

# LIFE ON AN OCEAN TRAMP (1894).<sup>1</sup>

Text by John Randolph Spears — Correspondent of the *New York Sun*

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## THE PLEASURES OF TRAVEL IN AN ENGLISH CARGO STEAMER

From New York to Rio, and Back Again from Argentina—The Frank Courtesy of the British Skipper—Why He doesn't Care to Carry Passengers—An Entertaining Delusion in Regard to English Hardtack—A Study of the English Tart—Coal Dust—When a Passenger is an Ass

This is the story of what one may see and learn when traveling to and from Brazil in an English tramp steamer. Time was when the voyage could be made as far as Rio Janeiro under the American flag, in ships built to carry passengers as well as freight, but if one can believe half the stories the coffee merchants of Rio tell, that line was robbed by its Rio employees until it was cut all to pieces. When, in the month of November, 1893, THE SUN decided to send a reporter to Rio, where the Brazilian navy was striving to overthrow the lawful Government, I found that there were no passenger steamers running from the States to any Brazilian port. Tramps—that is, cargo ships—ran with considerable regularity, however, for Brazil was a good importer of Uncle Sam's food products, while Uncle Sam bought more Brazilian coffee than all the rest of the world put together. It was necessary that I should take the first steamer, and finding one advertised I went to her agents. Their reply when I asked the price of passage was very much like the reply a Spanish-American makes when an Englishman wants to buy something. They said:

"The price is \$100, but we do not carry passengers."

"Excuse me, but I do not quite follow you. You have a price, but do not take it when offered you?" said I.

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"Not exactly that. Our ships are not fitted for passenger traffic, and we do not want passengers. There are several spare staterooms on the ship bound out Thursday, however, and we could carry a few: but if you go you must put up with ship's grub and ship's accommodations. You will live just as the officers do, and will not have either the table or the attentions you would expect on a passenger ship. Moreover, you will have to sign as one of the crew. We can carry a purser, for instance, but the law governing passenger traffic prevents carrying you as a passenger. In fact, we don't want any passengers at any price, but to accommodate you we will take you as purser for \$100."

That was not a pleasing condition of affairs, but there was no other way of getting to Rio, so I paid the gold, and on a cold, windy morning made my way to a pier at Martin's Stores over in Brooklyn. The route to the pier lay through a tunnel that pierces the stores, and with a westerly wind blowing that tunnel is the coldest spot in the metropolis. I got on board ship with my teeth chattering, and there I met the steward. He was more cordial than the agent of the line had been, but he was very sorry to say there was no way of warming either the staterooms or the saloon. The ship was built for trade in the tropics, and special attention had been paid to ventilation. In fact, she was almost as well ventilated as the tunnel that had chilled me so, and I was glad to escape ashore again to a hotel to await the hour of sailing.

Now, because she was a cargo ship and because a few barrels of flour had failed to arrive, the sailing hour was postponed twice, and it was not until the morning of the second day after the advertised time that we finally backed out from the pier and headed away south. She was a typical tramp of the old style. The cabin was built on deck aft, the forecastle on deck in the bow, and little rooms for engineers, mates, and petty officers were amidships opposite the engine room. There were high bulwarks—she had what is called a well-deck, so called because the space between the bulwarks was like a well and in a gale of wind would hold something like 500 or 600 tons of water. She was built on the model of a canal boat, and by burning about twenty-four tons of coal per day could travel eight and a half knots an hour in a smooth sea. The modern tramp, it may be said by way of comparison, will carry three times as much cargo as she could, and travel ten knots an hour with it on thirteen or fourteen tons of coal a day.

