hour I spent watching these tiny creatures at work. It was wonderful to watch the order and intelligence with which they removed some object, generally a cockroach turned over on its back. A scout would first spot the object and then chase off and tell the others, when column after column would appear, each lead by what were apparently officers, and the object would be carried to their nest. My only regret was that I could not see what happened there.

It was Christmas Day. ‘Moses’, the cook, had become very drunk the night before, one of those states of drunkenness which is first madness. Perhaps he had been doped with the drink he had obtained from the natives. Anyhow, he ran amok with a butcher’s knife, and wanted to kill everybody. Poor, silly ‘Moses’ had to be lashed up. But what of the Christmas fare? It was all done for, even the plum duff.

cargo of palm oil, camwood and coconuts for R. & W. King in September 1882; *Customs Bills of Entry Bill A*, 16 September 1882.

The usual salt junk and biscuits would be the menu. But I was in luck's way, for 'Pincher', upon the request of my big brother, had given me permission to spend the day with him on board the barque *Watkins*, and the gig was placed at my disposal. The Kroo boys on this special day used oars, and, as I held the yoke lines, and gave the order to push off, I felt almost bursting with pride. How was I dressed? Why, in my best, of course – white calico shirt and pants and red sash, (swank, no doubt), and, thanks to dear 'Old Joe', they were all my own making. I was well received on board the *Watkins*, for my brother was a Somebody, being well up in his business of Cook and Steward. His ship was well rationed. 'Full and plenty, no waste' was his motto, and in the end it was cheaper than doling out the pound and pint. The men were much more contented, because they knew there would be something on their plates for every meal. Whereas with wretched 'Moses', one day's rations, badly cooked, were sent to the fo'c'sle at mid-day, with the result that after supper there would be nothing left for breakfast. The same applied to tea, sugar and coffee, which was served out weekly.

I had dinner with the men, which was my wish, and I noted well how nicely it was served. Soup, stuffed roast pork, and plum duff. Each had his own knife and fork and plates (no sheath knife or tin plates here.) The cook was a good one and the men knew and appreciated his services. Any food not eaten was returned to the galley and hashed up for the next meal. I had supper aft (there is no tea-time on board ship). At sundown I returned to my ship more than ever dissatisfied with the way in which our rations were cooked and served.

On the West Coast shoals of whales are often met with. The Gulf of Guinea, I believe, is a breeding ground, so that they are free from being hunted. I have seen them so close to the ship that I could have thrown a lump of coal into their blow hole. To see these huge monsters covered with barnacles is a sight not to be forgotten. On one particular day the men said there was a thrasher about, but whether he was fighting or at play, I could not say. He would leap right out of the water and his tail would flop the surface with the report of a cannon. I could quite understand what I read about small ships or boats getting a whack and it was all up.

Talking of barnacles reminds me that our ship, having been at sea a long time, would be covered with them on the sides and bottom, which impeded sailing and steering. At even tide our Kroo boys were organised to dive under and pick off what they could. Each boy had his own bucket which he placed on deck at the spot from which he was diving, and brought the barnacles up as he picked them off. The owner of the bucket which was filled first would get the best prize. But the wicked sailormen would take out some while the boys were diving, and they

could not understand why the buckets would not fill up. ‘Quee, quee, some witch bucket, no full.’ This went on for several evenings, until one of the boys who had dived right under and came up on the other side spotted the last lot we had dumped sinking through the water. Needless to say, for the future a boy remained on deck to watch the buckets. Poor, silly boys – ‘when the horse has bolted’. However, they were elated that they had ‘catchee white man’.

‘Cockney’ was in disgrace. During his anchor watch he was caught red-handed by ‘Pincher’ stealing onions from the poop deck. It was a silly thing to do because ‘Pincher’s’ berth was right underneath. All hands were mustered aft to receive a lecture on this terrible crime. The same old yarn – ‘There was a time when I could have given a dozen lashes or more, but as I can’t do that now, and to make you all remember that I’m captain of this ship, I will make him polish the copper swung in a bow-line’. This was most refined cruelty, for he had to sit in a loop of rope from 6 am till 6 pm day after day, and the rope would soon cut into his flesh. Moreover, every time the ship rolled he would be up to his neck in water, and water infested with sharks! Just think, if you can, what this job meant. The poor fellow’s gruelling lasted a fortnight, and then he went sick, which was not to be wondered at. When the ship arrives home the people will probably say, ‘How nice and bright her copper is!’ They little know how and why!

For some time past I had had a nice job. ‘Bung’ had got very much behindhand in making casks, and oil was coming aboard very fast. So I was told off as an assistant. I liked the work very much, for using tools was my delight. I was also learning something useful, and in my spare time I made toy tubs and various articles in this line. ‘Bung’ gave me every encouragement to push on and learn, and my little smattering of geometry now came in very useful.

Our rations had lately been very bad. The salt beef and pork had turned green and rancid, the biscuits and flour mouldy and full of weevils, likewise the peas and rice, the sugar had turned into a liquid. The black stewards were to blame for all this except in the case of the meat, for they in their carelessness had often left off the covers of the lockers in the store room, and cockroaches, ants and other insects had caused havoc. All sorts of things not wanted would get served up with our food, and at last we could stand it no longer. Everybody agreed that we should go aft and complain, with ‘Old Joe’ as our spokesman. I had yet to learn how little to be trusted were the two who were most voluble in their praise of the proposition – ‘Cockney’ and ‘Moses’. They did the most shouting, but when it came to going aft and complaining they were conspicuous by their absence. The sneaks backed out at the last moment by saying that as ‘Pincher’ was always down on them it would be better for all if they kept out of it. The real white

men faced the music, and, each carrying some part of the rations, marched aft. 'Pincher' was walking the poop when we came up to him, and he expressed some surprise. 'What's up, men?' he inquired. 'Old Joe', respectfully taking off his cap (we all did likewise), said, 'Sorry, Captain, but our grub is not what it ought to be'. 'Oh, I was not aware that anything was wrong with it', replied 'Pincher'. He then examined our food, and said, 'Sorry men it is so bad, those two black scamps must have left the lockers open, and those nasty things got in. Men, I want you to remember that the food had been aboard over twelve months, and heaven only knows when the meat was first salted, or the other stuff made. However, the next ship out is bringing our second year's provisions. In the meantime try and put up with it, and I will do my best to buy what may be obtained on shore in the way of pigs (bosilla), but these are not over good for you, because they are the scavengers of the towns, eating up all the filth. I must be careful in this matter.' 'Old Joe' thanked him for giving us a hearing and hoped that all good feeling would continue fore and aft, and we returned to our quarters. Needless to say, the two skunks had a rough time.

We were now running down the coast for the last time, and where the trusts were not fully met, passengers were sometimes taken in lieu. Our last trading town, Cape Lahou, had completed its quota, and it only remained for us to sail to Half Jack, exchange our passengers, get three new hands from the other ships there, discharge our Kroo boys, and hop it for home, having had some fourteen months on the coast.

The Kroo boys were leaving to return to their country, and we to ours. Everybody was happy. They, especially, for they had been given our old unseaworthy surf-boat, which was loaded with the balance of wages due to them. There were twenty-eight of them, and they had a pull of some hundred miles or more against wind and strong current in an old leaky boat. Many were now rich and would be buying their first wife. 'Dabbery', the cook's mate, would be able to claim his lovely 'Buggery Isaiah' (this was a very general personal name on the coast.) Without any breach of confidence I well know his feelings towards her. Whites are not the only people who have love matches.

Good-byes were said – 'I you, I you, Ka' – and finger snapping with the whole twenty-eight of them. 'Booto', 'Dago' and 'Dabbery' were most affectionate. 'Jerry, you come next voyage and teach us book, we like you bery much.' Away they went, chanting a song to the rhythm of the paddles. Happy Kroo boys. They would have a pull of several days. But what odds? It was for home and loved ones.

We got our three new hands. Old ones, of course, were always transferred, because they were more likely to fall sick. From two of these men I learnt a great deal of the world and its peoples. Tom H——, an old naval man, had spent much time in Japan, and he told

wonderful stories of the Japanese. He was in the ship that carried our first ambassadors in 1864.⁶⁵ The other, old Jerry B——, had sailed in the old packet ships, windjammers of the Western Ocean, prior to the great steamship lines. He was an old man now, for disease and the rough life had played havoc with him. His legs were black from frost-bite and scurvy. ‘Old Joe’ and he had been ship-mates before. Both had travelled the world over and its roads, and knew its wrong turnings, and I gleaned much from their experience.

We had on board thirty parrots, one or more to each man. Also, everybody had his West African curios, model canoes, paddles, monkeys’ skins, native cloth and gold rings, besides a host of things made by themselves in their spare time, such as mats and rugs. A good sailorman is never idle.

On the morning of sailing ‘Pincher’ said, ‘Jerry, get your kit, and resume duties in the cabin for the homeward passage, and tell Mr Mate I shall be dining with him in the fore cabin’. I saluted and said, ‘Yes, sir’. I had expected this. The black servants were now gone and there would be no interference. I knew my work and intended to put my best into it. Mr Mate was not over pleased with my message. ‘Well, Jerry’, he said, ‘I suppose I must dine with him, although he doesn’t deserve it. But it will be somebody to talk to’.

The anchor came up with a flip, and ‘Fare thee well, we’re homeward bound for Bristol town’. ‘Blow the man down’ was sung by the men. Sails were set, ensign dipped, and the West Coast of Africa soon disappeared from view. Watches were set and soon everything was in ship-shape order. My duties in the cabin were light. ‘Pincher’ and Mr Mate were now settled down and it was a pleasure to listen to the conversation. ‘Pincher’ was far from well, but with me he was OK, often testing me on what knowledge I’d gained in the fo’c’sle of seamanship, knots and splices and things in general. I came well up to scratch in my work and in my answers and he said, ‘Waal, Jerry, your brother is a splendid cook and steward, but you’re cut out for a sailorman’. ‘That’s my intention, sir’, I said.

Four weeks had passed since we had left the coast, and my only adventures were the capture of a few sharks and the hooking of pilot fish. They are about six inches long, and supposed to be great pals with Mr Shark, going before him to seek out his prey: hence the name pilot. In the water they look very pretty, striped black and yellow like a tiger. There were some swimming under our cutwater. I made a very small hook, baited it, and number one was soon in a bucket of salt

⁶⁵ This may refer to the bombardment in 1864 by a combined British, French, Dutch, and American fleet to reopen the Shimonoseki Straits. Alternatively Langdon may be referring to the arrival of Harry Parkes as British minister to Japan in 1865.

water. Number two soon followed, and I said to 'Pincher', 'I've two of those fish, sir'. He was very surprised, and said that he had never known them to take the hook before. 'You young beggar, you can catch anything'. In a few hours, however, these fish went west, and when dead they lost all their beautiful colouring.

Calm after calm succeeded, and we just drifted south. The men were kept painting the ship, for she must look spick and span for our home-coming (including the polished copper on the sides).

Wonder of wonders, there was a ship bearing down on us, the first ship we had seen since we had left the coast. It was a mail boat, SS *Roman*,⁶⁶ and it passed close to our stern. 'Pincher' hailed to get our bearings and Greenwich time, for our chronometers were rocky, at least I heard 'Pincher' say that they did not keep time.

I noted when holding the chart that we were four degrees south of the line.⁶⁷ 'Pincher' was always whistling for wind. A puff came from the SE. It freshened. It was the south-east trade wind, and every stitch of canvas was put on, and we were now really homeward bound. North by west was our course, and we soon re-crossed the line, and at about one degree north I saw the North Star just dipping on the horizon. Every night I used to watch this star rise higher, and the Southern Cross sink lower.

With the south-east trade we met with an immense school of albacore and benito, which must have numbered hundreds of thousands. The sea all around was just covered with these fish, and they followed us for some three weeks, the barnacles on the sides and bottom of our ship being no doubt the attraction, for it meant a good feed for them. I heard old Tom remark that if anyone fell overboard it would be all up. He had seen a similar lot when serving in HMS ——. A messmate fell overboard, and before the ship hove to, the fish were at him. They could be seen clinging to his raised arms. His captain, since there was no hope of rescuing him in time, had him shot to end his misery. I heard also that a school of mackerel would attack anyone who was unfortunate enough to fall among them.

We got much sport from these fish, and several hooks and lines were lost when trying to hook twenty to thirty pounders. It was no easy matter to hold a large fish with the ship going through the water at eight or ten knots. Our lost lines could be seen for days dangling to the fish which had got away. We tried to re-hook them, but nothing done. Once bitten, twice shy. Then for sheer wantonness I

⁶⁶ Possibly the SS *Roman Empire*, 1,542 tons, of the Calcutta run.

⁶⁷ i.e. the Equator. It was usual for ships trading to West Africa to sail south of the line for their return, in order to catch the south-east trade winds, rather than attempt to return directly along the coast.

would catch one and tie pieces of tin or wood to it and throw it back into the sea and watch it swimming with the rest. Porpoises played havoc with them, but there was no apparent diminution in numbers. I here got the finest sport I should ever have. I was out on the jib-boom and was letting the fish chase the hook. When you won't let them take the hook they sort of get wild, and a good number would bunch themselves together and jump for it, when you could take your choice. I was doing this one day when a porpoise and family suddenly appeared and they made short work of the bunch. I hooked a benito, however, and dangled it before the porpoises, who chased it, and I played with them as I played with the others, until finally benito and hook disappeared inside the porpoise. It was rather a unique catch, but I couldn't hold the monster. It must have weighed one hundred and fifty pounds or more. How it digested my large fish-hook I cannot say.

We had fish fried, boiled or baked for every meal, and to give 'Moses' some little credit he made some delicious fish-soup by simmering the fish for several days. Even 'Pincher' praised it, and I think it did him good, for after his good fare on the coast our salt junk, which might have been some old cab-horse, did upset his digestion.

In due course we ran through the south-east trade wind and for a few days were in the Doldrums, with the usual thunder storms, calms, or wind boxing the compass almost every hour. We picked up the north-east trade wind and away we went towards the roaring forties, where we sighted a splendid four-masted barque. She was bearing towards us and passed close enough to read our message written on a large blackboard and to answer in a similar manner. This was found to be much quicker than flag-wagging. Her decks were well lined with men, women and children. She was an emigrant ship, eleven days out from Glasgow, bound for Melbourne. 'Pincher' again obtained our bearings and Greenwich time (it was almost like asking our way home). What a magnificent sight she looked. Somebody has said that a ship is the most beautiful thing man ever made. Yes, but she must be in full sail, with a good breeze, bowing to every swell. Then, indeed, she certainly becomes a thing of life and beauty. She carried a great spread of canvas, including sky-sails and studding sails. Our little cockle-shell of two hundred and ninety three tons seemed so small, and indeed, we all felt so little gazing at such a stately object.

We sighted and passed the two western islands of the Azores. 'Pincher' again got his bearings and the time, he seemed always worried about his chronometer. I would hear at table, 'They are not correct', 'Our longitude is out', 'On such and such a night the moon or a star will be eclipsed, must take a sight'. Jerry was very keen on this, and wanted to know much about the heavens. Of course, he was supposed

not to hear what was said at table, but he did, and much of it was added to his store of knowledge.

There was much grouching among the crew. It appeared that 'Pincher' had promised to serve out grog after we had passed the western islands. Some time previously I had noticed, when down in the lazaretto, that the bung in the cask of rum had been withdrawn and the barrel was upside-down. I reported this to 'Pincher', who said, 'That's alright, Jerry, I did it, was going to give them grog, but changed my mind'. This almost cost him his job, for after our arrival home, somebody spread the yarn that he drank the rum himself, was drunk most of the time with it, and could not navigate properly. The owners held an inquiry, but I was able to corroborate his ill health, and the empty rum cask, by which, I hope, I did 'Pincher' at least one good turn.

For some days the wind had been dead ahead and we were tacking and putting ship about every four hours. I saw by the chart that we were just outside the Bay of Biscay. I also noted the bearings of Falmouth, whither we were bound for orders, but unless the wind changed we should be a long time reaching there.⁶⁸ 'Pincher', whose health had not improved, was much worried by the adverse wind, and spent most of his time on deck repeating to the helmsman, 'Keep her close, keep her close to the wind'. Many times I would hear through the skylight, 'Jerry, load another pipe, light it, see that it draws well, and bring it on deck'.

'Square the yards!' Hullo, what's up? We had sighted a strange object on the lee-bow, and bearing towards it discovered it to be a large telegraph buoy which had become adrift. 'Pincher' said that this must be entered in the official log and reported. A few days later we got another scare. It was on a lovely moonlight evening, with a stiff head wind blowing, when I heard through the sky-light (I was in the cabin), 'Jerry, the glasses, sharp!' I knew what the last word meant, and he had them in a tick. On our weather quarter, only a few yards away, was a fair sized ship bottom upwards. A close shave. Had we bumped her it might have been Davy Jones' locker for all of us. 'This also', said 'Pincher', 'must be logged and reported'.

We were nearing land and the colour of the sea had changed from deep blue to green. Orders were given for deep sea soundings (this was fresh to me). 'Pincher' had already given me good practice, when on the coast, with the hand lead line up to fifteen fathoms. This would be one hundred fathoms with a lead of thirty pounds. The bottom of this lead was hollowed out and filled with tallow, so that when it reached

⁶⁸ Ships returning from West Africa would return to Falmouth, Plymouth, or, as occurred on Langdon's second voyage, Cobh, for orders as to where they were to take their cargo for landing. This would usually depend on market prices.

the bottom of the sea the tallow or arming would pick up a sample of the soil from the sea-bed, by which 'Pincher' could get his bearings on referring to the chart. Deep sea soundings cannot be taken while the ship is sailing. She has to be brought to a standstill, hove to, and then the lead is passed outside the ship from stern to jib-boom, each member of the crew at equal distances holding the line clear of obstacles. As the line pays out, each man calls to the next, 'Watch, there, watch', until it reaches the officer in charge at the stern, who watches the whole line pay out. 'Ninety fathoms, sir, and no bottom.' It was hard work for all hands to haul in this length with a thirty pounds weight on the end, the strain had been increased by the lee-way the ship had been making. After several attempts, at intervals of four hours, bottom at eighty fathoms was obtained, with the arming showing small brown pebbles. 'Pincher' had now his whereabouts and the course was set for the English channel.

The next day at supper, 5.30 pm, 'Pincher' said, 'Jerry, when you have washed up, take the glasses to the royal yard and have a good look round'. At sunset I reported land on the port bow, about twenty miles distant. When it became dark, and we were nearing the point sighted, we saw the reflection of flashes of light well up in the sky appear at regular intervals. It was the Lizard. 'Waal, Mr Mate', said 'Pincher', 'I guess we shan't make Falmouth with this wind by the morning. We shall fetch the Eddystone and put into Plymouth.'

In the early morning a Plymouth pilot took charge. There was very little wind, but my word, he knew how to handle a ship. He made good use of every catspaw or current, and we were soon so close to Eddystone that we could have knocked the old stump lighthouse with a biscuit shy. The sea here must be very deep. We drifted into the Sound, dropped anchor, and for the first time for over eighteen months the ship lay without a roll.

A medical officer from the Board of Health arrived. 'You are from the West Coast of Africa, any fever on board? No? Well, you are from the fever climate. Forty-eight hours quarantine.' The yellow flag 'Q' was then hoisted. Next came the Board of Trade officer for any reports, and to examine the official log. He saw the entry for the telegraph buoy adrift and for the ship bottom up, and said that it must be seen to at once. Within an hour a Trinity House⁶⁹ ship, whose commander had taken full particulars, was steaming out on the search.

'Pincher' had gone ashore to wire the owners for orders and another captain to take charge, for his health would not hold out any longer.

⁶⁹ Trinity House was the institution responsible, under the Board of Trade, for regulating the safety of British shipping, particularly with reference to maintaining lighthouses and navigation buoys and licensing pilots. It was also responsible for clearing wrecks.

This would cause some two days delay, but my time was very profitably spent, for old Tom H——, being an ex-naval man, knew Plymouth well, and he told me all about the building of the breakwater by convict labour, and of the training brigs.

We got a visit from the port missionary, but he was not asked if he would like a bass. Oh no, he was not out for that. He shook hands and said, 'How de do, lads, you've had a long voyage and been away from home a long time'. Gradually the temptations of shore life were brought up, and he gave us some very sound advice. His proposal to hold a service in the fo'c'sle hold was received with acclamation, and it will never be forgotten. It touched the hearts of everybody. But alas, his good work was soon marred by the foul work of the bum-boat men. Drink was obtained from them and when the men had no more money to pay for it they parted with their kit or valuable curios. Silly fellows, to let those rascals take advantage. I should just like to have put the punch on them.

Fresh vegetables were received, but 'Moses' was on the beer, and, as during his last bout at Christmas Eve, they were not properly cooked. The result of all this beer drinking was that their tummies were very much out of order, for they had been on salt tack and lime-juice for nearly three months.