On an examination of her cabin it appeared that it had originally been designed for a small passenger traffic. She had a saloon with two tables, each of which

would accommodate twelve people comfortably, while the staterooms had bunks for twenty-four people. There were benches at the tables instead of chairs, however, a fact which the Captain explained by saying that the chairs originally there had been washed out by a wave that boarded her from astern, and as she was then old-fashioned it was though proper to save expense in repairing the damage. But the most remarkable feature of the ship was the finish on the saloon walls. These walls had been veneered with marble slabs an inch thick, and the slabs in turn edged up with gilt lines and scroll work. There is no dispute about, nor is there any accounting for, the taste of the builders of tramp steamers, but I doubt if there was ever any other builder whose taste led him to make a stone quarry out of a structure where buoyancy and tensile strength were matters of prime necessity.

So far, I found that the agents when saying that the ship was not adapted to passenger traffic were strictly truthful, but when I got acquainted with the officers and crew and with the bill of fare they were all found to be much more agreeable and pleasing than I had been led to expect. Ship's grub, as I had found it in other voyages, made as a member of the crew, was substantial but plain, and without variety. Here there was variety. As for my associates (I was the only passenger), I know that sailors were about as companionable fellows as one could wish for, and in this respect, I was by no means disappointed. But there were certain things about the bill of fare that were interesting, even though I had no reason whatever for criticism. For instance, the first thing in the morning—say at 6:30 o'clock—the steward brought to my stateroom a cup of coffee and a plate of what he called biscuit, the American name being crackers, or hard tack. These biscuits were, he said, of the best English make, and I do not doubt it. We also had the same kind of biscuit served with tea at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Now, there was distinctive flavor of stale lard about the biscuit, due, no doubt, to the length of time they had been in store. It was not offensive enough to be worth mentioning but for what happened when a week out. The last of the English biscuit was served then, and in place of them came one afternoon fresh, crisp crackers made in New York. The Captain apologized for serving the New York made article instead of the English made.

"We bring all our supplies out from home," he said, "but the biscuit did not arrive in time, and we were obliged to buy American biscuit. Your American bakers seem to use nothing but flour and water with milk or butter to make them crisp. Now we put in potatoes and other vegetables—I do not know what. I wonder that your bakers do not learn our way of making them, so as to supply the

English shops. I do not fancy these American biscuits can have much of a sale away from New York."

Then turning to the steward, who was standing ready to serve more tea, he said:

"Did they send the best American biscuit?"

"Yes, sir. They told me in the office to get them myself, and I ordered the best."

"They do not make biscuit with vegetables in them in New York, do they?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, do they? Like those from home?"

"Very nearly, sir."

"Why didn't you buy them, then?"

"They cost three cents a pound less. The baker said that was forecastle bread."

The Captain flushed slightly, and then said something about having heard that sailors were well fed in American ships, after which he finished his tea quickly and went to the bridge.

It should be said in explanation to the reader who is not acquainted with seafaring matters that potatoes and even ground peas and beans are sometimes put into ship's hard tack by New York bakers, but such things are used only as adulterants, or, at least, in inferior qualities of goods. The Captain had never been accustomed to the pure quality of hard tack, and so did not like it as well as the class he had used.

Meantime, we had had at the breakfast table one day a little talk about other kinds of American food. He wanted to know if I had traveled out of the States much, and when I said I had been away about half the previous year, he brightened noticeably and said:

"Were you, though? Then you do not mind having no pie, eh?"

"No," I said. "I have become accustomed to other kinds of food."

"I'm glad you don't miss it. Could you explain, now, how you Americans ever acquired such a habit?"

"Why, I don't know, unless it was because flour was always cheap, and berries and pumpkins cheaper. We're an economical people, you know, and outside of the cities berries of some kind grow everywhere, and anyone can have them for the picking. So, flour and berries make a cheap change in the scant bill of fare of all Americans living in the country, and when we come to the city we have the same tastes."

"Ah! I suppose so. But I never could acquire the habit of eating pie for breakfast. I have tried your pies in the restaurants; the pumpkin pie is not half bad."

That day for dinner the steward, who had served a pudding of some kind after each midday meal so far, asked us whether we would have pudding or cranberry tart. Everyone at the table said tart, and tart was brought.