Our new captain had arrived, a very young man, who had risen to a trader.⁷⁰ This was his first command, and he strutted about the poop like a bantam cock. Our orders were for Bristol, so up came the anchor, and down the English Channel we sailed and rounded Land's End clear of the Longships. When I made the close acquaintance of our new captain's boot, for answering 'Old Shocker' pertly, this was the first act of brutality during the voyage, and from a little wipper snapper not much bigger than myself, I should very much like to have returned the compliment by using some of the tricks I had learnt from the men in boxing. But I thought it best not to, since these men have great power behind them, and, knowing this, many of the skunks are always ready to use it.

We were becalmed off the west of Lundy Island. It was a glorious moonlight night, and the old tug *Refuge* came alongside and asked where we were bound for. 'Bristol', we replied. 'Tow you up for thirty pounds', they said, 'using our own tow rope'. After much haggling the price was dropped to twenty pounds with the use of our tow rope. Twice this rope was wilfully broken by sudden jerks from the tug, because they wished to use their own and so earn another fiver. Our bantam cock showed himself off at his best by saying, with several cuss-words interspersed for emphasis, 'I say, Mr Tug, if you part that rope again I shall cry off'. It did not happen again.

⁷⁰ Capt. Luke, *Bristol Presentments*, 14 September 1882.

We had a sixteen hours tow before us, so the sails were stowed in the best ship-shape fashion, and the ship looked spick and span to enter the dear old port of Bristol.

How beautiful and green England appeared after the yellow sands of Africa on that lovely autumn Sunday evening. All Bristol seemed to be at Cumberland Basin.⁷¹ I could only get a glimpse, for I was kept busy with the customs officers, putting contrabands under seal.

The men were going ashore. ‘Shake, Jerry, shake, you’re a good lad’, they said. With ‘Old Shocker’, dear ‘Old Joe’, and old Jerry B——, it was the last shake, for before I embarked on my second voyage their toes were turned up to the daisies. The beer and fresh vegetables did it.

At last I was ready to leave, and walked the plank ashore, feeling very bashful at seeing so many people in their Sunday best. ‘Ain’t he a brown ’un?’ I heard somebody remark. [...] I was very shabby-looking for I had much outgrown my clothes, such as they were. Still, it did not matter for I’d a pay day coming.

I had confidence in myself, for years of experience had been rolled into eighteen months and ten days. I had rubbed shoulders with men and things, had gained much knowledge of things in general, but above all of the two sides of life, Good and Evil, and I felt within myself the will to hold fast to the first and reject the latter.

⁷¹ The *Ceara*, Capt. Luke, returned to Bristol from the west coast of Africa with a cargo of 688 casks of palm oil and a quantity of coconuts for R. & W. King on 14 September, *Customs Bills of Entry, Bill A*, 16 September 1882.

SECOND VOYAGE

13 October 1882 to 25 March 1883

I've been home nearly a month, and funds are getting low. [...] I have two offers, as an ordinary seaman, thirty shillings a month, to the West African Rivers.⁷² The first was made by that little Cock-Crow, with whose boot I had already made an acquaintance; the bruise has not yet disappeared. I turn it down. Lucky kick! Lucky Jerry! for that ship after leaving Bristol was never heard of. The second was on my old ship. Another captain and also a Trader from a competitive firm had been taken on.⁷³

Our owners, I believe, always started their captains with a river voyage, and if they returned with a whole skin, were given a trading voyage. Even sailormen would fight shy of these pestilential rivers. I had heard 'Pincher' talk of his gruelling. Most of his men were down with fever, and three died. 'Never again, Mr Mate', he said, 'will I take command of a river ship'. This and other yarns had somewhat fired my imagination, so I decided to take my chance. Also I had heard that the wearing of flannels, if you could, would ward off fever, so I get a fair supply made up.

Signing-on day, and the usual crowd of pimps outside the shipping office. 'Join your ship at Bathurst Basin, on Saturday October 13th at 7 am Attwood.' I keep my ears and eyes open when signing on, and take note of my coming ship-mates. All save old Tom H—— are strangers, mostly Americans. There was a Jordie⁷⁴ (north-east coast man), and also a well-dressed Bristol boy, whose pay for the voyage was five pounds. The mate, Mr Mac—— looks hot stuff, red hair, pointed beard, an Irishman. The second mate, a big fellow, had a full grey beard, was cross-eyed, and he too was not nice looking. The cook and steward is my big brother, who had returned in the barque *Watkins* about a week ago, and was off again at once. He was saving to get

⁷² i.e. the rivers of the Niger Delta and its neighbours in the Bights of Benin and Biafra.

⁷³ Capt. Gay, *Bristol Presentments*, 12 October 1882. For voyages to the Niger Delta and its neighbouring rivers in the early nineteenth century it was usual for there to be a supercargo, in addition to the master, on board the ship; the former would be responsible for the trading activities of the voyage. There were few remaining 'competitive firms' to Kings in Bristol in this period; the main one would have been Lucas Bros, owners of the *Watkins* that Langdon's brother served on.

⁷⁴ i.e. Geordie.

married, and has four pounds a month against my thirty shillings. I shall have to put in four years before the mast to get my AB ticket.

Mr Mac—— invited everyone to a drink. Rather unusual for an officer, I thought, to thus mix with the men. The reason was soon known. His father-in-law, an ex-convict, ex-pugilist, now a cab-driver, keeps on the quay, or rather his wife does, a pub and boarding house of very evil repute. Nearly all the crew are staying at this house, hence the free drinks. Poor beggars, there won't be much of their advance note left when these wretches have skinned them. They were very surprised at my taking only ginger beer. 'Why, you'll never be a sailorman on that stuff.' 'I'm going to try, sir', I said. I chink my glass with him, saying, 'Good health and voyage, sir'. 'H'm, he knows how to do it.' The pimps and parasites are now mingling with the crew, to get free drinks, and perchance rob them. I, too, have my advance note. Hop it, Jerry.

Sailing day arrives. [...] I am full of confidence, feel well grounded in my work, eager to start and show what I really know. Good-bye is said. 'Mind you keep your promise and always wear your flannels.'

On board, and away we go. The same old story; crew drunk, including the two mates, and the powder runners⁷⁵ work the ship. Ninety tons have to be taken aboard whilst slowly towing down channel. The jib-boom has to be got out, the back-stays, back-ropes and martin-gale have to be set up. Mr Mac stands at the ship's hand, or tries to, holding on to a rope for support. It is much past the bee season but a great number are buzzing around, he must have a nest inside his mouth. No matter, my aim is to show that I know my job. When everything is home and set taut I overhear him say, to the second, 'That young —— will be in my watch'.

Off Battery Point⁷⁶ the lighter with ninety tons of gunpowder hauls alongside, and fires are extinguished. This has to be handled without a break by passing from hand to hand and stowed in our fore peak. The position allotted to myself is between the two ships, a most uncomfortable one, a slip would land me in the soup, also I have to cry 'tally' up to ten. Hour after hour at this was hard and trying work, and when finished I am hoarse with calling 'tally', my muscles and back ache badly.

I then take my first turn at the wheel, steering after the tug-boat, and find it much easier than steering by the compass or by the wind. We are now well in sight of Lundy, and it is getting dark. The tug hauls alongside and takes off the runners and pilot, who, when leaving, gives the course and remarks, 'You'll have a dirty night, shouldn't get

⁷⁵ i.e. the seamen responsible for loading gunpowder.

⁷⁶ At the mouth of the Avon, by Portishead.

above the top-sails, if I were you, captain. Good-bye. Safe voyage.'

The crew assemble aft and watches are picked. Mr Mac places his hand on my shoulder and says to the second mate, 'This lad is mine'. Each officer gives his men a short homily, in rather profound language, what he expects of them. 'Aye, aye, sir', reply the men.

The first watch at sea is always taken by the first mate, eight till twelve midnight. We start with a fierce south-wester, and I have the first look-out. I thought of the last time I sailed this way, the sea-sickness and turps will never be forgotten. I inwardly chuckle for I've got my sea legs now, and am able to go aloft and watch the ship dip her nose into the heavy sea. Still, it gave one a creepy feeling to think of the jib or flying-jib being stowed, for it was so very dangerous on the jib-boom when it was blowing hard, and one has to stand sort of sideways on the foot-ropes. Chanty⁷⁷ songs out there are not of much use to guide the men, it is either hang on or get washed off. At midnight I turned in.

Up again next morning at four, eight bells, and, though it was Sunday, all hands are kept busy lashing down, coiling ropes towards getting ship in good sea trim.

By now everybody has realised that they were under the command of brutal officers. Save cuss words, I never received a blow from Mr Mac. A blackguard and a brute he was, but before the end of the voyage I learnt that even he possessed a soul, and he became my friend and protector. I cannot say the same for Mr Second Mate, but will sum him up as a big muscular bully.

I must now introduce a few of the ship's company, with their pet names and characteristics.

The captain. Well, on the whole, not a bad sort. No side, and so different from 'Pincher'. Never interferes with the mates, and rarely gives orders to the men direct, save on special occasions. Very fond of pea-soup, has it at table every meal. Perhaps he thinks that like the flannel it will ward off the fever. He loves to drive the ship for all she's worth, sits on the taff-rail and watches the ship put her nose into a big roller, and jokes with the helmsman, 'That's a good one', forgetting that it meant wet berths for us chaps for'ard. 'The soup or peas, I know not which', he says, 'become very tuneful'. A most jolly fellow.

'Uncle John', an AB, American (State of Maine), a six-footer, was in the American Civil War, and the *Kearsarge* of Alabama fame.⁷⁸ Was a well read man, also a splendid reader. Book after book he would read

⁷⁷ [sic] Shanty.

⁷⁸ The CSS *Alabama* was a warship built at a British dock for the confederate government during the American Civil War. Launched in 1862, it inflicted considerable damage on federal shipping until sunk by the USS *Kearsarge* near Cherbourg in 1864.

aloud, and to those who could not read it was a great delight. They would say, ‘Uncle, give us some reading, will you, or spin us a yarn?’ He was never aggressive, although I never met his equal in boxing, it was really beautiful to see him knock out a bully. I learnt much of his history. The same old story. Has now passed his prime. Sciatica has its grip on him.

‘Chester’, another AB, six-footer, American, had sailed much in the lake⁷⁹ schooners, a fresh water sailor. Pages could be written about this man. A born artist, and he looked it. Long lank hair with gaunt features. Reckless abandon. Only twenty-six years of age and has to pay the price of his folly already. Just left a certain hospital and his mind is affected. Won’t turn in for sleep, but sits on his sea-chest, with his head in his hands, breathing out terrible vengeance on women of a certain class. Poor ‘Chester’, I won’t say he was a bad man at heart, but I must say he was a foolish one. Sketching or painting were the only things that would take him out of himself. He was always daubing, and what beautiful shades he would make from the ship’s paint pots. If he saw a lovely sky or sunset, he would say, ‘I must paint that’. He did, but also, the evil side of nature was not left out, and this I must say was in most demand.

Another A.B., who calls himself an American, was a powerful bully. ‘Uncle John’ says he’s a fraud, a German posing as a Yank. Name of Bill Smith. He can’t read or write, I write and read his love letters. Tries to bully, and ‘Uncle John’ knocks him out in the first round. Oh, it was grand to see a lump of fourteen stone crying for quarter.

The next is a Jordie man, who served an apprenticeship in North Sea fishing, spent some time on the Grand Banks⁸⁰ in this line, and was a good shanty man. Decent fellow on the whole, but his one failing was that he thought the North Coast men were The Ones and only ones, and this sometimes caused fierce discussion and bitterness.

And lastly, the ship’s boy. Poor kid, this was to be his first and last voyage. He had never fended for himself, and had been overcared for at home. To him it is truly a dog’s life. Has a good number of starched shirts, frilled fronts, collars and ties, and on Sundays does the swank. Wore a watch and chain, but was told to stow that unless he wanted it pinched. Has no go in him, scared to go aloft, never did. All the odd jobs were given him, helped the cook. He is in the second mate’s watch and is having a sorry time with that brute.

We are about two weeks out and the head winds and gales have driven us well into the Bay of Biscay. If we could only clear Cape Finsterre the way would be open to sail south. We’ve had a gruelling.

⁷⁹ Presumably the Great Lakes of North America.

⁸⁰ i.e. the Grand Banks fisheries off Newfoundland.

Tack and tack, and the ship is overstrained with such driving, the deck seams have opened and our fo'c'sle and berths are always wet. During every Watch the pumps are manned, but it takes some time before we hear the joyful cry, 'There she sucks'. We never had this in 'Pincher's' time, he would not carry on in bad weather.

The men are in a very bad mood, the mates have been rubbing it in, every night watch it was sweat up this or that, mostly unnecessary work. They are talking among themselves that when sweating up the braces all will simultaneously let go, and of course, the officer who always takes the lead will have his whole weight on the rope, and will just be flicked overboard. In fact, his number will be up. This was, I had heard, an old trick often done to get rid of brutal officers. Life to some of these dare-devils was so very cheap. I hear all but say nothing. It shan't come off. As the youngest seaman, the belaying-pin is mine, I have to take the turns off pin, haul in the slack, if any, and make fast. Thanks to 'Pincher' being a splendid teacher I never take off the last turn until the slack is in. Like the reef-knot, he always explained the danger to life by not doing the right thing on board a ship. The men, I feel sure, did, on several occasions, slacken their hold, but the turn was always on the pin.

We have cleared the Cape, the wind shifted a point or two, and we are now heading south. The weather continues rough. One morning I came on deck at 4 am and away to the east the sky appears to be on fire. With awe, wonder and amazement I gaze at the great comet of November 1882.⁸¹ Its brilliant head is about 23 degrees above the horizon, and the tail appears to fall into the sea. A beautiful spectacle. Every morning I watch it rise. It becomes smaller and smaller until at Cameroon in December, it was overheard at 10 pm, but very faint. We had altered our position some thousands of miles, the 'comet' some millions. Oh, how I did wish I was clever enough to work out its course.

'Uncle John' has gone sick – sciatica. The poor fellow can't move. I take him in hand, for last voyage I had read and re-read *The Ship's Captain's Medical Guide*. In fact, I possess a copy. I used to help 'Pincher', who, when dosing the men, would say, 'Jerry, see that so and so gets a dose of Epsom Salts for a week', and I became fairly well acquainted with the Medicine Chest and its uses, even to the making of poultices. 'Uncle John' gets some rather hot salt-water bathing – hot flannels, hot salt bag over affected part. Someone, who had my welfare at heart, packed in my kit a large bottle of Enos' Fruit Salts, with orders 'to take

⁸¹ The comet of 1882, sometimes termed the Great September comet, initially became visible to the naked eye on 1 September 1882 and remained so for 135 days; S.P. Maran (ed.), *The Astronomy and Astrophysics Encyclopedia* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 117.

a dose every morning, when in those dreadful rivers'. I dig it out, and 'Uncle' says, 'Why, Jerry, that's a godsend; it always did me good'. He is dosed with the whole of it, and in a week is back to duty. He was so grateful. 'Jerry, my lad, I shall never forget you.' I have made a good friend.

Madeira is sighted and passed. It was grand weather. We have a passenger, called 'Bob, the Carpenter', who has been home on leave, got married, and was going back to his job: he was under a contract for three years. He had with him a dog, and was looking forward to its companionship in the lonely life he would have to live. It is missing, and suspicion has fallen on the Second Mate, who had repeatedly kicked it, owing to the ropes getting messed up, and had threatened to dump it overboard. No one ever thought such a cruel threat could be carried out. It was sad to see how 'Bob' grieved – 'My all, my chum, who would have shared my solitude, when I may not see a white man for weeks. Later I shall learn no good has come to this ship.' The men are indignant; only a dirty skunk could do a dog in. 'Old Tom', who always has a parallel for every event, says, 'I don't like it, boys, that dog will bring bad luck to this ship. If this ship ever gets to the "Rivers", and I see her empty, then perhaps I'll tell something. I was in her afore. I'm looking for something.' 'What are you looking for?' 'Shan't say, until I'm sure; don't want to frighten anybody.' 'What's he looking for, Jerry, you was in her last voyage?' 'Bust if I know.'

A few days later we run into a severe thunder storm. It's our watch below. Fearful lightning flashes and thunder crashes. 'D'ye feel that? Pins and needles all over like. It's hit something!' All hands on deck! Yes, it has struck the yard-arm of the fore-yard, ran down the lower top-sail sheet to the deck, and knocked a man down. We find he is only stunned, and on revival says, 'What a whack it gave me'. The 'sheet', which was an iron chain, is fused. It is soon replaced by another and we fellows go below to talk. 'Old Tom' – 'What did I say? That dog would bring bad luck, shouldn't wonder if he ain't a-following us. What about the 90 tons of powder, only a few inches below a lightning flash?' 'Good Lor!' No one save Tom had thought of it.

The Cook and the Second Mate are having a royal battle of words. He who always overrides anyone below his own rating, it appeared, had entered the 'Cook's own Galley', without permission, and helped himself to hot water. They are calling each other names. It's nuts for myself to hear someone who is 'king of his own castle' talk freely to this bully. 'You call yourself a cook? I could make a better one out of putty. What about that burnt pea-soup? After dinner, I thought my last day had come.' 'You call your self a Mate? I could buy better ones for four a penny, you old boggle-cross-eyed cad. Can't take a sight without standing on your head. Can't see the side-lights. If the Board of Trade

knew, you would lose your ticket.⁸² This last did it. The Mate loses his control (if he had any). The Cook is down, and the brute is putting his boot into him. My brother! I can't stand this. In a flash an iron belaying-pin is whipped out, and I let fly. 'Twas a good shot – across his shoulders and neck. His attention is now turned towards myself. My fighting instincts are well to the fore, every trick I know crowds into my mind. If only I had my boots on! I step in sideways, my foot on his instep, get a bunch of his whiskers – for a keepsake. Look out, Jerry, or he will be on yours. It was a most unequal scrap – 12 stone against seven and a half – but one could only say I did my best. The Cook, who in the meantime had got himself together, went to the cabin and informed the Captain. His damaged face told its own tale. 'Struck you, has he? And a man living aft? I shall have a say in this.' In quick time he is on the scene of action. 'Stop that, Mr Mate, and go aft.' 'But, Sir, he slung a belaying-pin at me.' 'Go aft, I say, at once, or there'll be mutiny on this ship, ere long.' 'I did throw a pin at him, Sir, couldn't help it. He was kicking a man when down, and my brother, too! Had he been as big as the mainmast, I couldn't have stopped myself.' 'Go and wash your face, Jerry.' Scientifically, 'Uncle John' repairs the damage. 'Jerry, I'm so sorry you got such a drubbing. It could not be expected otherwise, but, lad, if ever I get half a chance, I'll mark that skunk, and it shall be a square scrap.'

What happened in the cabin, we chaps for'ard are supposed not to know. Gleelessly, the Cook told me all about it. Both Mates got a lecture and it ran something like this. 'Mind you, he had rough stuff to tackle, his shooting-iron was handy. Mr Mates, you know I've never interfered between you and the men in the working of this ship. When in the Bay, if either of you had gone overboard from off the Braces, I should not have been surprised. There's that dog business, too. A dastardly act, whoever did it. It has unsettled the men and also myself, because I once had a dog, and know what Bob's feelings must be. But when an Officer so far forgets himself as to strike a man living aft, and to enter his Galley without permission, I must tell him that it is a breach of discipline which I would not be guilty of myself. He's a good man, adds much to our comfort, and is one of ourselves. Therefore, you'll agree I'm only doing my duty in telling you these things.' 'Yes, Sir', says the Second Mate, 'I'm very sorry I lost my temper and struck the Cook. I couldn't stand what he said about my eyesight and the Board of Trade – that it would not stand a test. I have a wife and family to think of.' 'Yes, I know', says the captain, 'on that point I shall not let you down, but you must be careful, or you will let yourself down by

⁸² The Board of Trade was responsible for issuing certificates of efficiency for ship's officers after examination; this examination included an eyesight requirement.

the way you are treating the men'. 'Thank you, Sir. But what are you going to do about that kid who slung a belaying-pin at me? Suppose you'll log him? He ought to be triced up and I give him a round dozen or two.' 'I shall do neither. With some Captains it would be a very serious offence, he would soon be clapped in irons, logged, and perhaps at end of voyage, sent to prison. To tell you the truth, I always admire pluck.' 'And so do I', chimes in Mr Mac. 'The days of round dozens are past, which you must know. I am one of the few who desires to uplift the lower deck men. It's up to you to lend a hand. Try it. Save for two slackers, we have a decent lower deck crowd. Do your best for them and we'll leave it at that. Good afternoon, Mr Mates.'

After the Captain's straight and reasonable talk to his mates the ship became comfortable and happy. Only once did the Second lose his temper and strike a man, and this was entirely our own fault. We had discovered his tender spot, and our chanty-man was most unmerciful.

'Our Bo'sn, a Boggle-eyed son of a Gun,
Blow, my Bully boys, blow,
Lights red or green, they are not seen,
Blow, my Bully boys, blow,
Belaying pins are flying about,
Blow, my Bully boys, blow,
Burnt pea-soup gives him the Blues,
Blow, my Bully boys, blow.
His Wife and Kids are sure to suffer,
Blow, my Bully boys, blow.'

The praises of Captain and Mate were not forgotten. Landsmen may ask what purpose does chanty singing serve. Much. They are often used to give vent to feelings. Point out the Bill of Fare:

'What d'ye think he gave for dinner?
Monkeys' tails and Bullocks' liver.'