People unfamiliar with the art of English cooks will be interested in the description of the sort of pastry which they call tart, and which they serve after dinner. The steward at my request took me to the cook's department, where I saw a tart made. The cook had mixed a stiff dough which he said consisted of flour, water, lard, and a pinch of salt. A handful of this dough was placed on a board and flattened out until it was an eighth of an inch thick, of circular form and ten inches in diameter. This he placed on a shallow tin plate of the same diameter, which he had previously greased with lard. Then he patted the dough down until it assumed the form of the plate. Then he took from a locker a tin can, which, on opening, was found to contain cranberries. Enough of this berry sauce was poured in to fill the dough-lined dish, after which a handful of granulated sugar was sprinkled over the fruit. Some more dough was now rolled out thin and cut into strips a quarter of an inch wide (I was careful to take measurements with a pocket rule, because the matter of tart seemed very important,) and the strips were laid over the fruit in the dough-lined tin plate in a crisscross or gridiron fashion, the ends of the strips being united with the rim of dough by a pinch of the thumb and finger. This done, the whole thing was put into a hot oven and baked.

In the course of the voyage a great variety of what he called tinned fruits were used by the cook in making tarts, and all the tarts were made exactly as the one here described. Having traveled somewhat beyond Uncle Sam's domain, and so having learned to accustom myself to foreign-made dishes, I had no trouble in learning to eat the English tart in place of the Yankee berry pie.

The Captain sat at the head of the table, of course. Being the only passenger, I sat on his right, and the chief officer sat on his left. The second officer sat next to the chief, and a junior officer on my right. One of the juniors always had the bridge at meal time. There was nothing specially notable in the service, but the officers all held their knives when cutting meat precisely as the majority of people hold a pen when writing. I do not mention this by way of criticism; very likely the Prince of Wales holds his knife so. I never saw the Prince at the table, and so must confess that I do not know what the proper English form is.

The voyage was, as all voyages to the tropics must be, a rapid transition from winter to spring and from spring to summer heats. We started with a piercing March-like wind chilling the blood as we steamed down the Narrows. In twenty-four hours, there was a suggestion of a thaw in the air; we felt like looking for the early bluebird to appear, and two days later still the men were dressed in cottons and washing down the decks barefooted. A rose tint flush warmed the pathway of the rising sun, and at night the western sky was covered with the glorious beauties that hover around the trail to the Tehuelche home of the soul. The rainbow-hued nautilus drifted by on sunlit waves, and flying fish in shoals scurried away from the steamer's bow as if she were a giant bonito. To lounge in absolute idleness in a steamer chair under the shade of the awning, and gaze without a care at the blue waste of waters, and so dream as a poet might do, or let the mind lie as idle as the body—that is something worth the attention of men who find the strain of business cares irksome.

But let no one seeking such a rest take his sea voyage on a tramp steamer bound on a long voyage, because his dreams will be disturbed by a blast of coal dust—real dust and not cinders—just as he gets well settled in his chair. People whose seafaring experiences are limited to voyages not to exceed two weeks in length are probably for the most part entirely ignorant of the miseries entailed on everybody aboard ship when it becomes necessary "to work the coal." Within a week after leaving New York the men came aft and took off the hatch just forward of the cabin, and we saw that the hold below had been divided by a temporary bulkhead so that some hundreds of tons of coal could be stowed there.

Having lowered the supply somewhat in the bunkers, the coal in the hold was now to be transferred to keep the bunkers full. Single blocks were secured to the gaff above the hatch, and ropes rove through these were hooked to baskets filled with coal in the hold and the other end taken to an old-style cogwheel winch. The winch throttle was opened, and with a crashing whirr the baskets were hoisted up above the hatch. Then they were lowered to little trucks so that the men could wheel them forward and dump them into the bunkers.