The sails Chanties are, I consider, the most serviceable. They have on many occasions saved life. Supposing, say, the large mainsail has to be stowed. Blowing hard, a black pitch night, ship tossing like a cork, no lights, save in very bad weather 'St Elmo's Fire' may be seen on iron work. The men take their stations on main-yard, the 'bunt' (centre), yard-arm and foot-rope. The sail is gathered up towards 'bunt' and is under the yard, the men on the foot-rope are leaning well forward, feet pointing aft. The sail has to be rolled over to the top of the yard. The chanty-man at the 'bunt' sings:

‘Oh now you Johnnie Boker,
Come roll and turn me over,
Do, my Johnnie Boker, do.’

At the last word ‘do’ every man pulls his best, up rolls the sail to the top of the yard, the men on the foot-rope are forced backwards, and their feet being reversed, it is easy to visualise what would happen to anyone who failed to act at the right moment. Hence the great value of chanty songs.

Rhyme, too, has a big place in seamanship. Most of the work is set to rhyme: ‘the rule of the road’, knots, splicing and a host of other things, which makes them very easy to remember.

Whilst dealing with this topic I must recount how the Second Mate lost his temper. After some weeks of sweet peace we have just entered the river. Sails have to be stowed, and ‘Jordie’ had composed a parody on ‘Johnnie Boker’, which was most offensive. ‘It’s too hot. I can’t stand this any longer’, and the Second put the punch on ‘Jordie’. ‘Uncle John’ then takes a hand. ‘You strike a man when on the main-yard, do you? Strike me!’ ‘No, “Uncle John”, it’s not your quarrel.’ ‘I shall make it mine’, says ‘Uncle John’. ‘Oh’, replies the Second, ‘double-banked am I?’ ‘You are not.’ The Second retreated down the main rigging, muttering, ‘I don’t know what ships and captains are coming to, now-a-day’. What can one think of ‘Uncle John’? Nobility, if you wish. He dared to risk even his life to save a ship-mate from this powerful bully. I have no doubt my affair was at the back of it. ‘Jerry, if I get half a chance I’ll mark that skunk.’

We encounter another thunderstorm and for some half an hour we were in an inferno. Continuous lightning flashes of all sorts and from all points, many striking the sea, which had the appearance of boiling. Deafening thunder. Three fire-balls. One with a bang as it met the water was most uncomfortably close. ‘Old Tom’ must, of course, call our attention to the powder. ‘If that had only hit us there would have been a bust-up, and it’s on a Saturday, too.’ Sulphurous fumes affect breathing. Someone aptly remarked, ‘There’s lumps of thunder dropping into the sea’. All were thankful when it passed, even our hard nuts admit they felt scared and wished never to see the like of it again.

The storm has set ‘Old Tom’ a-talking. ‘I’ve told you boys before and again Saturday’s the unlucky day for this ship.’ ‘Stow that. Friday is the day for sailors’ bad luck.’ ‘Tain’t for this ship. We left port on a Saturday, saw the comet, Bob’s dog dumped overboard, struck by lightning, Jerry had that awful licking.’ ‘That was good luck for us’, says someone. ‘Wast thee married on a Saturday?’ ‘Oh, Lor’, now I remember I was.’ ‘Then it’s your unlucky day, Tom.’ ‘It ain’t, that was the luckiest of my life. Missus keeps like a sort of shop out Bedminster

way.⁸³ I shall soon stop going to sea.’ ‘And sail in steam-boats?’ interrupted one of the boys. ‘No, I shan’t, I shall stay home and help her. Say what you like, Saturday puts nails in her coffin. Wait until I’ve seen her empty, then I’ll talk.’ ‘You old Jonah, why don’t you say what you are looking for?’ ‘Wait, don’t ask questions.’

The following Friday, ‘Land Ho on the starboard beam’. The high land of Fernando Island (10,000 feet).⁸⁴ Away on our port bow is seen the Peak of Cameroon Mountains (13,000 feet) – a beautiful sight, away looking up in the clear blue sky its snow-covered top sparkles in the sun. Next morning we are well in shore and can see the mountain base plainly. Does not appear very far inland. Difficult to say how far. Such a great mass upsets one’s calculation. The lines of vegetation are plainly seen. Later the land becomes very flat, with watery patches.

Early evening we drop anchor, they say at the mouth of Cameroon River.⁸⁵ When aloft furling sails I well spy out the land. Cannot see any sign of a river for miles around save a few patches of mud or sand covered with trees, some of the tops of which only show above the water. How much I would like to have a good peep at the chart, pinned to the cabin table. The Captain and Mr Mac are well studying it; they have without a doubt a very difficult task to navigate with so few points of bearing.

Sunday, with tide and sea breeze the ship’s head is pointed towards the river. My station is in the main chains heaving the lead. Chart and soundings are the most essential. I cry the various depths – ‘By the mark 7, deep 6, by the mark 5, deep 4, by the mark 3. Great Scott! Six threes are 18. She’s drawing 16 feet of water. The lead is not going over the ground and a soft bottom, Sir’. ‘Aye, aye.’ The ship has grounded on the bar.⁸⁶ The sails are well filled but no progress is made. Later I report that the lead is dragging over the ground. The bar is cleared and the water deepens in places to 6, 7 and 8 fathoms. As we proceed up, the land on the right slightly rises, which gives some semblance of a bank. The hulks are sighted (store ships).⁸⁷ Sails clewed

⁸³ To the south-west of Bristol.

⁸⁴ The island of Fernando Po (now Bioko), which the Spanish had claimed since 1778, was formally occupied by Spain in 1858. It had been briefly occupied by the British between 1827–1834 and acted thereafter as an important provisioning centre for ships in the trade of the Bight of Biafra. Its facilities included a rudimentary hospital. It was also used as a depot where Kru could be landed at the end of a trading voyage to await a ship returning to the Kru coast.

⁸⁵ Strictly, the Cameroons estuary of the Wouri river.

⁸⁶ Most of the rivers in the Bights of Benin and Biafra had submerged sand bars at their mouths. Navigating across these was extremely hazardous; the use of local pilots was usually required, though payment of these became an issue of some controversy between British traders and local authorities.

⁸⁷ Hulks, which were used as store ships by traders, became increasingly common in

up and stored. Are now proceeding with the tide, which is very fast, some six to seven knots. The Captain is giving Mr Mac orders, 'Take your station at the head, there's no room to swing her. Head on to tide, I shall let go running.' This is a very dangerous manoeuvre. Umteen things can happen. Say, a ship travelling five to six knots an hour, 100 fathoms of chain cable may pay out before the anchor takes the strain, sometimes cutting hawse pipe to water's edge, or if the ship failed to answer the helm quickly would run over cable and cause damage to bottom. All buckets are filled with water to dowse windlass and hawse pipe, some sparks will fly presently. The hulks are passed. 'Let go!' Crash! The windlass and hawse pipe are like a blacksmith's anvil. 'Old Tom' – 'What about the powder stowed in the fore-peak'. 'Shut up, you old Jonah, this ain't Saturday, it's Sunday.' Ninety fathoms before the anchor takes the strain. The ship trembles from stem to stern as if in fear, then swings in her own length, head on to tide. The cable up to 15 fathoms is hove in, hawse pipe blocked, no ropes are to be left dangling over the side at night – water snakes may wish to pay a visit. Bob has already said that there are lots of funny things in this river.

How nice it is after a rather stormy outward voyage of some 48 days⁸⁸ to sit under the fore-deck awning and have a good quiz. I note the tide is out. The fairway of the river is narrow. For miles looking seaward are banks of mud or sand, with water channels. Flocks of birds, clouds of flies, seeking, I suppose, what the tide has left. It is most uncomfortably hot. Flannel shirts are very irritating with one's body covered with prickly heat. They have to be worn. That is the order. Can wash and dry one in about a quarter of an hour, there's plenty of water now. I look towards the town (King Bell's), or rather three towns, each is enclosed within its own stockade, only a few feet above high water.⁸⁹ I've heard much from Bob. In the rainy season they are often under water. The white-washed school-house and church; its minister, a West Indian (his father formerly a slave) married the daughter of the former white parson.⁹⁰ When Bob left for home they

West African rivers once the steamship services between Britain and West Africa began in 1852. They allowed traders to bulk their produce and despatch it on the steamer. However, firms like Kings who did not regularly use the steamers, found hulks useful in allowing them to cut down 'turn-around' time on the coast.

⁸⁸ This was relatively quick for a voyage from Britain.

⁸⁹ The Duala of the Cameroons estuary were divided into three main quarters or 'towns', named after their ruler, Akwa, Bell and Deido.

⁹⁰ The Baptist Missionary Society set up its mission in the Cameroons estuary in 1845; this mission was an offshoot of its work on Fernando Po. It was established in response to an initiative originating in the West Indies and a number of its staff were Jamaican. The missionary referred to in Langdon's account was Joseph Jackson Fuller, a Jamaican who began his ministry in 1859 and who in 1861 married the daughter of Joseph Diboll,

had at least eight piccaninnies.⁹¹ Expect there are more by now. Away up the river, less than a quarter of a mile away, is moored the hospital ship, close to a mangrove swamp.⁹² Silly place to have it – so many flies. Skill, attention and cleanliness are sadly lacking. ‘Abandon hope ye who enter here.’

There are four hulks, each belonging to a different firm. Ours is the *Lord Raglan*. How often had I looked at this beautiful ship lovingly, which for years was laid up near the Drawbridge, a sort of ward in Chancery.⁹³ Sold very cheap to our owners on condition she was not to be used for sailing. A hulk now. Her splendid spars, save the lower masts, are taken away, and the deck thatched over. She will never sail again. How often we boys have watched for an opportunity to climb her rigging. The watchman, however, was always there, and besides, being so near the Bridge, many ‘snouts’ (policemen) were about, who wore belts and used them on boys. They hurt, but the laughs from the grown-ups hurt more.

It is getting dark, fires are kindling in the town. Sounds of revelry, the beating of tom-toms, weird chanting and dancing. I think of the many yarns told by Bob – the fabulous animal supposed to live at the back of the Cameroons, not yet seen, save its three-toed foot-prints. The danger of swimming in the river. What! Shan’t I get a swim? It’s risky, lots of funny things there. The natives use the creeks. The boys who had fallen overboard or upset canoes were never seen again. Are there any saw-fish? These, I know, the Sassandrew men on the weather coast would not use their river for this reason. No, not many. They say there is an under-current, sort of eddy, once in it you are done for. Then again one may be looking at the river. There’s something out there, looks like the trunk or bough of a tree, not the least movement, throw in a stone, make a ripple, it moves quickly. Allos or crocs. Dead bodies are often seen drifting down stream, some bust-up or scrap higher up; may be an epidemic, always caused by the witch. Push ‘em into the river with sticks, and the sticks as well for fear of contagion. Awful thing this witch-craft business.

It’s time to turn in. The men already have their beds on deck. ‘Jerry, you can’t doss in the fo’c’sle, it’s too blinking hot.’ We have some good-

an English minister in the Baptist mission. The Baptist mission left the Cameroons estuary in 1886 following the German annexation. Fuller retired in 1888. J. van Slageren, *Les origines de l’église évangélique du Cameroun* (Yaoundé, 1972), pp. 29–35.

⁹¹ i.e. children.

⁹² In many of the rivers involved in the West African trade it was common for the traders to combine together to provide a hospital ship and a surgeon for the use of ships coming out.

⁹³ In this period the swivel bridge, commonly called the drawbridge, at the entrance to the floating harbour in Bristol.

humoured chaff, 'Won't be now all the hot stuff is on deck. Besides I don't like the early morning African dews, and it's dangerous to the eyes to sleep in the moonlight (moon blindness). They say it will draw a fellow's mouth right round to his ear (facial paralysis). I must keep my good looks because some day I hope to get married.' 'Jerry, if you sleep below you'll be a dead man in the morning,' 'I'll tell thee, lad, where a light won't burn it's no place to doss. Have your own way, go and kill yourself and put us all to the trouble of attending your funeral.' 'Oh, thanks, mind you carry me steady, no jostlings mind. Good night.' I turn into my bunk. Can't sleep, the air is so suffocating, am compelled to take my 'donkey's breakfast' (straw bed) and sleep on deck. Count the beautiful stars and listen to the strange cries of the African bush.

Next morning we warp ship⁹⁴ alongside the *Lord Raglan* and for the first time see the few white clerks in charge – ghastly white, bloodless, dressed in immaculate white, walking corpses, they are never exposed to the sun, no manual work (above it), waited upon hand and foot by their black servants.⁹⁵ Bob the carpenter said, 'I'm not one of them because I have to work, and a good thing, too, in this country, it keeps you out of yourself. When these chaps are walking and feel tired they are carried, slung in a pole hammock, by the natives.' He was not far wrong. These fellows never during our stay exchanged a salutation with us common sailormen. Perhaps after all, they may have been only the sons of poor men with just a school board education. How often when a kiddie I've heard my people say that the School Board Act⁹⁶ would create a class of black-coats above the dignity of work.

The *Lord Raglan* has a small army of Kroo-Boys. I know not their lingo, they speak fair pigeon English.⁹⁷ I address a few with some wild Drevin cuss-words – 'Hay-a-coo' (your mother die), 'Nay-a-to-co' (your grandmother die). 'That be damn black nigger talk, we be free Liberia men, savey some book.' Yes, yes, one thinks, swollen heads, some knowledge above his fellows, how will the future generations turn out?

Work, work, from 6 till 5 on deck or in ship's hold in an almost unbearable heat. I love work, always did, nice to feel at end of day one has done more than his bit. Other fellows may not like it, that's my business not theirs. Everybody without grouching worked well. Why?

⁹⁴ To warp a ship involved moving the vessel in an anchorage by use of a hawser and a kedge anchor, hauled by the crew.

⁹⁵ Such resident agents, who would remain on the coast for the palm oil 'season', buying produce, became increasingly common in the West African trade, and more specifically the river trade, after the introduction of steamship services in 1852.

⁹⁶ Presumably a reference to Forster's Education Act of 1870 and the school boards it established.

⁹⁷ Pidgin English was the lingua franca of the West African trade, though (as seen in words like 'dash' and 'palaver') it borrowed from the Portuguese of the original maritime traders to the coast.

Because our Captain was a very decent man and wanted to make his first voyage for the owners in record time.

The Right Reverend Somebody of the Cameroons is on board. I well size him up. True negro features, heavily built – a six-footer, dressed somewhat like a bishop (I'm not well up in church ratings), silk top-hat, black frock-coat, high waist-coat, all-round collar buttoned at the back, some sort of gaiters, with a leg many in his line of business would be proud of. He is shown over the ship, but never a word said he to us sailormen. 'Captain, I would very much like my wife and elder children to inspect your ship.' 'Very pleased to see them on board any time you like.' 'Oh, thank you, Captain, you are so very kind.' Stays to lunch.

Next day the 'inspection'. I likewise size up his wife, a white woman, daughter of the late clergyman, born at Cameroons, a little sick-looking four-and-a-half-foot-come-under-my-arm woman, and mother of some ten 'mulatto kids', many with wool and the rest with hair. She wore a Dolly Varden⁹⁸ hat, a princess robe dress, its train caught up with a dress-holder – the only bit of skirt I saw on the West Coast of Africa. They, too, said never a word to we common sailormen.

Almost every day His Reverence, under some pretence, would come on board. I ask Cook whether he talks much about his church. 'Not much, save to cadge, always short of everything. "Can you, good Captain, spare me this or that, it's not for myself, you know." Not much time to talk, he'll scoff and swallow all that's going. Fancy I, Cook and Steward of this 'ere ship and a white man, too, have, after my cooking, to don my best whites, lay table in best style, and with a napkin on my arm wait on the likes of that.' 'Serves you right, you always did like the flunkey business.' 'Yes, I know, but this part I don't like. "Oh, Captain, it's so nice to sit at a well-laid table, with a splendid waiter, it reminds me of my college days."' 'That's the stuff to give you, old Cookie.' The men's remarks about her Ladyship – 'Poor little dear, what she must have to put up with with such a hulk of a husband and big family'. What was said about his Lordship will not be written. Their varied experience came well to the fore. I agree with 'Old Tom', 'He was not like the good man of Plymouth, he sort of got right inside of a fellow'. Yes, had the Vicar General of the Cameroons held out a handshake, or said, 'Men I would like to see you at my church on Sunday, be he black or white', the cloth would have been respected. I myself was intensely disappointed at not attending at least one service.

⁹⁸ Dolly Varden hats, which were popular in the early 1870s, were named after the heroine in Charles Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* (London, 1841). They were straw hats with a low crown and a wide brim and were sometimes referred to as shepherdess hats. I am grateful to Ms Lucy Pratt of the Victoria and Albert museum for this information.

On a Sunday morning to hear the bell calling to church and so far away from home. The longing for these things is difficult to describe. It created a poor impression, especially after Covally River. But, I've only seen the worst, the best have yet to come. There are, and must be, real missionaries.

After one has worked very hard all day in a baking temperature, that irresistible longing for a swim is bound to come. 'The many funny things in this river' are somewhat a set-back for a dip. I've taken chances before. On the Weather Coast I always went over with the Kroo boys. Booto or Dago would say, 'Jerry, one of us, he savey swim much'. When a school-boy I took chances with Mr Policeman (no free swimming-baths). These very noble men would pinch our clothes and faithfully serve their Queen and country for two-and-a-tenner a day. We poor kids would have to run home without a fig-leaf. The grown-ups would laugh, aye and the women, too. The laugh did hurt. Our mothers would go to the police station to get the clothes. Two-and-six with costs for going through our streets minus a 'leaf'. Disgraceful, disgusting, would cry the goody-goody; they ought to come to the West Coast of Africa where every day they would see thousands without 'fig-leaves'. Splash! I take another chance. The 'funny things' make one sort of creep. 'Jerry', says 'Uncle John', 'we shall yet have to attend your funeral'. 'No, you won't Uncle, I should only be a mouthful for the crocs; they would save the trouble.' 'Very kind of them', replies Uncle.

The main hold is empty of cargo. We start loading our return cargo of palm kernels in bulk.⁹⁹ The ship is not properly equipped for such cargo – we have no 'dunnage mats'¹⁰⁰ nor 'shifting boards'. Nothing to cover the 'bilge holes' and the openings of her inside skin, save makeshifts, and very little of that. The Bulkhead of 'Chain Lockers' is rocky. The officers' attention is drawn to these things. Can't be helped, must take its chance. Day after day the kernels are shot into the fore, main and after holds; we lads are below trimming.

'Uncle John' goes sick – his old enemy sciatuca. 'Uncle', says I, 'do you remember the book you read to us about the three sailormen who had rheumatism; their mess-mates buried them up to the neck in the hot sand; then after such hot work left them for a while to get a drink or something; and the crocs came along and pinched off their heads?' 'Yes, what about it?' 'I was thinking if we buried you in the palm kernels – they are hot and oily – it may do you good.' 'That's a good

⁹⁹ Palm kernels were usually transported bulked together in 'mats' made of rope.

¹⁰⁰ Dunnage mats were stowed in the hold to prevent damage to freight and to stabilize the cargo. The shifting of a cargo of kernels, as occurred on this voyage, was of considerable hazard.

suggestion', says the boys. Every morning 'Uncle' is placed on a hatch, lowered into the hold and covered with the palm kernels. In less than a week he is back to duty, hopping about like a young two-year-old, and says, 'Boys, it was so kind of you, I feel better than I have for years'.

For some days a look-out has been kept for a barque belonging to our owners. She is sighted coming up the river from Rotterdam to Calabar and Cameroon with a cargo of gin.¹⁰¹ We were looking forward to seeing fresh faces, but not yet, she has grounded on a sloping bank and at low water is careered well over. Sorry time for crew, who will have to get about like monkeys. She will have to be lightened. A small steamer (same firm) is coming from Calabar¹⁰² to attend, and will, if we are ready, tow our ship out of the river. We also hear that some of the barque's crew are down with fever.

There's a commotion among the *Lord Raglan's* Kroo boys. All are shouting and gesticulating. Two of their number have a grievance as to which is the best man at scrapping. They are going to fight it out. Each has his own backers. Ivory bracelets are worn. It must be understood the blackman has but few rules, if any, for their game. We use our fists; they close the fist with thumb pushed up between the first and second finger. The thumb nail is carefully trained to grow like a gouge, and at every blow a twist is given. Pieces of flesh are gouged out like cheese. The 'ivories' are used with pull down slanting blow, surprising how the square edge will chip lumps off. Their primary object is to gouge out the eyes. In a moment an eye is out. Sometimes it is replaced in the socket and the fight proceeds. This fight lasted over an hour. The furious savageness was most disgusting. Which was the victor I do not know, only blindness of each stopped the fight. Hence the phrase 'one-eyed nigger' may have some meaning, and there are many on the West Coast.

Christmas Day. The bell is calling to church. In my mind it seems to say, 'Not for you, Jerry, not for you'. This and other events will never be forgotten. It is fearfully hot – 110 degrees in the shade – strange we all feel the heat more than when at work; may be our sumptuous fare is the cause – turtle, African beef (tough), real plum-duff, yams (sweet potatoes), plantains and heaps of other fruit. We have a good cook and captain, too. He is giving his best in return for our best, 'Mr Mac, as much as I want the ship ready to sail in order to get a tow down the river, the men shan't work on Christmas Day'. The cook has much to

¹⁰¹ Gin, or more strictly Dutch schnapps, was a staple of the West African trade.

¹⁰² Calabar (usually termed Old Calabar in this period) was one of the major ports of the Bights for the West African trade. Kings had only entered its trade, however, in 1879.

do; others and myself lend a hand. The shell of turtle has to be taken off and a post-mortem held. Says cookie, 'It's a lady'. A bucket-full of eggs and entrails is given to the Kroo-boys, it will all go into their cooking pot – mix well with the palm oil – fish and monkey already there. The natives are not over choice. Chop (food) is usually scarce – cannibalism is not yet minus, at least so I had heard from those who had professed to have partaken, and of course I, nose-ey like, asked what it tasted like. 'Pig', was the reply.

Our feast is served, which is just IT. Healths are drank to everybody near and far – some chin-wag – sleep – then early supper, soft tack and cake.

'Say lads, that barque what got off the ground yesterday and came up, what d'ye say if we take our boat and pay a Christmas visit, some are down with fever, might cheer them up, maybe help them.' Right-ho, we will! I must be in this. Arrive at ship and not a soul is to be seen, make for the fo'c'sle and shout, 'Below there, a merry Christmas'. No answer. We look at each other. 'Old Tom' said, 'Can't help it boys, manners or no manners, I'm going down'. The rest follow. What a sight! Every man was in his bunk, and to make matters more difficult every man was a Dutchman, and those who could speak English were too ill to talk. In the thick, fetid atmosphere, with spluttering oil-lamp, cockroaches are swarming, you crunch them under foot, in the bunks, and worst of all crawling over the sick men. A bad sign this. Tomorrow the worst of these men will be removed to the hospital ship. May heaven help them. We return to our ship, sorry we had done so little to help these poor fellows.

A few days after the river takes toll from us. 'Mr Mac', two seamen, the Cook and boy are ill. The hospital doctor attends. I lack words to describe the drunken, filthy, foul-mouthed blackguard. Three visits, each time drunk. Never have I heard such low-down talk. Sailormen will use cuss-words, but few talk filth. Perhaps, as 'Uncle John' said, he mistook us men for swine, and like an accommodating gentleman came to its level.

The ship is loaded to Plimsoll's mark. More and more is shot in. 'Are you going to sink her?' says someone to the officers. 'No, but we must get the kernels well up to deck, or they will shift when she rolls'. At last she can't take any more, there is only a few inches of free board, a bucket of water at gangway can be dipped up easily.

The eve of sailing. The Blue Peter¹⁰³ is hoisted at the fore. What for? I don't know, unless to inform a few white clerks, and by the way, one

¹⁰³ The Blue Peter flag is used to signal that the ship is about to sail and that all concerned should report on board.

of their number, who can't stand the climate – twelve months nearly cooked him – is returning with us, of course as first-class passenger. More work for old cookie. Bob, the carpenter, had to live for'ard. 'Bust it, why don't sailormen don a black coat and get the better things of life?'

There's a confab going on – 'Old Tom' a-talking. 'This 'ere ship is much overloaded for a northerly winter passage. When she gets in the roaring forties that there cargo is going to shift. She'll be on her beam-ends and down she goes like a stone. I've reasons for knowing, to-morrow is Saturday, her bad luck day. I've seen her empty and didn't find a-what I was looking for.' 'Shut up you silly old Jonah, why in the blazes don't you say what you wanted to find?' 'Oh, that's so easy now, don't get frightened.' 'Rats I was looking for, last voyage she was overrun. Ask Jerry.' This I confirm. 'You all know what it means when they desert a ship, her number is up. I tell 'ee again she ain't going to reach her next port, she's much below the Plimsoll mark. The law is on our side, we ought to chuck it.'

'Uncle John' takes a hand, 'There is much in what Tom says, the law is on our side, but who is there in this God-forsaken country to administer it? Cape Coast Castle is the nearest consul,¹⁰⁴ it would take weeks to get at him. If we were bound for an English port we might get a say, but Falmouth for orders means somewhere on the Continent, otherwise the ship would not be loaded so deeply. Say, if we did down tools, some of her stuffing taken out, and without shifting boards, the ship would be more dangerous than before. We should all get logged at end of voyage. There would be a big bill for delay and paid out of our wages.' The last did it. Take our chance and carry on.

Next day we start our homeward voyage, are towed out of the river.¹⁰⁵ Mr Second Mate is at the head, 'Mr Mac' too ill for duty. One can only hope he will soon get well. I have no particular wish to be in this bully's watch. His whiskers are so tempting. A good bunch would make a fine watch-chain if cross-pointed (round plait).

At sea again. So good at least to breathe pure air and occasionally get a breeze. All save 'Mr Mac' are getting better, is in a bad way. I broke the ice by just popping into his berth to say, 'How d'ye do?' I noted he could hardly help himself, so make him comfy and tidy up berth. 'So grateful, you'll come and see me again, Jerry?' 'Yes, I'll pop in every watch.' For weeks this continued, the very kind boys often during

¹⁰⁴ The trading castle at Cape Coast was the centre of British administration on the Gold Coast; the Gold Coast was annexed in 1874. The official commanding British administration was the governor, not the consul. However, from 1872 there was a British consul, with a consular court, based much closer to the Cameroons at Old Calabar.

¹⁰⁵ i.e. by the small steamer from Old Calabar referred to above.

the night watch would take my look-out, or turn at wheel, to enable me to give him attention. He said much during that time. His early life, wife and children, that hell of a pub and boarding house his father-in-law kept, he would never see them again. 'Yes, you will, Mr Mac, I got you in tow and will see you through.' 'Jerry, your kindness hurts, you ought to be a woman. Only to think I was so unkind to you on the outward voyage, I can't understand it.' 'That's nothing, Mr Mac, you never landed me one.' 'No, I'm glad of that, because I took a fancy for you when coming down the Bristol river. I hope that bully will keep his hands off you. That talk which the captain gave us did me much good.' 'Don't worry, Mr Mac, let bye-gones be bye-gones, if the Second Mate was in your present boat he would get good attention.' 'I can't understand it, Jerry, I've never been used to it.' One night, after some three weeks of illness, he is in a very weak state. 'Jerry, they tell me sharks are following the ship.' 'Well, that's nothing, there's plenty in these waters.' 'They are waiting for me, I shan't see the morning.' 'Yes, you will. I've told you before, I've got you in tow.' 'Jerry, come closer. I've been a bad man, I once did a man in, and it was not a fair scrap (particulars were given, but need not be written). Since then I've never been happy. I changed my name. "He" had a wife and family. Oh, what misery I have caused. Always before me, even when drunk. Do you think God will forgive me?' 'Yes, I'm sure He will because you are sorry, but it will be up to you when better to make what amends you can.' 'Jerry, give me your hand.' He held it a good time. He sleeps – the first for a long time. The crisis has passed.

We make slow progress. Drift past the island of Fernando.¹⁰⁶ Only calms and cats-paws.¹⁰⁷ Three weeks after leaving [the] river are off Prince's Island, further drift south-west of the line and meet the south-east trade wind. Sails are squared and north we go. Later, the north-east trade wind, pass the Western Islands, and here our troubles commence, well in the roaring forties. One night are hove-to on the port-tack; our middle watch has had a rough time, glad to get below at 4 am; ship is pitching badly, at seven bells.¹⁰⁸ 'Now you jolly sleepers below there, tumble out and have your breakfast.' 'Old Tom', to save our getting a wetting, has brought the coffee and cracker ash from the galley. He is in his oil-skins. 'We've had an awful time since 4 o'clock, she put one over that almost put her on her beam-ends, I never expected her to rise again. When she did, most of the starboard bulwarks had gone. See what a list to starboard there is; those blessed

¹⁰⁶ As on the windward on Langdon's first voyage, because of the prevailing winds and currents in the Gulf of Guinea, it was the practice of traders to this region to drift south in order to catch the south-east trade winds for the return to Britain.

¹⁰⁷ Light breezes marked by slight ripples on the surface of the sea.

¹⁰⁸ i.e. 7.30 am.

palm kernels have busted the chain locker bulkhead into the pump wells, and they are choked with them kernels. I told you before what would happen, and it's Saturday, too.' Things are not rosy, the list is most uncomfortable. One has to eat sitting on the fo'c'sle deck, with feet against some thing solid to avoid slipping to leeward. Our turn on deck. 'Jerry, there's a gasket adrift on the main upper topsail yard.' I mount aloft; the wind is terrific; try to face it; can't, takes away one's breath. Not very far away to leeward a fine barque is hove-to. When we dip into a valley of water neither ship is visible to the other, and when on top of a wave one is looking down on the other. My work done I return to deck. 'Get the flag-bag, Jerry, going to signal the barque.' Our ensign upside-down (distress signal) is hoisted. In a few minutes the French flag is flying on the barque which is manoeuvring for a favourable position. Her stay-sails are set; she's dancing towards us – a thing of life. Splendid seamanship. Beautiful sight to see how skilfully she was handled. This iron barque of Bordeaux, with black and white chequered sides, looked like a bird as she sailed past our lee quarter.¹⁰⁹ Written on our signal-board, 'Our cargo has shifted to starboard, pumps choked, making water, going to ware, will you stand by?' Up go her flags, 'I'll stand by, ware ship'.¹¹⁰

To ware a heavily listed ship in a roaring gale and heavy seas is a most difficult and dangerous manoeuvre. The ship has to be turned right-about-face; then the wind and waves will beat upon our best side. Three great risks have to be taken, twice the ship will get into the trough of sea, and once before the wind and sea. In the trough there's every chance of capsizing. Before the wind and sea, if ship pooped a sea, she would go down steer first.¹¹¹ As we are almost on our beam-ends these risks must be taken, or turn turtle.

We take our stations, squaring the yards as ship pays off before the wind. I am at the main port braces. We know the danger. There is no fear. We are cracking jokes. The ship is now before the wind, with yards squared, like a log, no steerage way, a fearful big sea is rolling up aft. (Picture looking up to Brandon Hill,¹¹² and you've got it.) 'Say your prayers, boys', says 'Uncle John', 'that will finish us'. Inwardly mine were said. This mountain of water reaches the stern, the ship rises with it, we are just sliding down a huge wave, much broken water is shipped, but this doesn't count. 'Hurrah! She's moving, has steering

¹⁰⁹ Bordeaux and Marseilles were the main French ports involved in the West African trade.

¹¹⁰ More usually spelt 'wear'. This involved turning the ship from port tack to starboard, or vice versa, by allowing the wind to pass around the stern.

¹¹¹ [*sic*]; presumably stern first.

¹¹² In the centre of Bristol close to College Green; site of a fort and part of the city's defensive walls.

way, the yards are braced up, wind is now on our best side and will safely outride the gale.' I look in to see how 'Mr Mac' had fared during the last few hours. Much water I know had entered the cabin; am anxious because he is now convalescent, but he must not come on deck, it's too cold. I see the affrighted face of our 'passenger'. Jerry, it grieves me to be locked here with this when you boys are in the thick of it.' The other, it appears, had given way to scare. Even for 'Mr Mac' it was not a relish, and he was a fearless man. It had been said he feared neither God, man nor the devil – a changed man now. 'Jerry, we were very near it, but something within me, what, I cannot explain, said it would be alright.'

When the gale abated, the ship was sailed close-hauled on the starboard tack for all she was worth, to re-shift the cargo; and it was done. With patched canvas bulwarks, like a wounded bird, we limp north and sight the Scillies. A Falmouth pilot comes aboard, 'I have your orders, an easy fiver this time. Harburg, 13 miles above Hamburg.¹¹³ You have a fair wind up Channel. Good-bye, quick passage.' All are intensely disappointed, are most done in. Salt-water boils are in abundance – I have a beauty on my wrist (sugar and soap will draw anything). Others have bruises, owing to slimy decks. Another reason – we wanted to test the new Plimsoll Act about overloading. 'Uncle John' had it already, 'No', says he, 'the owners are too artful to let ship touch an English port'. The result is our two slackers again go sick; only the grub will ferret them out of their bunks.

The fair wind takes us to the Start, its back's right in our teeth.¹¹⁴ For days are tacking from English to French coast. Our mainsail gets busted. 'Come, lads, with me', says our Captain, 'and save the bits'. Good stuff, this man; has taken his watch since our leaving the river, owing to 'Mr Mac's' illness. All man the main yard. Flop! Bash! The ribbons are flying over our heads, more than one gets a black eye. Wind again changes to our favour. Creep up to Deal. A North Sea pilot boards, 'Take you across for £25, Captain?' 'I'll give £20.' 'It's too cheap, but as it's a fair wind, I'll take it.' Our good man can now take a well-earned rest. The pilot drives for all she's worth, pass those dreaded Goodwins. The Galloper Lightship is just lighting up. At night are sailing in the North Sea. Lane after lane of fishing boats' lights.

¹¹³ Hamburg was the main port for the palm kernel trade from West Africa, the kernels then being transported to the German and Dutch markets for processing. The sharp increase in Hamburg's African trade only began in the late 1870s and was due to the development of the margarine industry in this period, for which palm kernel oil was a vital ingredient. Kings' involvement in the Hamburg trade was a sign of considerable enterprise; L. Harding, 'Hamburg's West Africa trade in the nineteenth century', in Liesegang, Pasch and Jones, *Figuring African Trade*, pp. 363–391.

¹¹⁴ Presumably Start Point, South Devon.

Marvel how Mr Pilot can twist in and out. Only another couple of days, and then in port. But not yet. We yet have to take our worst gruelling. Next day wind changed dead ahead, with fierce blizzards for a week. Another man goes sick (genuine, we think). Rigging and ropes are covered with icicles. The few hands have to tack ship every watch. Pass a great number of packing cases; some ship must have gone down. 'Keep a good look-out.' One afternoon, my two hours at wheel is almost up. Mr Pilot comes on deck, looks away to windward, a-sort of sniffs like, says it's going to blow. 'Oh Lor', thinks I, 'it is a-blowing now'. Take in the upper topsails, another half-an-hour at wheel. I had been numbed, but now I feel nothing of it. The relief man at last! Go forward, take off mittens, can't straighten out fingers. Flop my arms to warm up like. Pins and needles, can't stand the pain, it makes one yell. 'What's the matter, Jerry?' 'Don't know, it's awful.' 'I do', says he, after looking at my fingers, 'you've got frost-bite. Icy cold water, put 'em in and rub well and keep away from the galley fire.' Mine was only a touch, what the pain of real frost-bite must be, one dare not think. That night it blew a raging gale. Next day (Good Friday)¹⁵ it died down, and towards evening it became a dead calm with sunshine. My pen cannot describe the sunset – all colours, those angry greens, chariots and horses a-racing; what heaps of things can be seen when looking at a gorgeous sunset. 'Chester, do come on deck and look at it, sure you would sketch it.' 'I'm too ill, regret I cannot.' Then he must be ill, yet – strange – always ready for grub. It is so pleasant to have dry decks and feet. Never again will I take another voyage without sea-boots. Those flannels did it, yet the somebody meant well.

Midnight – just a puff from the west – with fine snow flakes. At last a fair wind. Square the yards. At 4 am our watch below; at 8 am our next watch on deck. It is blowing a gale and ship is covered with snow. Heligoland looms on our port bow. Mr Pilot has his bearings. Crowd on all sails, I'll give her beans. Are making a good ten knots, ship creaking and groaning as if in pain. Two Hamburg pilot boats are sighted. 'We want a Hamburg pilot', is signalled. Get in reply, 'Can't board you, sea running too high'. 'No matter', says our North Sea pilot, 'my ticket goes well up the Elbe. Shall expect that extra fiver'.

Sniffing round the galley, say, 'Cookie, there's something good for dinner'. 'Yes, fore and aft will get a good bust, am using my last tins of meat and soup.' 'Kind old Cookie, you've fed the wild animals well, why don't you apply for a job at the Zoological Gardens?' My expectations for dinner are great. Mr Second Mate is in the fo'c'sle, asking the sick men to show a leg on deck. 'Come, lads, I won't ask you to work, we want a clean bill of health.' The Germans are so very

¹⁵ 23 March 1883.

strict with ships coming from a fever country. What about 'Mr Mac'? Oh, he's on duty for the first time this morning. 'Now, my good lads, do start, if only to oblige me and a good captain. If you don't we shall be clapped in quarantine for a long time.' Only the last sick man responded. The other two were old hands, they knew the German medical officer would order them to hospital. For weeks would have a lazy time, well treated, and later a passage to England at the owners' expense. These are the fellows who always enjoy bad health.

Eight bells, am just going below. 'Clew the royals up.'¹¹⁶ Up you go, Jerry', says that bully, the Second Mate. I think of my nice dinner, it will get cold. When a little up rigging and clear of his boot, I hold forth – it just ripped out. 'You old cross-eyed...'. I feel better after this. At the royal the sail is well covered with snow, and bellied out. Get it almost in, blown out again by heavy gust of wind. Finger nails started and bleeding. At last the gasket is around it and I return to deck. My weather eye is kept on Mr Second Mate, he will give me a sly one. Nothing was said. I think he feared the captain and 'Mr Mac' who were on deck.

I get below and have dinner alone. The boys have turned in to sleep. Bump! She's aground! The two sick men in a tick are out of their bunks. All hands on deck. They are first up. Bumps and bumps. Look out! The top-masts are falling. At each bump we are thrown off our feet. Mr Second Mate, axe in hand, asks for instructions. 'Shall I cut the masts out of her, Sir?' 'No, it won't be of any use, the tide is past flood.' Mr Pilot is ringing his hands and with tears in his eyes says, 'For twenty years I've been a North Sea pilot, and never sprung a rope-yarn. This old tub will be my ruin.' Green rollers are dashing over the stern. Decks are awash. 'Get out the boat!' As usual it's lashed on main hatch and full of lumber. Nasty remarks are passing. The two sick men are trying to save their own skin. In this quarter things look ugly. Somebody will walk into the two if they give much lip. Bump! Bash! Bang!! Like a cannon report, the deck lifts and splits right across amidships. She's done for, her back is broken. The water rushed in with a gurgling sound. Yes, she had passed over. Not a movement. Dead. The sea had claimed her.

The boat is now cleared of rubbish. To remove from main hatch the fore topsail halliard are hooked on and lifted to rail of ship. It has to be launched broadside to sea. 'Watch your chance, boys. On the third roller heave.' Out she goes, fills with water on the next roller. In our haste only one painter (bow rope) was on her, and of course is broadside to sea without a stern rope to haul her round. 'Down you go, Jerry, and haul her round', says the Second Mate. I slip over the

¹¹⁶ i.e. draw up the sails to the yard on the mast in preparation for furling.

side and enter boat. The icy water up to my waist gives a sort of shiver, am making my way towards stern of boat, a big roller is looming up. 'Look out!' someone cries. Too late! The boat is turned bottom up. As it turns I slip over the gun-wale. The green water covers me. My eyes are open. Wonderful what one can think and see (home scenes) in a few seconds. I am rising, can feel the keel of the boat between my legs. I'm going to get some damage – rupture perhaps. To my great surprise am lifted gently like one would lift a baby, a rope coil is thrown. Good old 'Uncle John', a splendid shot, it lands over my head. I grab, the slack is hauled in, the receding wave leaves me for a few seconds out of the water. My wet clothes feel like a ton weight, am too numbed for any effort. 'Haul me up.' A lad drops over side on a rope, grabs hold of my coat collar, am soon on deck. 'Jerry, Jerry', says 'Mr Mac', I thought you were gone. Come in the cabin and get fixed up.' I hear his orders, 'No more of this foolhardy game, get the topsail halliards on her nose (bow of boat), lift her high and drop her quick again. That is a better way to empty her of water. It ought to have been done in the first place and not risk the lad's life.'

After getting fixed up, mostly by wringing out my wet clothes, am again on duty. A change has overtaken the weather, it has cleared, a lightship can be seen some miles away. Her flags and ours are a-wagging, 'Stand by your ship if you can, a life-boat from Cuxhaven will assist.' Good. In our own boat would have had a poor chance among so many sandbanks. Towards evening the life-boat, under sail, is bearing towards us. I note she has a small crew – sail being much used. We leave the wreck; each two men are given an oar; we are only too pleased to pull, it keeps us warm. After several hours we enter Cuxhaven Harbour. Many folk are watching as we step ashore on that frosty moonlight night, with crisp snow under-foot. A gentleman gave a short address in good English on the 'Providence of God', with prayer of thanks. Stimulants are served out; I'm not taking any – have my own reasons for refusing; a promise to one over the border is not easily broken. What! An English sailor not taking grog? As I walk through the streets of this quaint town, with its snow-covered buildings glistening in the moonlight, my companion, who speaks fluent English, is plying heaps of questions about the voyage, ship and crew. 'Old Tom's' voice is hard, 'Didn't I say Saturday was her unlucky day, and she would never reach port?' 'Yes, Tom, but we have.'