Meantime the soft, sweet air of the tropics came drifting over the rail. It fanned the cheeks of the workers and caressed the baskets and coal and loaded itself with black impalpable powder. Then it passed on to the cabin and caressed the hangings and the marble walls and the table linen and the uttermost crevices of the staterooms, leaving the dust wherever it went to mark its trail. The napkins gave a deeper hue to the lips when we used them at the table, and the darkened features which novelists say all old travelers acquire became ours by the simple use of a towel. There was no escaping it anywhere, and there was but one consolation when thinking of it: we knew that coal dust was not unhealthy.<sup>2</sup> And it remained with us all that voyage.

Singular as it may seem, this working the coal is not peculiar to cargo ships running to South America. In the steamer *Magdalena*, a ship built for the passenger trade between England and the River Plate, they were transferring coal from the forward hold to the bunkers during all the passage I afterward made from Rio Janeiro to Montevideo. One would suppose that such a ship would be designed with bunker capacity sufficient for the voyages she was to make regularly. Then, when I went down the Patagonia coast in the Argentine naval transport *Ushuaia*, we had to endure the same nuisance about half the voyage. In short, I would advise anyone thinking of making a journey to South America to provide an abundance of black wash goods for over and under wear.

In connection with the subject of comfort on a voyage at sea, it is worth calling the attention of the traveler, and incidentally that of the ship owner, to the very great difference between the care railroads take of their patrons and that which ship owners bestow. Consider the finish of the palace car and that of the stateroom on a ship, for instance. Compare the luxurious seats in the palace car with the back-breaking benches scattered at wide intervals about the ship's promenade decks. Even the common coaches of the western American roads have

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<sup>2</sup> The risk of silicosis was less recognized in the 19th century.

chairs which can be set at various angles to give greater comfort to the guests, but if the passenger on even the wealthiest of Liverpool packet lines would sit at ease he must carry his own chair, and that is a most inconvenient piece of baggage, too. Imagine a traveler bound to San Francisco being obliged to provide in advance cushions and pillows for the journey!

For a pastime, almost every traveler carries books and periodicals, and there is nothing better. The smoking room of the steamer to Rio had a great heap of English humorous illustrated publications, of the kind that retail at a penny or a halfpenny, including chances to win prizes by sending coupons clipped from some corner of the periodical. To the Captain these publications were sources of infinite amusement. But having been trained in the school of humor where Frost's<sup>3</sup> tramps and Church's<sup>4</sup> bears are used as pictographs, I could not appreciate the work of the artists whose atmosphere is so different. I think the difference between English funny artists and the American sort must be due to the atmosphere. I should not like to accuse the English artist of lacking anything in mental qualifications.

The passage to Rio occupied twenty-four days. There was not a gale nor even a squall during the time. We had a little wind, of course, and a little shower or two, but on the whole, it was a summer-day journey. We arrived off the Rio harbor one morning before daylight. We waited for the sun, and then anchored under the lee of an island just outside the harbor's narrow mouth, where the doctor came to visit us. We soon passed clear of him, and then ran into the harbor, which, at that time, was crowded with idle ships. The Brazilian navy, under Admiral Saldanha da Gama, ruled the bay by keeping his ships anchored among the foreign ships where the Government cannon could not reach them. It was a condition of affairs that will not be seen in that harbor again while ex-Vice-President Floriano Peixoto takes an interest in public affairs. In spite of the precautions which the Government thought necessary when passengers landed there, I passed the customs officers as quickly as I could have done in New York, and I was free to go about the town as I pleased.