After our experience the comfort of an inn, warmth and security gives a feeling difficult to describe. An old-fashioned place with low ceiling and heavy beams. Lager and other drinks flow freely. Glasses clink – our lads are being treated. I am the odd dry number – refusal upon refusal, no thanks, no matter. I can and shall live it down; my will is my own and not other peoples'. Rattling tunes are played at the

piano. Mine host, with spectacles and briar pipe, together with his sons, is serving us and laying the good things for our supper. Oh, my! What a take-in for us famished lads. By way of grace, 'The Fatherland' and 'God Save the Queen' are played – all standing. White soup – looks like water. One spoonful – it's nice and spicy. More please. German sausage by the yard. Help yourself. And heaps of other things. Then to bed.

My brother and I have a room to ourselves, very clean and comfortable. 'Say, Harry, d'ye think the bedclothes are enough, it's only a sheet and thin covering.' 'It's all feathers. Try it.' We tumble in – like falling into the warm sea. Soon asleep. I awake before daylight, am wet with perspiration, aches and pains all over like. Later when the others wake, say, how bad I feel. 'It must be those wet togs you kept on.' 'Or,' says I, 'the sausage'. 'Lay on a bit, kid, I'll go to the cook-house and get a strong cup of tea.' He did and it put me right, save for a cough and hoarseness. But I had my suspicion something stronger than tea was put in.

After a spanking breakfast mine host says, 'Gentlemen, if you will allow I will read you the newspaper account of your wreck'. Newspapers on a Sunday, I think, are wicked; only last night I thought the Germans very religious. Mine host, almost without an error, translated the long account with many details through the voyage, into good English. Now I know who my nice companion was last night – the newspaper man!

Harry and I are out to see the sights. Easter Sunday morning – everybody looks so happy; most are going to church. Salutations from many are given in English. We wander round the harbour, spot the quaintly built Dutch ships, then round the dykes. 'Say, Harry, ain't this like our New Passage on a large scale? Remember our Sunday School treat there?' Enter the forts; not a soul about; all spick and span. 'Say, these guns are different to ours on Brandon Hill.' 'Rather! These are breach-loading.'¹⁷ Get back to a jolly dinner and sight-see for the rest of the day.

On Monday have to attend the British Consul re our shipment to England and draw some cash. But before doing so we all raid the barber's for a trim up – and it's wanted, too, for some of us looked like Robinson Crusoe. In the afternoon are driven in by a snow-storm. 'Have a drink with me', says Bully Smith. With some lip – No thanks! 'Let's make the young —— have some.' In an instant my arms are pinioned and I am lifted off my feet. 'Now, Chester, pour it down his throat.' The heels of my boots are driven into his shins, and his hold is released, but before he could land me one, 'Mr Mac' had given him one behind the ear. The old spirit had returned. With eyes flashing he

¹⁷ [*sic*]; breech-loading.

says, 'Anyone who touches that lad touches me. Come on' (to Smith). He, to his shame, was ready. 'No, you don't', says 'Uncle John', 'he's a sick man. I'll take his place. And all of you let Jerry alone. If he don't want to drink, there's not a man's son here that shall make him.' The bully climbed down, he already knew who was the better man.

On Tuesday our orders are to ship for London on Wednesday morning. I get in all the sight-seeing I can. In the evening I attend a concert and dance – splendid music; at least I thought so. On returning to the inn I find the boys fuddled and quarrelsome. 'Bully Smith' is still chewing how 'Uncle John' took him down yesterday. They sleep in the same room. When turning in, Smith is still nagging. 'Take that', says 'Uncle John', lifting a wash-basin high above his head. Bash! It's on the other fellow's head; the bottom is knocked out and the rim is resting on his shoulders. The scene is so ludicrous that everyone save Smith laughs. It's a red rag. The fellow is just furious; and hits out at anyone. Mine host appears, 'I will call the police, I never had such men in mine house before'. The rim has to be broken. 'Uncle John' is given another bed and peace is restored.

Next day, after a long pull well out in the Elbe, we board the SS *Martin*, from Hamburg to London, as fore-cabin passengers. There is already one lady passenger, and the affrighted look on this woman's face will never be forgotten when our rough lot of sailormen entered the cabin. I am glad to say the Captain found her a berth aft. Worse luck, there is a bar on board and our fellows have money. They have tasted blood with so much treating by the good people of Cuxhaven – a silly way I think of showing kindness. I take a good look around. Between decks cattle are penned, also there is a deck crowd of Polish Jews, who must not, as per order, enter our cabin. The men, women and children are the most motley lot I've ever seen.

We pass near our wreck. Dear old ship; for over two years it had been my home – my first love; met her doom only by a fluke; she was not very far off her course. If only that buoy had not been washed away. Just like life – so many 'ifs'. Glad it was not the old pilot's fault. Good-bye, old thing, I shall always remember you with pride.

Our rations are good and well served, so for a couple of days it will be eat and sleep. At night it blew great guns, and the ship is putting her nose into a very heavy sea. I am snug in my bunk. Lucky Jerry, no watch this night! But what about those poor people with a deck passage, who just now were hammering on our door, even praying for shelter? Those cruel orders; it hurts one, it does.

The frightful spectacle next morning – the men, women and children and babies had been battened down with the cattle! Awful sight! Human beings and cattle sea sick – all are laying in filth and muck! Mothers in last stage of collapse suckling their babies. Sick at heart I return to

deck, having seen enough misery and wretchedness to last a lifetime.

Another sight, different from the last. Passing through a fishing fleet, the small steamers collecting from one boat to another; the Bethel-ship chasing round, too.¹¹⁸ One wonders how her parson would act after seeing what I had just seen. I never felt so helpless.

Laying in my bunk am watching the silly antics of the now boisterous crowd. Mr Second Mate is smoking a cigar, and for a joke (so he said) puts its lighted end on my cheek. I yell out with the pain. 'Mr Mac' is again my champion and protector. He is going to walk into him. 'No, no, you don't', says 'Uncle John', 'you're a sick man; I want a turn at this. He was always down on Jerry'. A ring is formed and each commences to spar for an opening. Remember, each knew the game. The Captain appears, 'Men, I'll have no fighting on my ship. The drink will be stopped, if you don't desist. Don't forget I have a shooting iron and know how to use it'. Peace is again restored.

Have entered the Thames. Must take in every outline. Gravesend, Woolwich, Greenwich and the 'Pool'.¹¹⁹ Turn in, and next morning are alongside St Katherine's Wharf. Have to pass the customs. My lady, the passenger, must, I think, be a governess – lots of books and much fine lingerie are on exhibition; those officers show but scant mercy. Our destination is Bristol. Up Tower Hill, turn to right and take underground to Paddington. I may mention I had drawn two pounds in German money, and after buying presents retained one-half gold mark, one silver pfenning and some bronze. The fare to Bristol is eleven and threepence. I change my money and get only nine and sixpence for the lot, so that I am short. What shall I do? 'Haven't you anything to sell?' I pull out an African gold ring. 'I'll give you the two bob for it.' In my anxiety I part with it. Jerry, you've got to pay for experience among the land sharks. At Paddington have to wait for train. Shipwrecked sailors – someone points. Toffs want to know all about it. 'Come and have a drink. Have what you fancy.' Silly stupid custom, will spend much in this way, but if one was to ask for the loan of a couple of bob, which I could not, even to save my ring, may get run in for begging.

Bristol at last! We shake. 'Mr Mac' – 'Jerry, I'm awfully sorry to see that scar on your face; you and I must sail again together. Don't forget to come and see me; I want to do you well'. We part, he to that hell of a boarding-house, and I to homely digs. And here ended my second voyage – a short one, but full of ripe experience and adventure.

Within a fortnight I heard that 'Mr Mac' had been taken to Bristol

¹¹⁸ Presumably a mission boat of some kind. 'Bethel' was commonly used among sailors to refer to a place of worship.

¹¹⁹ The Pool of London; Langdon's ship would berth in the Lower Pool.

Royal Infirmary and has expressed a wish to see me. I go. He was so delighted. Against orders he sits up to greet me. 'Nurse, nurse, this is Jerry.' 'Young man, your ears must often burn, he just raves about you.' 'Jerry, we must sail together, I'm going back to the West India Trade, never ought to have made that river trip, but I wanted to sample it. My former Captain will give you a berth, and I shall join her on the next voyage. I must pay for your schooling, and someday see you aft.'

Before I took my next voyage he had passed over, and it can only be hoped that his soul rests in peace.

THIRD VOYAGE

17 May 1883 to 19 November 1884

A few days after home arrival Harry and I are in town, and we run across 'Pincher'. 'Hully, you lads, I am so pleased to meet you.'¹²⁰ Our old ship got piled up.' 'Tell me about it.' An account is given. Then says 'Pincher', 'I want you both to sail with me. The owners are buying another ship for my command – a barquentine named the *Edmund Richardson*.'¹²¹ "She" is to be re-fitted with a six-foot false keel, new copper, and thoroughly overhauled, and I guess "she" will be the smartest craft on the coast. Also the fo'c'sle is a house on deck. The ship will be most comfortable.' 'Thank you, sir', says I, 'but I want to get away south, to Rio, round the Horn, and 'Frisco'. 'Yes, Jerry, I well know your ambition. Come with me another voyage; it will make a man of you. As I cannot yet ship you as an AB, I will give you five shillings per month less than the men, and further, as the ship has to be re-rigged, you shall have employment thereon.' The last did it. I could not let such an opportunity slip; it would mean much experience for the future. The visions of work-up jobs, including 'copper-polishing', which had already crowded into my mind, vanished like a mist at such a splendid offer. We sailormen, as a rule, have very short memories about the indignity of the work we are so often compelled to do.

For several weeks I am working on the ship and gaining much experience. In the 'Lime-kiln Dock' (Hotwell Road), the ship is lifted off the stocks by means of wedges; the false keel is added, and fastened with long copper bolts. It was here that I nearly lost the number of my mess. The old copper sheeting was being hoisted out of dock when off flies the winch handle and I am precipitated well over the edge of the dock. I am thankful I did not loose myself. My hands are dug well into the dock sides, and with sailor-like promptitude a shipmate has plumped himself across my legs. My word! I thought they were cracked; but save for some damage to my knuckles all is OK, and work is resumed.

I find 'Pincher' has engaged some of our last crowd to help re-rig the ship, with the promise to sign them on for the voyage; of course, it was much cheaper than employing professional 'riggers'. 'Uncle John'

¹²⁰ Langdon has clearly left out quotation marks here, since it would be himself reporting that the *Ceara* had sunk.

¹²¹ 291 tons, Capt. Swan, R. & W. King, owners, *Bristol Presentments*, 17 May 1883.

and ‘Chester’ are very decent fellows, but the bully, Smith, and the cross-eyed Second Mate, whose whiskers are so tempting, I did not like. Our new First Mate, who will be called ‘David’, was an elderly man, holding a Master’s Ticket. Owing to the passing of the old packet ship, he, like many others, had fallen on evil times. He was just the man ‘Pincher’ required – new to the coast and too old to become a Trader. ‘David’, in his younger days, was hot stuff, but had become a changed man. Occasionally, however, he did forget his changed nature, and let it rip. In the middle of a string of strong adjectives he would suddenly stop and say, ‘Men, I’m sorry; I forget myself’. It was really genuine, for often a tear would glisten on his eyelid. In danger he was as brave as a lion. My great hope is to get selected for his watch.

I revel in the work of rigging a ship. Taking down, and sending up masts and yards, wire-splicing ‘dead eyes’, ‘worm and parcel with the lay, turn and serve the other way’, blankets round the masts to take the chafe of ‘shrouds’, setting up backstays and shrouds, ‘rattling’ down, ‘bending’ sails, and much more very interesting work. When all is finished my ship, I think, looks rakish, save the bowsprit and jib-boom; cocks up too much, but this cannot be altered owing to ‘her’ build. I am very proud of our deck, and to myself, ‘she’ has become a thing of real beauty.

Signing-on day. The usual crowd of parasites outside of shipping office. Fifty shillings a month are the AB’s wages. ‘What are you paying this young fellow?’ asks the shipping master (Attwood). ‘Pincher’ in reply said, ‘Forty-five shillings’. Upon which Attwood says, ‘Captain, that’s ten shillings above the rate; I suppose you know what you are doing’. ‘Yes, yes’, replied ‘Pincher’, ‘he’s worth it’. I do some mental arithmetic, and says to myself, ‘That’s another fiver for the voyage’, simply by just speaking at the right moment.

‘Join your ship at Cumberland Basin on May 17th 1883 at 2.30 pm’ (Attwood). My sea chest and kit, including sea boots, are sent aboard. During this voyage I intend to keep a journal¹²² so as to avoid, if possible, some of the fierce controversies arising out of events. Sailormen are very much prone to argument, and fellows like ‘Bully Smith’, if one did not agree with all they said, would soon start a row. [...] ‘Uncle John’ will be there, so that neither this bully nor the Second Mate will have their say always.

Sailing day. Glorious weather. [...] My ship looks spick and span. Many people are there to see a Guineaman depart. The crew are arriving,

¹²² Held in Bristol City Library, ‘Diary and Notebook of John Chandler Langdon, 1883–84’.

some just able to stagger aboard, while others are carried. 'What shall we do with a drunken sailor?' 'Put him in the long boat until he's sober.' Someone is calling, 'Jerry'. In an open carriage sits Mrs Pincher who, holding out her hand, says, 'Good-bye, Jerry, be a good lad and the Captain will make you a splendid sailorman'. I am just fit to bust. A Captain's wife condescending to speak to an ordinary seaman! All are aboard, save Smith, whose boarding-house master – ex-pugilist 'ticket-of-leave man' and now a cab-owner, has charged him ten shillings for driving him and his kit from the Broad Quay to Cumberland Basin. Smith won't pay and the other fellow won't part with his kit, so there's a row. The 'Bully' shows his mean spirit by challenging the 'ticket-of-leave man' to fight, well knowing that he dare not fight through his being on leave for manslaughter. Thus the skunk, Smith, was ever ready to take advantage of another fellow's helplessness. Without doubt, the ex-pugilist could have put Smith to sleep in a very short time.

Our pilot won't wait any longer. 'Can't help it, Captain, you must leave that fellow ashore, or we shall miss the tide.' 'Let go for'ard and aft' and away we go. I am secretly delighted that the cad had been left behind. 'I must get another man', says 'Pincher', 'or the Board of Trade will be on my track'. Among our powder runners are many able seamen – another case of taking advantage of a man's helplessness. 'Yes, at more than double wages, six pounds per month, with an early transfer to the first homeward-bounder.' One must be engaged. Articles are signed. As we proceed down the river, I am assisting David to get out the jib-boom and set up stays and back-ropes. At Pill 'Pincher' sings out, 'Jerry, take the wheel'. 'Aye, aye, Sir.' I relieve the pilot's steersman. 'Now Jerry', says 'Pincher', 'this is a quick steering ship, not like our last one, where you had to grind water before she would answer her helm'. Sure our ship was a beauty for steering. Save when boomed out, one spoke of the wheel would do the trick.

We are slowly towing down the Bristol Channel. Runners take from lighter and stow in our magazine sixty tons of gunpowder. 'Captain', says the Pilot, 'that tug-boat is signalling to come alongside'. 'Yes, I wonder what he's after?' replied 'Pincher', 'I hope it's not that fellow Smith, 'cos it will be a mix-up now that I've signed on another man'. This turned out to be correct and my delight had been very short-lived. 'Pincher' had to square the man signed on and Smith had to pay part out of his wages and also the tug-boat charges, so that in the end the miserable row with the boarding-house master cost him several pounds. Didn't we lads have many a chuckle over the affair!

Darkness is setting in and I am still at the wheel, drinking in the yarns 'Pincher' and the Pilot are spinning. Says the latter in a kind way, 'Captain, don't you think it was time this lad was relieved, he's been at the wheel over seven hours, and without grub?' 'Yes, I do',

was his reply. ‘I’ve told the mates to turn in for the night as the weather is so beautifully fine. I’ll go for’ard and roust someone out.’ ‘Uncle John’ was the only hand able to answer. ‘Who’s got the wheel, Captain?’ ‘Jerry, he’s been at it a long spell without grub.’ ‘Oh, Jerry is my lad, I’ll relieve him, Captain.’ I hand over the wheel to ‘Uncle John’, giving the course ‘follow the tug’. He can scarcely repeat the words, but I know ‘Uncle’ is doing his utmost to carry on. I just had time to get a snack where there came from the tug, ‘What in the —— are you doing aboard there? D’ye want to go back to Bristol? Who have you got steering? Almost carried away your martingale.’¹²³ ‘Uncle John’ had fallen asleep over the wheel and the ship had got broadside to the tug. ‘Jerry, come aft and take the wheel again.’ ‘Aye, aye, Sir.’ And there I remain until well after midnight. Again ‘Pincher’ goes for’ard to ascertain if the fumes of drink had worn off. ‘Uncle John’ is again to the fore, his sleep had sobered him. Very soon he was on duty and I hand over the wheel to him, giving the course, which ‘Uncle’ can now repeat. ‘Pincher’ then says, ‘Jerry, you turn in and don’t turn out till six o’clock for anyone. Say that is my order’. ‘Thank you, Sir.’

At six am I turn out. We have come abreast of Rat Island (Lundy), sea like a mill-pond. How different from my last two voyages in winter time with howling gales! The crew are now sober, but very thirsty. Oh, what would they not give for a livener, but it cannot be obtained so they are forced on the tea-pot or water-cask. The tug hauls alongside and takes off Pilot and runners. Sails are shaken out, the course set south and now begins the task of getting the ship into ship-shape order, with the crew suffering from fearful headache and thirst. David gives his commands in a decent way, with a sort of moral lesson on drink and the evils of life. The Second Mate, with his whiskers flopping about, is trying to bully the men to get a move on. I particularly note the absence of his usual vile cuss words. One can only presume that neither ‘Pincher’ nor David will allow it.

‘Pincher’, who is walking the poop-deck looking on, says, ‘Jerry, come aft and take the wheel. You had a long spell at it yesterday, have another to-day while those fellows are hard at work getting the ship fixed up’. I stay at the wheel until late afternoon. Lundy fades from sight. ‘Pincher’, who is taking a good look at it, says, ‘We shan’t see Lundy again for a long time, Jerry’. ‘No, Sir, the sailors do say “good-bye Lundy, good-bye Sunday”’. ‘What, you young beggar, do you mean to say I make you work on Sundays?’ ‘No, Sir, only when necessary, shipping oil to mail-boat or getting under weigh.’ ‘Ah, that’s better. Some captains do make their men work on Sundays when on the coast, but I don’t.’

¹²³ A martingale was a rope for guying down the jib-boom.

The mates select their men for watches. David lays his hand on my shoulder and says, 'This lad is mine'. I am so glad, feel sure from what I already know of him all will be well. He was without any doubt a splendid navigator and seaman and would save 'Pincher' much worry, and David was ever grateful to him for a berth at six pounds per month, while other unfortunate men holding Master's Tickets had to sail before the mast at fifty shillings. Why? Because of steamships. One would often hear, 'This will be my last voyage at sea, I shall give it up and go in steamboats'.

Save for a few incidents the outward voyage was almost a picnic. A few days out 'Pincher' shot a very large sun-fish of a size too great to haul aboard. On June 1st we passed Madeira and off Cape Verd¹²⁴ had an unusual squall. On June 8th it was my turn at wheel during afternoon watch. There was just a bit of black cloud to windward, which looked nothing, but there was something in it. All sail is set with yards braced and we bowled along at some eight to nine knots. The bit of black cloud developed into a terrific hailstorm and hurricane. It strikes the ship suddenly. All hands on deck! The various orders are fast and furious. Bang! Our mizzen gaff topsail, spanker and mizzen stay have parted. The loss of our aft sails causes the ship to pay off before the wind. In a tick, before the order was given, the helm was down so as to keep the ship up to the wind. The pitiless hail cuts one's face, yet only a few moments ago the hot sun was showering down its burning rays. Now it's like the North Sea blizzard of last voyage. It lasted only a few minutes, however, but quite long enough to capsize many a ship. I was relieved to put on dry clothes and attend to hail cuts. 'Pincher', I was told, was pleased that the helmsman did not lose himself when certain sails were carried away.

To recount the preparation for West Coast trade would be a repetition of my first voyage. The building up of trade-room and the watering of rum were duly carried out, and on June 25th land is sighted on the port-bow. In a few hours we are anchored at Grand Drevin, our first trading town. David, who did the navigation, had made landfall almost in a bee line – no asking other ships the time or bearings, he knew his work and did it.

We had not anchored very long ere a number of canoes put off from the shore. This time there is not any singing or showing off. I am somewhat perplexed about this for only recently one had been telling our lads, who are all new hands to the coast, what a reception we would get on the coast when we arrived. It seemed so strange and unusual, something certainly must have happened to these people. The canoes are alongside and 'Pincher' is at the gangway. King Quee and

¹²⁴ i.e. Cape Verde in modern Senegal.

his son 'Atto' are the first aboard and the rest follow, among them my pals 'Booto', 'Dago' and 'Dabbery'. The salutation, I-U-Ka, with snapping of fingers, is freely used. The last named is almost caressing. 'Our good Jerry come again to our country, he fita talk – teach – more book.' 'Booto,' I say, 'what's the matter with your people, he no sing, no make noise when white man come again your country?' 'Jerry, Jerry, much trouble come our country since you went home over twelve moons. Dem bad Sassandrew man make war, we finish all our powder, some blow up dem bad men kill plenty our men, thief our women and piccaninies. There must be witch somewhere. We talk you Jerry when you keep anchor watch to-night.'

My first anchor watch was at 10 pm and in the meantime I had gathered from conversation that on the following morning on board our ship there was to be a great palaver concerning the question of supplying only the Grand Drewin men with guns and powder, and then giving the Sassandrew men the go by. A few minutes after commencing my watch 'Booto' and his friends gather. 'Jerry,' says he, 'we talk, tell us all you have done since we said good-bye at Half Jack, also how the old ship was wrecked in the white rain (snow)'. That glorious moonlight night almost skin to daylight, when my black friends squatted around, their white sheets well tucked in for to them the night was cold, will not readily be forgotten. I tell my story; they tell theirs, about the war, and how the medicine and fetish men would attend the coming palaver. 'Jerry,' says 'Booto', 'when we get big-men (rich) we fita make you our blood-brother, then you be one of us'. Great Scott! When I looked at the cabin clock I found that our chin-wag had taken some four hours. The next watch was called and I turned in.

Soon after breakfast there was much commotion on the beach. A good number of canoes were being hauled to the water's edge, ready for launching. This great palaver was a big event for a number of towns were involved in the war with the Sassandrew, and all of them our trading towns, so big men from each, including the medicine and fetish men, were attending and would have much to say at the palaver. The canoes have cleared the surf and are now making toward our ship, which they encircle three times, singing, chanting and showing off really far better than on my first voyage. There is more fierceness in it and at times their gestures with paddles are pointed toward the Sassandrew country. One can easily visualise that they hope to make mince-meat of their enemies; evidently the rum and gin taken ashore yesterday must have gingered them up. I am glad of this because my prestige with our lads had dropped owing to this matter. I heard someone remark that that kid Jerry was right after all.

In the leading canoe sat King Quee and his son Atto under a canopy in company with the medicine and fetish men. The latter are in their

best make-up, painted with different coloured pigments and smothered with charms, crowie shells¹²⁵ and palaver marks, i.e., small diamond cuts into their flesh which when healed leave deep indentations of various designs, thereby indicating how many palavers the wearer has attended. Some have their hair or wool plaited upwards, which give a semblance of horns – impressive and grand without doubt to their own fellows, but to us lads, most grotesque.

All this big crowd is on board and they are in a festive mood. I-U-Kas and snapping of fingers take place by the score. ‘White man be our big friend, we bring plenty palm-wine, fruits and koker-nuts for him.’ Yes, they did, but in drinking palm-wine our lads were beaten hands down. To them palavers are always boosey matches.

The big men are assembled on the poop-deck with King Quee as president and his son Atto acting as interpreter. A harangue lasting some hours follows in which everybody has much to say both in voice and gesture which would hurt many a Welsh orator. The essence of this long conflagration, when boiled down, was that ‘Pincher’ was to supply the Grand Drewin people with the sinews of war at enhanced prices, but he must not under any pretence trade with Sassandrew (boycott). ‘Pincher’ refused this request saying that the last named had always been good tradesmen prompt in payment, and he would be asking for a peppering if he refused their trade. The Beraby men were already on his track for this punishment and he did not wish to create another enemy. His reply sets up a chorus of dissent. It was then very forcibly pointed out that he was already a blood-brother to them and to refuse would mean a worse punishment than peppering. In the end they may or would help themselves. Poor ‘Pincher’ was between the devil and the deep sea. But as he had become one of them there was no option so he had to do what his black brothers wished. To sign and seal the contract King Quee, who guaranteed safe payment, produced a manilla which was broken in the usual way, each retaining his respective half.

The way is now open for trade or trust and my brother and I have charge of the trade-room. Orders for guns and powder, gin, rum and tobacco top the lot. Day after day our decks are just like pandemonium, with the big-pots and little-pots buying or getting on trust the sinews of war.

¹²⁵ [*sic*]; cowrie shells. These were shells of *cypraea moneta* and *cypraea annulus* that were imported from the Indian Ocean and that had been used as a currency in West Africa for many centuries. These became particularly associated with the development of the palm oil trade, because of their use in paying for small quantities, and became increasingly prevalent in parts of West Africa (though less so the Windward Coast) during the nineteenth century in what came to be called the great cowrie inflation. M. Johnson, ‘The cowrie currencies of West Africa, Part I’, *Journal of African History*, 9 (1970), pp. 17–49 and ‘Part II’, *idem*, pp. 331–353; J. Hogendorn and M. Johnson, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1986).

We finish our trading at Grand Drewin and then sail down the coast to our next two trading towns, Duke Walker and Kromwell, where almost the same scenes are enacted. The next two towns in our ordinary trade would be Sassandrew River and Treepo. The first named 'Pincher' has to give the go-by; the second is just outside the war zone, but 'Pincher' is afraid that being so near we may get a visit from the Sassandrew people, therefore he decides to pass by both towns. All is ready to slip past, we have the afternoon sea breeze, when almost ahead is sighted a number of large canoes that have put out from Sassandrew to intercept our passage. We head away from shore and I have charge of the wheel. The canoes are now astern and the men are paddling hard to overtake our ship. Bang! Bang! They are trying to pot up. 'Pincher', who is near, says, 'Jerry, don't be scared, I guess they can't catch this ship, she's the smartest sailor on the coast'. After a few parting shots they give up the chase and a few hours later we anchor at Kutrou, another trading town, then Frisco, Piccaninny Ho and Cape Lahou, our last trading town for trust.

Our stay at Cape Lahou lasted some eight weeks, during which time 'Chester' and another AB are transferred to a homeward-bounder. Poor 'Chester', the artist, 'reckless abandon', was ill most of the time, and the other fellow was a bully, but thanks to 'Uncle John' he and Smith were kept in their proper places. My log has already served some useful purpose in settling many a fierce argument caused by these two men. 'Good-bye, Chester' (a good man at heart). It was the last shake. The other fellow was given a post of Bos'un for the homeward voyage, and we heard later that he so ill-treated poor 'Chester' that soon after his arrival home he 'went west' at our Bristol Royal Infirmary. His, without a doubt, was a wasted life, and he was only twenty-seven years of age. But what of the other fellow! How often does one see and hear of those taken out of fo'c'sle becoming greater tyrants than those who have never lived for'ard.

We leave Cape Lahou for Half Jack. Cargo and provisions have to be delivered to ships belonging to our firm. There are a number of 'passengers' to be accounted for. I again catch sight of that big bleary-eyed monster William King who has some interest in our 'passengers'. Poor beggars, one can only guess what will happen to the girls of small stature. In carrying these poor wretched creatures we saw they were mostly boys and girls captured in bush raids, or girls who, perhaps through no fault of their own, had taken the wrong turning, and their value as wives would be nil, so were sold into slavery. Hence the splendid morals of the blacks, so often quoted as an example to we whites, became more a matter of cash than morals. They may be on board a week or more, and one can easily see that they are starving. I have on several occasions got scraps of food myself, making pretence

of eating to show them it was not poisoned, but they would always with fear refuse to accept by gesture. Some Kroo-boy would remark, 'Him be damn bush nigger, him no eat white man's chop (food), him bery much fear witch (poison)'. Really their intelligence was far below the animal and in the event of a British gun-boat asking questions the reply would be that these people are passengers and were being carried for King or Headman So-and-So. During the voyage a grand palaver was held at Frisco by natives from Cape Coast Castle re this matter of bush raids and coast slavery, Dick Squire being in the Chair.

Our business here is soon completed and once again we are beating to windward¹²⁶ in due time arriving at Grand Drewin, where we get one of the greatest ovations I ever saw on the coast. Their joy was akin to madness, for during our absence they had, with our ammunition, just walked into the Sassandrew people and cut them up – from some of their yarns some were boiled or roasted – and having to pay so much attention to war, there is no oil ready, which makes 'Pincher' look very glum. Before we again left this town a deputation of headmen came up the coast from Treepo to inquire why 'Pincher' was not trading with them this voyage. He told them that their town was too near Sassandrew, to which they replied that the Sassandrew men dare not enter their territory, for if they did, it would mean war, which they – the Treepo people – would greatly welcome, if only just to wipe them off the map, and it would be an easy task in their now weak state. 'Pincher' swallowed all that was said, thinking perhaps that if the other fellows were wiped out there would be some balance of power on this part of the coast, and it would stabilise trade. So 'Pincher' promised to trade with them. He had made another silly mistake, for in the end it was found that these folk were simply acting on behalf of Sassandrew.

In due course we anchor at Treepo where a rousing welcome is accorded us. Manillas are broken and many orders are given for 'trust' – mostly guns and powder, which looks fishy. The reason given was that they wanted them in case the Sassandrew men cut up rough, but there was no doubt that they would be sold at enhanced value to Sassandrew. Towards late afternoon a canoe was sighted coming from the last named place and all our Kroo-boys, belonging as they did to Grand Drewin, are so agog with excitement and fear that they want to hop it at once. The Treepo men calm them, however, by saying, 'No fear, he no bite while we are aboard'. The canoe arrives and the occupants clamber up the side of the ship. At the sight of our Kroo-boys their knives are whipped out with fierce gestures, showing what they would like to do. Their headman holds them in hand and marching up to

¹²⁶ i.e. returning westwards along the coast, against the wind.

‘Pincher’ in an arrogant way says, ‘What for Cappy you no trade with Sassandrew man?’ ‘Pincher’, equally arrogant, says, ‘That’s my business; I suppose I can trade with whom I please without asking the likes of you’. ‘No, Cappy, you can’t; you always traded with us, and the Sassandrew man paid proper fit time. We know, Cappy, you be blood-brother to [...] Grand Drewin man, you let him have plenty guns and powder, he kill our people and now we want the same, we will fita pay you proper.’ ‘Get off my ship [...]’, shouted ‘Pincher’. ‘Bery well Cappy, softly softly catchee monkey, we come again and then we make you sell.’ They depart, telling our Kroo-boys that they would soon come again and cut their throats. This threat gets the wind up with the Kroo-boys who won’t stay on the ship and request ‘Pincher’ to loan them the surf boat so that they could paddle to Kutrou and await our arrival. He does his best to calm them, ‘Don’t be cowards, they dare not touch you on an English ship, Sassandrew man only talk, me no fear him’. ‘No, no, Cappy, we no stay on ship, we much savey Sassandrew man, him like big cat in bush, him jump when you no look.’ So with several days’ rations they depart, leaving only Dabbery the Cook’s mate aboard.

That night, 27th September 1883, and the next day, ‘Pincher’ had treated the threats with ridicule, and supper being over, I hoisted the anchor lamp.¹²⁷ There is no moon, but a thick African mist. The lads in the fo’c’sle are playing cards and I am seated on the main hatch trying to play a concertina, while Dabbery, near by, is trying to make me talk ‘book’. Suddenly, some fifty or more dark objects are seen standing on the starboard rail, with huge knives held between their teeth. For a moment they are all poised, then three fierce yells are given and, with the precision of training, they all simultaneously land on deck, one section making for the cabin and another for our fo’c’sle. Their gun muzzles are already pointed through the skylight and port-holes – in fact we are covered at all points. Dabbery, who spotted more quickly than I what was happening, makes a dash for the fo’c’sle and I follow. The poor kid has turned very pale, is cold and violently trembling. He is stowed under a bunk at once and some of the invaders entered and pinched our oilskins. As all our lads are new to the coast they cannot palaver (talk), but I could, however, and I addressed them thus, ‘Now, now, you Sassandrew man, what for you come sailorman’s house? He no say come (come in), spose he come you house, you no say come, you say clear out, I give you fum-fum (fight). It no be our palaver, go aft and see Cappy about it’. ‘We want dem [...] Grand Drewin man, we fita proper cut him throat like bosilla’ (pig). I get the

¹²⁷ A longer description of this incident was given by Langdon in ‘Our bust up with the Nigger of Sassandrew River, West Coast of Africa, 1883–84’; typescript in Bristol City Library.

idea (Dabbery had not been spotted) and say, 'Oh, dem [...] bery much fear Sassandrew man, him run away in boat, say you much savey, like big cat in bush jump when you no look, and I (Jerry) think the same, you jump ship when we no look'. This sort of flattery pleased them and after more palaver our clothes which had been snatched from the doorway were returned.

But what is happening aft? They too are cornered at every point and 'Pincher', who is well armed, is holding a conflag through the cabin scuttle hatchway. Later the headmen are admitted and 'Pincher' is told that if he would sell they would pay, if not, they would take the ship, at the same time reminding him how their fathers took the schooner, mentioned in my first voyage. Again 'Pincher' was forced to knuckle under and manillas are broken for good faith and contracts made.

I receive orders to get an anchor lamp and open the trade-room. My brother has the many written orders which have to be made up at once, guns, powder, rum, gin and tobacco in the main. In the powder magazine, owing to want of air, it is difficult to keep our light burning, and several times it had to be taken out and snuffed. At last I discarded the lantern and choked the naked light between some kegs of gunpowder. 'Have a care', says Harry, 'this ship is a very bad roller'. 'Don't worry, old chappie', says I, 'we are not out of the wood yet. If the ship was blown up you and I and some fifty or sixty black niggers would go up too.' I make the suggestion of getting some loose powder, wetting it into paste and firing it right under the hatchway. It would make a good fizz and much smoke. Then I should rush on deck and say that the ship was going to blow up. Those black niggers would make a dash for their canoes and 'Pincher' could slip the cable and hop it. I wanted Harry to put the proposition to 'Pincher'. 'Not I', says he, 'he would call me a fool'. After several hours work in a stuffy atmosphere, for we were not allowed to uncover the hatch until all was ready for sending up, their wants are satisfied pro tem. Each tradesman has his goods, which he guards lest his pals steal a part, but they are not going to depart until daylight.

I was glad to be in the fresh air again. It is well past midnight and David has the deck. 'Jerry', says he, 'those fellows for'ard won't turn out for anchor watch. What shall we do?' 'Alright, Sir, you turn in and I'll keep the deck until morn. Our lads, like yourself, are not used to these black gentry.' So armed with a small hatchet under my coat I keep deck watch until 5.30 am. I take a squint around and all the fowls and a small pig have been killed. These fellows must have blood on their knives to spin a yarn at home, for they are such fearful liars and thieves. A cask of rice has been stoved in and the Sassandrew men are squatting about it in groups eating raw flesh and uncooked rice and

washing it down with rum and water. The last named, I fear, will do the trick, and at times I chin-wag with them – they are on the war-path. After the feed they drop off to sleep, but Oh my! when the uncooked rice began to swell in their tummies many were downright ill. It must be remembered that chop (food) is always scarce with these people, and perhaps they had not had food for some time.

At daybreak they commence to pack their plunder (for such it was) into two large canoes and later take themselves off. With feelings of relief we watch them round a point of land, less than a quarter of a mile distant, and Dabbery, who had now left his hiding place, is watching too, when suddenly he uttered an exclamation of surprise, ‘Quee, quee, look, look, mona (four) big canoes are coming. Dem Sassandrew man much savey. He hide him men all night’. Sure enough, four canoes have rounded the point and are making good speed towards our ship. Dabbery was right, they were hidden reserves held in readiness for a given signal. He was at once rushed off to another hiding place, the fore peak, and is given a supply of food and water. The black fellows are soon aboard and by some manoeuvre they seem to land on deck all together. With yells and curses (which need not be written) they shout, ‘We want dem damn black nigger Drewin man’. Cut-throat gestures are made towards us and I have a feeling of cold water running down my back as a burly nigger has caught hold of David, who was sitting on the taffrail, and was shaking him, and to all appearances is about to plunge his knife into his heart. David did not turn a hair, but calmly looked the ruffian in the face till he loosened his hold, and the nigger said, ‘Old white man no savey fear’. It was easy to see what their gag was, they wanted us to draw first blood. Well, if we had, I feel sure my story would not have been written. Their leaders are shouting to ‘Pincher’, ‘We want trust, we fita pay you proper’. He has again to capitulate and the trade-room is opened, where orders are made up until sunset. More men arrive from Sassandrew, the Trepo men are fraternising with them, and all are clamouring to get their orders in for trust. In the late afternoon they depart, the unsuccessful ones hoping to place their orders on the following day, but ‘Pincher’ had had enough (and so had we), so that when it was dark, orders were given to hoist the anchor quietly (muffled wind-lass) and later during the night we drop it again at our next trading town, Kutrou, where orders are given to keep a sharp look-out for any suspicious canoes coming down the coast.

I heard that ‘Pincher’ had written a letter asking for protection to the Governor of Cape Coast Castle,¹²⁸ which would have to wait for

¹²⁸ The Governor in question would have been Sir Samuel Rowe, Governor of the Gold Coast and Lagos, 1881–1884. It was a belief among traders that Bristol ships in

posting until a mail-boat passed down. It must be understood that this part of the West Coast of Africa was at this period (1883) under no jurisdiction. Prior to the War of 1870 the French had claimed it and almost had it on their map, but after their defeat the English traders had a look in, and many of the older natives could even then 'parlez-vous'.¹²⁹ Only this year, for the first time since the War, several French schooners were trying to pick up the threads of their former trade.¹³⁰ It had put the wind up the English traders because they were so often told that the French-a-man gave much better value.

Next morning our Kroo-boys come aboard and are all agog with excitement. What they and Dabbery's people are going to do for us sailormen for stowing him away is to be great, but when they had heard the full story, of how the Sassandrew men had obtained a good supply of guns and powder, they are much concerned with regard to the danger, and say, 'Him will again chop our people up'. 'Cappy, too, our blood-brother, has broken his trust and promise. What will our people say?'

In due course we call at all our trading towns and beat to windward and make our third visit to Grand Drewin, where we let go the anchor just after sunrise. There is something in the air, for [...] many hours no notice was taken of our ship from the shore. Near mid-day there is a stir and bustle on the beach and several large canoes are launched, which are paddled many times round the ship, the occupants making a great noise, firing guns and making fearful gestures with their knives. All our men save the cooper and myself are given jobs aloft. They come aboard. King Quee, his son Atto and others make aft for 'Pincher' and another lot, brandishing knives, rush for'ard, where one tries the same trick on the cooper that was used on David. The poor fellow, much wanting in courage, just crumpled up; in fact, it took several

West Africa 'avoid the British colonies and settlements, preferring to trade with native states', allegedly because of a desire to avoid British regulations. The presence of pawns or 'passengers' on Langdon's voyages might confirm this; A. Swanzy, 'On trade in Western Africa with and without British protection', *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 22 (1874), pp. 48-87.

¹²⁹ This would refer to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871. The French had been very active on the Ivory Coast in the 1830s and 1840s with the work of the naval officer Edouard Bouët-Willaumez. French garrisons had been established on the Ivory Coast in 1843; they were withdrawn following the Franco-Prussian war; E. Bouët-Willaumez, *Description nautique des côtes de l'Afrique Occidentale* (Paris, 1849).

¹³⁰ French traders had been prominent at Assinie and elsewhere on the Ivory Coast in the early part of the century and Robertson described their 'extensive trade' in 1819; Robertson, *Notes*, p. 96. Contrary to Langdon, Babington noted their presence in Grand Bassam and Assinie in the 1870s, 'Remarks on the general description of the trade', p. 249. The most prominent French firms in West Africa by the 1880s were Victor Régis of Victor et Louis Régis of Marseilles (taken over by Mantes Frères), and Cyprien Fabre of Augustin Fabre et fils of Marseilles.

hours before he regained consciousness. Aft a noisy palaver is taking place, in which ‘Pincher’ is told that he has broken his promise by selling guns and powder to the enemy, who had walked into them and sent a number of Drewin men west. The upshot was that a good big discount would have to be taken off the original contract. To this ‘Pincher’ had to consent and friendly relations are at once resumed. Atto makes a great speech with regard to our protection of Dabbery, and asks ‘Pincher’ to allow his men to be his guests the following Sunday. He (‘Pincher’) is on the horns of a dilemma, for to refuse would give offence, but what was the motive? Was it a trick to get at the ship? He stammered out a sort of excuse that perhaps his men would not like to go. ‘Oh’, replied Atto, ‘I will ask them myself’. So coming for’ard says, ‘Sailormen, I want to talk you. Sorry my men very much frighten the cooper, we only play. I ask Cabby to let you come my house next Sunday. He say you fear to come, we want to do you fit (well) for what you done for our Dabbery’. Needless to say we thanked him for the invitation. He then marched aft and says to ‘Pincher’, ‘You men much glad to come my house. I do them proper fit’.

On Sunday, December 9th 1883, the Kroo-boys are dressed in their best, with bodies well greased so that they shone like a well polished boot. They have the surf-boat ready soon after breakfast and all save ‘Uncle John’ are going ashore; he, poor fellow, has had another attack of his old malady and can’t move out of his bunk, but he is left quite comfy. We get a few words from ‘Pincher’, ‘Men, I want you to be most careful not to give any offence. At 5 o’clock our flags will be hauled down and I shall expect you aboard at six. If they want you to stay later say you must obey my orders’. ‘Aye, aye, Sir.’