My return passage to New York was made from Buenos Ayres, and the difficulties I experienced in securing a direct passage will be found of especial interest in connection with what has already been said to all who are anxious to

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Burdett Frost (1851-1928) — American illustrator and comics writer

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Stuart Church (1842-1924) — American artist, noted for his illustrations of animals

promote trade between the United States and the Brazils or the River Plate. There is, or was then, a house that at fairly regular intervals dispatched a chartered English tramp from New York direct to the River Plate, to return by the way of Rio Janeiro, where a cargo of coffee could always be had. When I was ready to sail for home I found one of their steamers advertised for the passage, and the advertisement said that a limited number of passengers would be carried. It was on a Sunday morning when I went up to the office, but such offices are always open on Sunday morning in Buenos Ayres. A clerk took my card and booked my name, and told me to come next day to arrange about my luggage. The next day I went there as directed, having visited the ship meantime, and found that she had a very well-arranged, if small, cabin. To my surprise I was told that I could not go in her. She had but one spare stateroom, and that the Captain was to occupy, because he had given up his room for two ladies who were going. He declined to share his room with a passenger. This was very disappointing: she was the first steamer to sail, and I had been away from home nearly eight months, so I offered to sleep on the lounge in the cabin. The agents seemed pleased at this; but when the Captain came in he declined to let me go even so, saying in a shifty sort of way that I would be uncomfortable, and so would think ill of the ship ever after. The thought that he had a personal dislike for me suggested itself, but that seemed incredible, because he had never seen me before. Then I thought he might not want a reporter along, lest something he proposed doing should get into print, but that he denied. Then the mate agreed to share his room with me, and at that the Captain gave way and I got my ticket—price \$100 gold. A week later the Captain and I had become friendly, and he confided to me the reason for refusing me passage. The ship was chartered by the day, her owners being obliged to furnish the crew and all provisions for the voyage. Now, all the passengers would eat at the Captain's table, and the food that I would eat would have to be paid for by the owners of the ship and not by the American charterers. He said:

"The house belongs in London, and I am not going to do anything to take a farthing out of the owners' pockets. It's all very well for the Yankees to get their \$100, but we don't want any passengers, and we're not going to take them if I can prevent."

"But why did you give up your room to the ladies then?" said I.

"I got \$50 for that. That made a difference."

I went on board on the afternoon of June 28, very glad to have secured passage on the first steamer bound for New York. I expected to reach home at least one day sooner than I could have done by taking a fast steamer to England and going thence to New York, but as the event proved I could have saved at the very least ten days by going the long way around.

As said, it seems to me that these details are of special interest to the manufacturers and merchants of the United States who would like to do business with the part of South America under consideration. The Italians have a line of steamers that run from Buenos Ayres to Genoa in eighteen days. The English ships now make the passage in as brief a period as twenty-one days. The French do about as well. All of these European steamers are well fitted for all classes of passengers. But from New York to Buenos Ayres direct the passage is made in a blunt-nose English tramp that may do the trip in thirty days and she may require six weeks, as did the one I came in, for I went on board on June 28 and I landed on Aug 9. And my ship was flying the blue pennant of the United States Post Office, too. And yet the best market for the hides of the Argentine pampas, and the coffee of the Brazilian hillsides, is right here in Uncle Sam's domain. There is, for instance, one house in Chicago that roasts 1,000 bags of Brazil coffee every working day of the year. How can the American merchants establish friendly relations with River Plate houses when the River Plate merchant must either travel to New York by the way of Europe or beg passage as a matter of favor from the supercilious Captain of a slow British tramp—a Captain, too, who never for a moment forgets that "the horse belongs in London," even when an American firm pays for the oats? My experience was not unique. I have the authority of Consul Edward Baker of Buenos Ayres and several merchants for saying that a voyage to New York direct is about the most vexatious a traveler could contemplate, and one from New York to the River Plate is but little if any better.

Of the incidents of the passage home not much need be said. We sailed out of Buenos Ayres with the entire deck covered with cattle, which were shipped for Rio. She was a flush decked ship, too, and since the principal part of her cargo consisted of dry hides she was decidedly top heavy, until we got rid of the cattle. Luckily, we had no severe weather. Americans have always been taught to consider the British as the best of sailors, but when we stopped at Montevideo we took on some hundreds of tons of salt meat for Rio Janeiro, and this was all stowed in the bow. In consequence, we were not only top heavy, but the ship was two feet deeper in the water at the bow than she was at the stern. At Rio

the meat was discharged and the space filled solid with coffee, which, though somewhat lighter, left her still about twenty inches down by the bow. Sailors will understand the trouble we would have had in case a cyclone came along.