Away we go, the Kroo-boys paddling with song through the surf up the top roller and in a tick they are overboard and the boat is pulled high and dry. All the world is there – big girls, little girls with skin well greased and painted – I-you, I-you-Kas, with finger snapping by the score. I have on a white jacket and trousers and I show Booto and Dabbery how we walk with our girls at home arm in arm, for which purpose two are selected, one on each side of me. Oh horror! The grease and paint have spoilt my nice white jacket, and we had to be presented to Royalty ere the day was out.

We arrive at Atto’s house, or rather hut – bamboo, plastered over with mud. During the day I had a peculiar experience with this mud plaster. It was at Dabbery’s Father’s house where I saw a large beetle about the size of one’s palm crawling up the wall, and with an umbrella I make a lunge at it. Great Scott! The umbrella went right through and to make up for the damage I promised the owner ‘bora-bar-semmer’ (one bar of soap). Palm wine and other refreshments are served by Atto’s

wives. He then lent each of us an umbrella and appointed guides to show us the sights. The first was the palm trees being felled down a slope where about one quart of the wine would percolate into the calabash in twenty-four hours. Our next visit was to some small bush villages where I note that each has a very strong stockade and outside of it all the filth is dumped, the *bosilla* (pigs) acting as scavengers. It is fearfully hot and the sun is right overhead – no shade save that caused by our very useful umbrellas.

We have dinner at Atto's house where each is given a mat about the size of a tea-saucer to squat on. The viands were placed on the ground and consisted of two large pots, one containing rice and the other rather a mixture of fish, fowl and monkey stewed in palm oil. The flesh of monkeys is considered a delicacy and is served to honoured guests. Each guest is provided with a spoon only. The feast commenced by Atto's taking the first spoonful, then all follow until the pots are empty. I had often watched our Kroo-boys at meals and noted that they used their hands only – and woe to him who took more than his share! I must say that in this particular they were most fair – some whites could learn a lesson from them. 'Bill and I do like duff-ends', so the duff is cut in half. Our feast was washed down with palm wine and the next adventure was our presentation to his great majesty King Quee.

'I-you-Ka, I-you-Ka, old king live for ever' is the usual salutation at these functions. The wizened old man is seated in state on piled packing cases covered with leopard skins and his many wives are lined up on each side, the youngest aged about 10, and the eldest I can't say what age. I learnt during the ceremony that the head wife gave the younger one a rough time with her tongue. The presentation consisted of walking this lane of women and taking from the hand of King Quee a tot of rum, he first taking a sip therefrom and in a peculiar way squirting it through his teeth, a custom that the giver and receiver must carry out, to omit which would be tantamount to saying that the stuff was poisonous. If through health or fetish one does not want to drink, the difficulty is overcome by just sipping, etc. I take my tot of rum from the king, sip and squirt it through my teeth and say, 'I-you Ka, old king live for ever'.

Our ship's flags are hauled down so we must soon get away, but one of our number is out of action – Bill wants to stay ashore and marry a black lady. 'Alright we will talk about it to-morrow, now get into the boat.' 'Yes, when I've gone up the beach and kissed my girl', says Bill. But into the boat was our orders and in he went and we get through the heavy surf quite safely. Our watch on Bill being relaxed he is overboard in a tick saying he was going to marry his black lady. We must proceed for to get backwards into the surf would spell disaster.

We arrive at the ship and report Bill's amour. A message is sent ashore to the effect that he was to be sent off at once, even if he had to be triced up. But silly Billy, who became sobered by being dashed about in the surf, returned later in a very small canoe and it cost him out of his wages (via dash) fifteen shillings.

It was Christmas Day, and to amuse the Kroo-boys (and also myself) I make a large kite. 'What for you make', they ask. 'I make big bird go (pointing upwards) up, up.' A kite was much beyond their knowledge and they watch intently, asking many questions. The tassels and tail were a puzzle to them and they said, 'Him tassel be ears and monkey no go up tree with such a tail'. The kite is a great success and it flies splendidly. 'Quee, quee!' they exclaim, 'Dem Jerry got witch'. Such was their ignorance. Our cook has done us well, full and plenty with no waste. We sing carols, spin yarns, and talk about our last Christmas at the Cameroons, wondering how those poor Dutchmen fared in hospital. We then turn in and think of home and what sort of weather they are having. With us it is just roasting.

January 4th, 1884 has arrived. A homeward-bound mail-boat is near by. 'Pincher' has brought on the doctor to see 'Uncle John', and the verdict is that he must go home, for he wouldn't get better in this hot clime. We are so sorry to lose him, it's like going to our own funeral. Tenderly we place him on a hatch and take him aboard the mail-boat. 'Good-bye, you lads', says 'Uncle', 'you have been ever so kind to me'. With 'Uncle John's' absence our fo'c'sle will not be the same. He possessed a wonderful range of reason and, as before stated, when reason failed to settle a dispute his fists did the rest. He was a master at fisticuffs and used his fists, too, without malice, for after a scrap he would soon chum again with his late opponent. To me he was a councillor [*sic*] and a guide. How many laughs had we had with him. Even when the laugh was against him he would not get angry. Two such episodes are worth mentioning. 'Uncle John' was always the first out of his bunk when the kittle of coffee was served at 5.30 am. One particular morning 'Uncle' was spluttering with his coffee, 'Drat it, I forgot to wash the tea-leaves from my hook-pot'. Again and again we heard, 'Drat it' (for 'Uncle' was not a swearer), accompanied by the splutterings, and presently another fellow turns out, who, wanting a smoke, gets a light from the galley. Then 'Uncle John' discovers that he had left the cover off his hook-pot, and the pest of small cockroaches, which we had in abundance, had got in. So cockroach stew was a gag for many a day. Another incident was when 'Uncle John' and I are painting the outside of the cabin, which is a half-deck house with alleyways each side. 'Pincher' is inside and I can hear from the haggle with the natives that he is buying gold and is about to test it with acid. To avoid the fumes and smell in the cabin he passes at arm's length

through the port-hole the gold in the acid, at the same time well shaking it. 'Uncle' leaves his work, takes the vessel out of 'Pincher's' hand, and says, 'Throw it overboard, Sir?' 'No, no, you ——!' I was just in time to save the precious contents from being dumped overboard.

One Saturday evening we are having a sing-song, which continues after eight bells (8 pm). The whiskered Second Mate, in a very bullying way, gives orders for us to shut up and turn in, 'There's no singing on this ship after time', says he. 'Go to Jericho', was our reply. The next order came from 'Pincher' himself. 'Let go the second anchor.' 'What for?' we inquired, 'it's a moonlight night and the ship is not in danger'. 'Because you are singing after time and won't obey the Second Mate's orders, and I'll make you heave it up again Sunday morning.' 'Then, Sir', was our reply, 'if that's the case, we shan't do either'. 'What, what! You refuse duty! It's rank mutiny. I'll log the lot of you and bring it before the Board of Trade when we get to port.' That long whiskered bully, the Second Mate, is in his element and dancing around like a Red Indian and flourishing a hand-spike, says, 'Shall I make 'em do it, Sir?' 'No, no', replied 'Pincher', 'none of that on my ship'. After a parley 'Pincher' was told that those aft often carry on till past midnight with their sing-song and we never complained at being kept awake just because others were enjoying themselves, yet he refused us one hour, until two bells (9 o'clock).¹³¹ I never knew 'Pincher' to be so diplomatic, he must have gauged the temper of his men. 'Oh', says he, 'if it's only an hour you want. You know, men, I must look after your health and see you get proper rest. You'll turn in at two bells.' 'Yes, Sir, we will.' 'Then have it', he says, 'and say no more about it'. 'Thank you, Sir', we replied.

Again we are beating to windward and are carrying several big men, Dick Squire of Frisco and other headmen are going to Sassandrew to adjudicate the boundary of the last-named and Grand Drewin. A truce has been arranged and this is to be some affair. The grand palaver will take three days. 'Pincher' has to attend to give evidence and Dick Squire will act as umpire. This very interesting man is well worth an introduction. When I served in the cabin I gathered much from his well balanced conversations, and for sagacity and fair dealing he was one of the best on the coast. In his appearance a streak of white blood could be traced. He was fully aware of the many shortcomings of his countrymen, the domination of fetish and medicine men and wiles of witchcraft and he also knew that if he attempted to introduce reform his life would be forfeit. His English was very good – how he acquired his good manners and breeding, I know not. He was, I may say, a blackman with the true instinct of a gentleman. For palavers or disputes

¹³¹ i.e. 9 pm.

his services were much in demand, even by the officials at Cape Coast Castle. Such was the man whose help and knowledge 'Pincher' had solicited to get himself out of the fearful hash that he had already made with the Grand Drewin and Sassandrew people.

In due course we arrive at Sassandrew. Our Kroo-boys knew that if the palaver failed their number would be up, so they take themselves off in the surf-boat, this time Dabbery going with them. It's a joy day for the Sassandrew folk. 'Pincher', with the delegation, left the ship in royal state, with a fanfare of shouts and firing of flint-locks (guns). David is in charge and all day our decks are crowded with bare-backed savages coming and going, bringing palm-wine, rum, fruits and small presents for 'sailorman'. They over fraternise with us, with the result that at the end of the day the mixed drinks of palm wine and rum, and maybe some other drug as well, was too much for our lads. All save David and myself are drunk and very quarrelsome and all of us become involved in a scrap with each other. It was here that I saw the prowess of old David. 'Bully Smith' went for him and in a flash with one blow (an upper-cut), Smith was down and out. I thought what David must have been in his prime when on the packet-ships, or before he became a changed man. A moment after his knock-out blow, he is bending over Smith, saying, 'I am so sorry I forgot myself, but you made me do it'.

In the evening David says, 'Jerry, the men won't keep anchor watch to-night. I'll keep the deck until four bells (10 o'clock), then you take it until morning, and don't turn out to-morrow'. 'Aye, aye, Sir.' I keep my long night watch while most of my ship-mates, Smith is one of them, are lying about 'dead-ho', and to prevent the ill effects of moonshine and the early morning dews, which are almost as dangerous to health as the sun, I cover them over with sacks, and when they came to their senses they did indeed look a sorry lot. Smith had to keep his chin tied up for several days.

'Pincher' returned and said that the palaver was set, i.e., that justice had been done. I heard much about this conference from a native who was there. 'Pincher' did not talk much about it. I was told that after two days palavering or jabbering the boundary-line was fixed, and a broken manilla not being a sufficient pawn of good faith in this very big affair, a slave (human being) was placed on the boundary-line, severed in twain and the medicine men of each side taking a half. It is horrible to relate, but I was assured by my black boy's friends that it was true. They further said that the medicine men would make much money from this for years to come, for they would sell parts of the body for charms, etc.

A new shipmate has come aboard, transferred from another ship just arrived from home, and we call him Tom, for such was his name.

He was a well-known character on the coast. His mother, when alive, held a very responsible post in the family of our owners,¹³² and I believe many a little 'king' had cause to bless her. His brother had risen from ship's boy to Captain and Trader, had offended the natives, got peppered and died. Tom's failing was drink. He would sell his very skin for it, but when he was sober one could not wish for a better fellow. One day he got an overdose – doped, I think – and was just mad-like. 'Put that fellow in irons', came the order from 'Pincher'. 'We can't do that to a shipmate', was our reply. But again the command was given, 'I will have that fellow placed in irons, and if you won't do it, I shall order the Kroo-boys to do so'. To avoid this deep insult, which would probably have ended in bloodshed, for without doubt we men were just full of indignation at such an un-white man's order, with strong imprecations directed towards 'Pincher', we overpower our shipmate and the hand-cuffs and anklets are on. Poor Tom is lashed to a stanchion, which makes him the more mad, and his fearful struggles to free himself will cause injury to himself. Even 'Pincher' had the 'wind-up', for Tom, whatever he may have been, was well known to our owners and some enquiry would sure to be made. 'What can I do with him?', asks 'Pincher'. 'Release him, and let his shipmates (whitemen) take care of him', was our reply. 'Do so', says 'Pincher', 'and I wish the fellow had never come aboard my ship'. Tom is therefore taken into the fo'c'sle and, with strong language, is told to turn in and keep quiet. I, Jerry, has to watch until he slumbers, and when I thought he was asleep I resumed duty on deck. Later I visit the fo'c'sle to see if all is OK and Great Scott! Tom is sitting on his sea chest, laughing and pointing to a fair sized pickle jar, says, 'I always had my eye on that. Thee thought I was asleep, but I wasn't'. The jar belonged to a curio hunter and contained a baby alligator, some small snakes and other funny things, covered with rum. We are in the soup for Tom is now very ill and has turned a peculiar colour. 'Pincher' must be told, but our difficulty lay in the fact that the rum in the jar had been pinched. He would be sure to ask questions. 'Jerry', asks someone, 'you're a good lad at explaining things, and the old man (the captain) must be told, so you go aft and spin him a yarn, but don't you let us down about that rum'. I wondered how the late George Washington would have felt, but I report to 'Pincher', and to my great surprise no questions were asked. I rather think that he, too, had the wind-up and said that Tom must be dosed at once, so from the medicine chest he pours out a stiff emetic. It had the desired effect, but it was a fortnight before Tom was back to duty.

It is now February 20th 1884, and we are again at Grand Drewin.

¹³² i.e. R. & W. King.

HMS *Electro*, a small wooden clinker, built for a gun-boat, has come down the coast and anchored close to our ship. An officer comes aboard and says, ‘Captain, I’ve been looking for your ship for some eight weeks or more, and have been in and out of the rivers and creeks from Cape Coast Castle to Cape Palmas’. ‘Sorry’, replied ‘Pincher’, ‘you must have missed us when we were beating to windward for we got well south of the line on that journey’. ‘Quite so’, replied the officer, ‘now according to your communication to the Governor, you have had some trouble with the natives’. ‘Pincher’ thereupon gives an account. ‘Captain’, says the officer, ‘I can do nothing. This part of the coast is under no jurisdiction and the French have eyes on it. With that fact alone we have to be very careful what we do. If only one British subject had been killed by the Sassandrew people, there would have been justification for bombarding their town. But even if that were done, the beggars would not have suffered much, save the loss of some mud-huts, which they would re-build in a few days. They would hop off to the bush and have a good laugh at us. However, I will steam down to Sassandrew, get the headmen aboard if I can, and give them a reprimand and show them how our “dogs” (guns) can bark.’ Later during the day we heard gun-firing from this direction, and the next time we were at this place the Sassandrew men had much to say, ‘Dem big guns, him bite big rock, big tree, him be devil’.

We are working down the coast and owing to the unsettled state of the natives trade is very poor indeed. At Frisco the brig ‘*Agnes*’ is anchored, and she looks smart and trim. The next time we were at this town this fair ship was on the beach, a wreck, for one night in swinging to the current, she fouled her anchor. This danger has to be closely watched by the man keeping anchor watch. The wreck is soon looted by thousands of natives. They say that everything that is washed up on their shore is theirs. I have a little yarn about this, and it happened at the same place. There was a small ten-ton cutter working close in shore, doing petty cash trade and natives, without canoes, will often swim the surf to do some small trade. The cutter belonged to the barque *Jane Lamb* (Captain S——).¹³³ Her size enables her to enter rivers and creeks where a big ship could not go. In fact, much small trade is often done by ships’ boats during daylight – but, back to the ship at night! This cutter, with one white man in charge, proceeded

¹³³ It was common in the West African trade for larger ships to use a smaller cutter to collect small quantities of produce from several different ports. This was particularly so in the river trade of the Niger Delta region, where a shallow bar at the river entrance could make access dangerous. The *Jane Lamb*, 303 tons, Capt. Rawlinson, arrived in Bristol from Antwerp in July 1883 with a cargo of coconuts for Cummins & Co. It is likely it would have unloaded a cargo of African produce at Antwerp before sailing for Bristol; *Customs Bills of Entry, Bill A*, 6 July 1883.

down the coast and the *Jane Lamb* would follow in a week or more to unload and reload the cutter with merchandise. A few days after the cutter had passed and was forgotten, toward sunset a small canoe approached our ship and in it were two natives and a nude white man. The natives are soon aboard. 'Dash, dash, cabby (pay, pay), we bring white man your ship'. It appears that the cutter had fouled her anchor the previous night, got into the surf and became a wreck. She was soon looted, and the man too robbed of his clothes. That evening he told us that he had that day walked sixteen miles of beach, and those — black niggers would not give him a bite of food or a drop of water for fear of witchcraft. The dash to bring him from the shore was about fifteen shillings in goods. Needless to say we made him very welcome until his own ship arrived, and we lads rigged him out with clothes.

No mention has yet been made about work-up jobs (punishment). Bill, a young AB, for wanting to marry a black lady, was given the task of holystoning the jib-guys, seated in a bowline. I, for some petty offence, was put to scraping down the mizzenmast, standing on the gauntlings (a small wire rope from rigging to rigging) bare-footed. I had to hold on with one hand and scrape with the other. 'Pincher' took a delight in ordering these dangerous jobs to be done. I ask David if I might use a bos'un chair or a bowline. 'No, Jerry', said he, 'my orders are "from the gauntlings"'. 'Alright, Sir, I'll do it, but it's very dangerous, this ship is such a quick roller.' 'Yes, I know', he replied, 'but, lad, take care you don't come a cropper'. I was dealing with a humane man, who, like myself, had to obey orders. David and I were fairly chummy, so far as our rating would allow, and many a soft job he would give me. I would hear something like this. 'Jerry, there's not much doing to-day, get into a quiet corner and do some mending for me. I can't thread needles like I used to.' The dear old fellow, his wardrobe was very scant, he had fallen on evil times, and was for so long out of a berth, and besides there were some little birds in the nest at home. It was a delight to me to work for him, therefore I gave of my very best in mending, patching and making his clothes.

By accident I am in the soup. I had purchased some herrings for breakfast from some fisher boys returning at sunset, and, on my haunches, was cleaning them alongside a big up-turned cask. There were pigs aboard and Mr Pig snaps up one herring, so that's my breakfast gone. And methinks the pig from the opposite direction had the other one, and my paddy is up. Knife in hand I make a lunge at the pig and the ship, taking a heavy lurch, the point of the knife entered the hind part of the pig. Pig-like, he had much to say about it and yell followed yell. Silly, pig, for it cost him his life. 'Pincher', 'Pincher', what was he not going to do to me? 'There was a time, etc., yes, and there was a time when you would have swung from the yard-arm for that.

Mr Mate make this fellow, from six to six, polish the copper from stem to stern, swung in a bowline.’ In vain I plead that it was an accident. The pig, to have a respectable death, was there and then killed, and orders were given that I was not to partake of any.

That night I have much to think about – the sharks, and ‘Cockney’s’ feet on a former voyage. Somebody had to have this job and it was my wretched luck. It was jolly hard, seeing that I was hoping to give the boys a surprise for breakfast. When keeping watch, I look toward the shore. If only the people there were civilised I would dump a hatch overboard, chancing the sharks, drift ashore and then hop it. No, those black fellows would pinch my clothes and bring me back to the ship and demand a big dash. So I tell myself that ‘Pincher’ won’t get all his own way. I’ve had my thinking cap on. I will not refuse to polish the copper, but I will refuse to sit in a bowline.

The next morning at six o’clock I had to turn to. My orders from David are to polish the copper. Nothing was said about using a bowline, so with an ‘Aye, aye, Sir’, I start the work slung in a bos’un chair. Very soon I am wet right up to my neck and when ‘Pincher’ makes his appearance on deck and sees me at work he’s just boiling with rage. ‘Mr Mate, didn’t I tell you that that fellow was to sit in a bowline?’ ‘Yes, sir, but I didn’t think you meant it.’ ‘Pincher’ then tells his same old story. ‘I’m captain of this ship and you, Mr Mate, must carry out my orders or there will be trouble.’ David then looks over the ship’s side and says, ‘Jerry, you must sit in a bowline’. ‘No, sir, I will not, and you may tell the captain.’ The die is cast and I feel ever so much better. I will face the music, and do what he may, I will not sit in a bowline. I enter the fo’c’sle. ‘Pincher’ comes in with hand-cuffs. ‘Are you going to polish the copper?’ ‘Yes, sir, but not in a bowline.’ ‘Then you refuse duty?’ ‘No, sir, I do not refuse to do my duty.’ ‘Hold out your hands!’ ‘I shan’t, if you want to put those things on me, do it yourself, I shan’t help you.’ Then ‘Pincher’ suddenly tripped me over with his foot. I had kept my head so far but now it is the reverse and I go for him. Soon our shirts are in a very tattered state, and my head gets a bump on a sea chest, and I am winded. The darbies¹³⁴ are on and I am taken aft and chained to the wheel with anklets.

I feel my position very keenly and all through that wretched pig. Besides I was getting on so well. I had cut out and made a royal sail all on my own, and was rattling down the topmast rigging when this affair happened. Now I am being treated like a felon – biscuit and water for breakfast, and that sent by a blackman so that it makes me more defiant, and it hurts. ‘Pincher’ lays down the law relating to the terrible crime of my refusing duty. He always got the same answer.

¹³⁴ i.e. handcuffs.