When near the Bermudas, the famous derelict *Fannie E. Wolston*<sup>5</sup> was passed. As illustrating the character of the lookout kept, it is worth saying that although the Captain and his three mates were on deck and an able seaman was at the wheel on the bridge, no one of them knew the wreck was in sight until I went forward from the poop deck to the bridge and called the Captain's attention to it. These matters are not mentioned out of any personal ill feeling toward the Captain or his crew. They all treated me with remarkable consideration and did everything to make me comfortable. I desire only to show the conditions of travel between New York and the River Plate.

With this end only in view I must relate one other incident of the passage. A week or so out from Rio the rudder chains got loose, and because of the vibration of the ship they rattled and banged about over the room the ladies occupied so badly that the ladies were unable to sleep. They mentioned the matter to the Captain, who said there was no remedy. Another sleepless night passed, and then the chief officer sent the carpenter to tighten the chains—a matter accomplished by simply turning a nut. Unfortunately, he set the nut too tight, and that night the chains squeaked in the sheave above the Captain's head, and next day the Captain indignantly ordered the chains loosened. So, the chains rattled again, and when the ladies mentioned the matter to the Captain he told them nothing had been done to the chains, and said again nothing could be done. The mate was again appealed to privately, and a block of wood slipped into the fair-leader of the chain that was directly over the heads of the ladies. That entirely cured the trouble. When the Captain came on deck and saw the block he was angry and spoke of throwing the block overboard; but when it was suggested that he invite the ladies up to see the ceremony of dumping the block he relented, and the block was still in place when we reached the pier in Brooklyn. The Captain in this matter was doing simply what he believed to be his duty to the owners of the ship. He was discouraging passenger traffic.

This, it seems to me, is all very remarkable in the experience of a traveler, but something more remarkable still happened after we reached the pier in

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<sup>5</sup> *Fannie E. Wolston*—Wooden schooner abandoned off Cape Hatteras in late 1891. In the next 2 years she was said to have drifted 9,000 miles before finally disappearing.

Brooklyn. We had been alongside but a brief time when one of the firm that run the line came on board. He was particularly attentive to the passengers and seemed to be anxious that they should feel comfortable on leaving the ship. Among other things said and done he asked me if anything unpleasant had happened on the voyage and how we had been treated by the officers. I replied that I had never been treated better. He then asked if I had seen anything that I thought he ought to know, and added that the firm wished to do everything possible to build up the direct passenger trade. At that I foolishly let my desire to help an American firm get the better of my judgment, and called his attention to the wooden block in the fairleader of the rudder, adding briefly the story of how it came there. I mentioned one or two other matters likely to discourage the direct passenger traffic in that ship, but said nothing of worse matters to which I might have alluded. A couple of days later I got a letter from the firm saying that my charges against the Captain were very grave: he had been in their service for some time, and no fault had been found with him. However, if I would come to their office at a time named and meet the Captain they would consider the evidence.

It was precisely what I deserved. The passenger who undertakes the job of helping a steamship company to run its business is an ass.

I repeat once more; these matters are of interest only as they show how American trade with South America is hampered. This Captain was simply an average cargo-ship skipper. His natural or legitimate business was carrying cargo. Passengers were and are a nuisance to such a skipper. With cargo only on board he could take life easy. He would not be obliged to consider anyone but himself. In a ship fitted for passengers the Captain has quarters away from the passengers and he need not mix with the at all if he does not wish to. Of course, an American ship Captain situated as this one was would have found pleasure in making life pleasant for all the passengers, but travelers have no reason for expecting the captains of English tramps to have the characteristics of the men who hail from Bath [Maine] and along the New England shore.