'I've not refused duty, but I will not sit in a bowline. If Mr Shark came along I would have no chance.' 'Sharks or no sharks', says 'Pincher', 'if you won't obey my orders I will send you to the Consul'¹³⁵ at Cape Coast Castle, and he will clap you in prison, and remember, Jerry, very few white men ever come out alive from a fever-stricken African prison'.

The Second Mate, too, had a try at persuasion, 'Don't be a fool, some captains would have had you keel-hauled (hauling a man under the ship's keel) for what you did'. David has nothing to say – at least not to me. I am in the open sun until dinner-time and 'Pincher's' temper has cooled a bit, and he now asks me round-a-bout questions. 'I didn't say how long I should keep you in a bowline', he said. I saw the point at once and said, 'If, sir, it's not your intention to keep me in a bowline all the time, I am ready to start the work'. In a tick he unlocks my shackles and I then make ready with bucket, sand and canvas, with bowline over the side. 'Pincher' stood watching and, holding up his hand says, 'Jerry, that will do, get about your other work, and say no more about it'. I am flabbergasted. Can it be true? It is. David, I believe, had a hand in it, although he never said so, but someone heard him telling 'Pincher' that it was risky for the man who had to do the work, and it was also risky to him who gave the order, and if anything happened he, 'Pincher', might lose his ticket. This, we all thought, did the trick, and I enter the fo'c'sle saying, 'Lads, I've a clean sheet. You have roast pork for dinner, and I too'.

Many incidents will occur on a long voyage which cannot be tabulated in general order, for instance, the sport of fishing. Most evenings, with the Kroo-boys, I would be fishing, with a line and several baited hooks. The fish at six or seven fathoms were most varied and plentiful and, like the natives, always seemed to be hungry. One would get a bite or two on the ground and more bites when hauling up. To haul up only one fish would be considered poor sport. Only two kinds of fish did the natives reject for food, but they are far from being fastidious, seeing that snakes, lizards and other funny things are eaten. But the devil fish, as they name it, is without scales, has a black and yellow colouring and scissor-shaped teeth which bite off the hook if not landed properly. With imprecations the native would inflate to a great size saying, 'Him devil, eat hook', and dumps it overboard, 'now go tell your brudder what blackman do you'. The other rejected fish was a sucker. Its under part was grooved like an India rubber mat and woe betide the fisherman if it caught the ship's side, for there it would suck, putting his line out of action. In daylight a native would dive down and pull off Mr Sucker, for the loss of hooks and line to them meant much. My strangest catch was a ribbon fish, two inches wide

¹³⁵ [sic], Governor.

and six feet in length. Shark hauls were many. One in particular I must mention. He was a ten-footer, and we had him well hooked in the upper jaw and he lashed the water furiously. We got a bowline on him and hoisted him on deck. ‘Look out, lads, keep your distance.’ It flopped and reared almost upright, lashing its tail about and pounding the deck. ‘Pincher’ was going to pot it with a shot to avoid injury to his men, but a Kroo-boy got in with a cut from a long-handled axe, near its tail. It was the most fierce I ever saw, and after the post-mortem the reason was apparent for a brood of little sharks was inside.

Two Kroo-boys had another tough fight with a young alligator which had got over the bar of a river and into the salt water. They chased it in a small canoe and with unerring aim plunged the harpoon home. Their next difficulty is to get it into the canoe. It lashed its tail and snapped its jaws. At the first chance given its eyes are gouged out and its throat cut. It measured six feet – a big feed for Kroo-boys. I was asked to partake, but declined; I also shied at eating alligator’s eggs.

We once captured another man-eating fish, the great barracuda, the tiger of the sea. This monster is feared more than the shark and grows to a great size. It has the long jaw and similar teeth to the alligator. Amid the usual babble of noise the fish is sighted, and at once there is silence, the natives speaking only by gesture. It is difficult and dangerous to catch this monster because it is very wary and sometimes it will attack. The best harpooner, with another to paddle, creeps silently towards its tail end and a harpoon, some fifteen feet long without a line, finds its mark. For a moment it remains upright, then with a tremendous cheer from the natives the fish dives and reappears several times, the shaft of the harpoon showing its whereabouts. After a great fight it is hauled aboard and another big feast is partaken of. The flesh, when cooked, looks rather tempting, but I could not at any price relish a man-eater.

Endurance and apparent indifference to pain among the natives are very marked. It was not unusual to see them lance their own abscesses (and large ones too), in the groin, or amputate a toe when suffering from Jigger worm. One would ask how’s your bad toe and the reply would be, ‘Him better, I cut him off myself’. It may be stated that prior to the operation they would dose themselves with kola nut¹³⁶ and many were addicted to its use. Another malady is the guinea worm, taken, I believe, in the drinking water.¹³⁷ This worm, they say, works its way through the body causing withered limbs, so that when it appears on the surface it is trained to continue its journey through a

¹³⁶ Kola nuts (the nuts of *cola acuminata* and *cola nitida*, both native to Africa) contain caffeine and are prized as a mild stimulant.

¹³⁷ Guinea worm, a common parasite in tropical regions, is transmitted by water and causes *dracunculiasis* in humans.

hollow reed or pipe stem and a cure may thus be effected. Undoubtedly the drinking water must contain the larva of many funny things. This fact was easily proved, for coast water, after being casked a few days or even months, when broached mosquitoes by the score would make for the open air through the bung hole. One is apt to ask the question with regard to the dreadful malaria whether or not Mr or Mrs Mosquito is not just as dangerous from within as from without.¹³⁸

To show the immense trade carried on by Bristol ships on a strip of coast of about 200 miles, I have culled from my log the names of 27 vessels, from the largest of 500 tons to the smallest (the cutter *Auspicious*) of 50–60 tons.¹³⁹ This last small ship has just completed the voyage from home and it must have been a very jumpy trip, for when at anchor she bobs up and down like a cork. How the large casks of oil are hoisted inboard, I know not, but one must admire the crew's pluck to sail such a small vessel over thousands of ocean miles. Whether she ever made the tortuous voyage home or not, I don't know. Perhaps she became a wreck, like the small schooner *Cyprus* which recently fouled her anchor at Frisco. 'That's mine', said the natives. They were doing well – two shipwrecks in one year. These small ships carry only one or two white hands, the Kroo-boys make the casks and work the ship, therefore efficiency is much lacking.

List of Bristol ships

Barques	<i>Mohican, Sir Humphry Davy, Cerea, La Zingara, Watkins, Jane Lamb, Avonside, Echo, Beatrice, Mervyn, Ibis, Gift, Celoria, Laughing Water, Burnswark, Alanso, Bolivia, Valdivia.</i>
Barquentines	<i>Edmund Richardson, Elvira Camino, Flora de la Plata, Zizine.</i>
Brigs	<i>Agnes, Dauntless.</i>
Schooners	<i>Cyprus, Vanguard, and</i>
Cutter	<i>Auspicious.</i>

To the above must be added the well known names of the Captain Traders: Hampton, Cook, Swan, Pollyblank, Budd, Salmond, Jeffries, Golding, Venning, Tresise, Johnson, Hunt and Lawton.

¹³⁸ The connection between malaria and the mosquito by Sir Ronald Ross was not made until 1896–1897.

¹³⁹ Although these were typically-sized ships for the sailing ships of the West African trade in the first part of the nineteenth century, they were relatively small for this period, following the introduction of steamers into the trade in the 1850s. By 1880, the average ship in the West African trade was some 800 tons.

It had been my pleasure, when serving in the cabin, to listen to the yarns of most of these men, watch their carousals, and serve the liquid refreshment.

Much could be written with regard to the mannerisms of the Captain Trader – a class to themselves, and often spoken of as counter-jumpers. Say, is not our trade room a draper's shop, minus the shop-walker? We have muslins, calicoe, brocades, in name only, and heaps of other haberdashery on sale. I hear the men say, and I believe it, that some of these Captain Traders only knew enough navigation and seamanship to bring a ship to the coast, when they would complete their trade and return home by the mail-boat to buy cargo for the next voyage. Their own ships will return sometimes with only one navigator aboard holding a master mate's ticket. Hence the value of old David who had a master's ticket. These Captain Traders were very affected and used jaw-breaking words, which of course the common sailorman was supposed not to understand. One command to illustrate this is worth mentioning, because of its originality. 'Mr Mate, will you kindly see that the ship is systematically arranged and the men duly organised in their respective stations preparatory to putting the ship about.' Someone remarked that he must be barmy. Such pomposity towards sailormen was nauseous!

On June 23rd we were at Cape Lahou. HMS *Starling* (gunboat) had steamed up the coast and anchored for a few hours near our ship. The commander wanted to know if we had any more trouble with the natives, and he also discussed the question of the French traders creeping in, and the attitude of the natives towards them. Further, the annexation of this part of the coast by the French nation was almost sure to follow.¹⁴⁰ This, with the present bad trade and the expected loss on the voyage, has put 'Pincher' in a very bad way.

Again we are at Grand Drewin and are running down the coast for the last time, having been some fifteen months from home. Much trust has to go by default owing to the late war and the Frenchmen. Passengers (slaves) in lieu thereof are likewise scarce, they having already been sold for war expenses. It is going to be a very lean voyage and 'Pincher', I hear, is going to send the ship home under the command of David, while he himself will stay aboard another ship belonging to our owners. Once more he will run down the coast to collect, if possible, any further balance of trust overdue, and then return home by a mail-boat. But it is a question whether he will have any success. The Frenchy-a-man, says the native, gives better value and stronger rum.

¹⁴⁰ In 1886 the French re-asserted their presence on the Ivory Coast and commenced a piece-meal occupation of the territory, a process that culminated in the declaration of a French colony in 1893.

Our last trip down is completed and even after disposing of our few passengers at Half Jack the ship is not fully loaded. Awnings are taken down, boats got in board and our merry Kroo-boys have said I-You-Ka, which answers for good-bye or how d'ye do. 'Jerry', they said, 'you come again our country we fita work for you. When you be trader you talk us boys plenty book, we much thank you.' Booto is coming to see the white man's country, so that the cook will have a very soft job. David will be captain, the Second Mate with the whiskers will be First Mate, and bully Smith will live aft and become Bos'un. With the last two named we expect a warm time, unless of course David puts his foot down, but he can't always be on deck.

On September 5th 'Pincher' takes his quarters on another ship and two fresh hands are transferred to ours. With one real navigator aboard we dip our ensign to the ships at Half Jack bound for Queenstown¹⁴¹ for orders. Some little mention may be given of the two new men. One was a Bristol lad, Charlie by name, who had just got his AB ticket, and was the son of a well known Bristol gentleman. Charlie had been apprenticed to a reputed firm of silk mercers in College Green and didn't like it so he hopped off to sea. He and I are at once great chums. The other lad came from the one and only town in the world – Birmingham, and would, if he could, have been a bully and also a prig. Watches are set and I am in the Whiskered Mate's watch. Some asking for information from other ships on our way home, the routine was similar to that of my first homeward voyage. David who was navigating could, so to speak, take a much better sight of the sun with a ham-bone than could the other so-called mate with a sextant, and we soon ran into the roaring forties. My afternoon watches below were spent aft, where David was teaching me my ABC in navigation.

As we sail further north Booto, who has not yet discarded his native costume, feels the cold and he must be attended to. 'Pincher' had left his spare wardrobe behind which had to be extended to fit the lad. I was successful with the clothes but when it came to the boots I was properly boxed up. Booto had some feet. So I made him a pair of half wellington canvas topped clogs, painted black. 'Oh, Jerry', says he, 'I so warm, and I thank you very much'. It was amusing to see the lad trying to dress himself in European clothes. The buttons gave him much trouble and I had to impress upon him the importance of having everything proper fast (secure).

We ran through the trades¹⁴² and there have been a few rows between the Mates and men, generally during the night watches. One morning at four o'clock I took my turn at the wheel and the ship was running

¹⁴¹ i.e. Cobh, Co. Cork.

¹⁴² i.e. the south-east trade winds.

before a stiff breeze with a jumpy sea. The main and mizzen sails are boomed out and the compass card is very unsteady owing to the quick movement of the ship. Mr Whiskers quizzes his squinty eye into the binnacle and with a vile oath says, 'She's two points off her course'. 'No she's not', says I. 'What, you contradict me, a mate of this 'ere ship?' 'I do', was my reply, at the same time thinking that I was king of the castle by being in charge of the wheel and that he would not dare to strike, so I felt free to tell him off with some lip. His vile oaths still smarted and his whiskers were so tempting that I let rip. 'You, mate of this ship? You never were and never will be. You're more fit for a coal barge. The ship is not half a point off her course. The compass card is jumping and you know that your eyesight is so bad that you can't see the lubber point.' The mention of his eyesight did it. Bash! All the stars and planets are crowded into my eyes at once, and danger to the ship or not, I leave my hold of the wheel, jump on his foot and grab a good bunch of his whiskers with one hand, while with the other I punch somewhat blindly at his face. Again, it is an unequal scrap, for he is very heavy and muscular, while I am a lightweight stripling of eighteen. We clinch and I still retain my hold on his whiskers, but I am forced to release owing to intense pain for the brute had got his teeth into my hand and held on like a bull-dog. David, who was in his bunk, rushed on deck in his sleeping bags, he must have been roused by the whirl of an unattended wheel and the rattle of tiller chains and the peculiar motion of the ship when about to broach-to. His first act is to seize the fast revolving wheel and get the ship before the wind. Then he called the watch aft to separate the combatants, and with all my hurts, it was good to hear how David slated Mr Whiskers. 'You, an officer', said David, 'strike the helmsman with the ship boomed out? In another moment, if I had not caught the wheel, she would have broached-to, and it would have taken the masts out of her in a breeze like this.' 'But, sir', said Whiskers, 'he was so cheeky, said my eyesight was so bad that I could not see. And that I could not stand.' 'I don't care what he said', replied David, 'you, Mr Mate, have endangered the ship by striking the man at the wheel, and by doing so you have broken a hard and fast sea law. It would be my duty to log you for it, but, like myself, you have little ones at home. You may hear more of it yet, however.'

My injuries are dressed and I resume duties at daylight. I am ordered to paint the main truck and all the iron work on the main top mast, a most unusual command and very dangerous when fore and aft sails are boomed out. I see the gag. Perhaps he hopes I shall refuse and he will then get a set-off for the recent scrape. 'Aye, aye', says I, and up the rigging I go with a paint pot slung on my left wrist. Above the cross trees I have to shin up to the royal mast head, above which is

five feet of bare mast pole, then the truck and above that the sky. I feel groggy – one of my eyes is bandaged and also one hand. I am almost blind for the other eye was also damaged. I shall skip the truck and paint downward. At eight bells I return to the deck, and am asked by Whiskers if I painted the main truck. I say to him that that was a funny question to ask when he saw me up there doing it. Really his sight was so bad that it was questionable if he could see the truck.

The men are very angry at the brute's biting my hand, for they too have had some hard cracks during the night watches with brutal officers. Dump him overboard from the braces, was their wish. 'No, no', says Charlie, 'Jerry has got a good case. I'll write out an account of the affair to be signed by Jerry and myself and he will hand it to the shipping master when we are paid off, and I will ask my people to take the matter in hand.'

Copy

Schooner *Edmund Richardson*

I, John Langdon, make this statement that whilst serving on-board the above named Schooner as ordinary seaman on a passage from Half Jaques W. C. Africa, to the United Kingdom was assaulted by the Chief-Officer Mr Parslow on the 2nd of October whilst at the ship's wheel during an altercation concerning the ship's course. He struck me a severe blow in the face and in attempting to protect myself he maliciously and wilfully bite me through the palm of hand in my catching hold of his hand to prevent myself from being thrown over the spindle of wheel. He called out for the Captain which brought to the scene H. Langdon my brother and Charles Bridgeman who took charge of the wheel.

This I can on my oath swear is a true statement.

Signed John Langdon
Witness Charles Bridgeman

Soon after this affair the Mate's manner entirely changed, and he was nice to everybody. He even enquired about my future, when was I going to start school for navigation and a host of other things. I knew he had wind of my intentions. Charlie's father may have a say. David, too, for obvious reasons, would much rather that no fuss was made about it, so that when it was my wheel during the night Mr Mate says, 'Jerry, I am sorry about that bust-up we had. If my sight was tested by the Board of Trade I should lose my ticket, and besides I have a wife and kids at home to work for.' The last did it. They would have to suffer if I tried to get him punished, so I told him that I would let

bygones be bygones. ‘Do you mean it, Jerry?’ ‘I do’, I replied. ‘Then’, says he, ‘give me your hand on it’. Which I did.

Every night when it is clear I note by the altitude of the North Star that we are getting more north, and calculate that we are forty-six degrees north. On November 5th I get two unforgettable experiences. It was in the early morn at wheel in fair weather when suddenly the whole of the horizon for a few seconds was illuminated with a reddish yellow glow. There was an explosion and then a fizz like a red-hot iron in water. An acrolite had fallen! Very appropriate on that day. The next experience happened on our first night watch below. We were so comfy when we heard, ‘All hands on deck!’ and the ship had to be heaved-to with only the fore-lower topsail and storm-stay sail. A north-wester is on us, and, just my luck, I am the one who has to stow the jib, the most dangerous sail on a ship. Every time she puts her nose into the sea we fellows out on the jibboom get a ducking, and when, after stowing, we were getting inboard, a sea completely covered me. Needless I held on to the forestay like — yes, you know —, and holding my breath until the ship lifted on the next wave, took a jump aboard. It was four o’clock next morning before we again went below.

Land ho! Queenstown. David the navigator had made land-fall almost in a bee-line, and not once had we sighted land nor asked our bearings, neither did he take a deep sea sounding. So different from ‘Pincher’ who kept the men swinging the deep sea lead day after day. Bum-boats and the main deck has become a slop-shop. Free drinks are given and when it has done its foul work, fancy prices are charged for the rubbish sold. Silly sailormen. David, who will have to write the docket therefore, will get a good commission, so the silly fellows are done at each end.

Someone has to go ashore for orders and for obvious reasons David must not. He had fallen on evil times at Queenstown. The acting Mate cannot be trusted, for he may get on the beer, and the Bos’un can neither read nor write, so the Cook has to go in a shore-boat. After some hours he returned saying that our orders were for Bristol. The bum-boats are therefore cleared from the ship. They in the meantime had smuggled beer aboard, our lads paying for it with curios. Free drinks at beginning, fancy price at end.

Sails are set for home. Bally-Cotten¹⁴³ is passed. The wind heads us and we beat for Lundy, pick up a Bristol pilot later and at early morning anchor off Barry Island. Save getting the anchor up the tug did the rest.¹⁴⁴ The last turn at the wheel fell to myself. At Pill I hand

¹⁴³ i.e. Ballycotton, Co. Cork.

¹⁴⁴ The *Edmund Richardson*, 291 tons, Capt. Cummins, arrived in Bristol from ‘Cape Lahore’ on 24 November, with a cargo of 551 casks of palm oil and 10,000 coconuts for R. & W. King, *Customs Bills of Entry, Bill A*, 25 November 1884.

over the wheel to the pilot's river steersman, who says, 'Old chappie, you've been at this wheel a long time, I gave her over to you when she started the voyage, now you hand her back to me'. 'Yes', I replied, 'I've had a good many months standing on these wheel gratings'. It was my last turn at steering a ship, and, like my last day at school, I did not know it. My intention was to apply for my AB's ticket, get away south before winter, then work up for a Mate's ticket. But the fates willed it otherwise. [...] It was all for the best. My coming pay-day was a good one and from the same I apprenticed myself to a craft.¹⁴⁵ Thus ended the seafaring of Jerry.

One day, a few years after I had settled down to shore life, I met 'Pincher' and our conversation turned to this particular voyage. 'Did you', I ask, 'ever get in the whole of the trust?' 'No', he replied, 'the French soon after annexed that part of the coast, which helped the natives to repudiate their English debts.'¹⁴⁶ That voyage was a loss to the owners of some two thousand pounds. Now our trade from ship-board is gone for ever. I haven't a ship now, but I have a shack and store at Grand Drewin. At present I am home buying goods. How nice it would have been if you, Jerry, had stuck with me and become a trader. I could have spent much more time at home, by having someone I myself had trained able to take charge out there.'

It was the last time I saw him. A few months later I read his obituary, 'At Grand Drewin, West Coast of Africa, aged 42'. It was said that he was poisoned. Probably he was.

Fifty years are nearly past since these happenings. Kind folk then said I was very foolish to give up such a promising career. It was putting the clock back, shore life would be irksome. So it was at first, and so different from the life I had left behind. Get on or get off was now more intense than ever. At the same time I was careful not to get the other fellow off. My few years at sea had given me good physical health and an energy much above my fellows. The foundations of healthy manhood were well laid. I was years behind my fellow craftsmen, for they had already served their seven years of apprenticeship, and I was to serve only three years. Within me was the will to be a first-class journeyman at the end of my time. I did it, although obstacles were sometimes placed across my path. I had learnt to hold my own on a fair basis, to do my bit, and a bit more if required, taking no notice whatever of what the other fellows may say. I and only I had to steer my own ship [...].

¹⁴⁵ i.e. bookbinding.

¹⁴⁶ 1886–1893.

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