

Sea Fever

Louis Arthur
Cunningham

Illustrated by

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Title: Sea Fever

Date of first publication: 1930

Author: Louis Arthur Cunningham (1900-1954)

Illustrator: E. J. Dinsmore (1885-1936)

Date first posted: July 5, 2023

Date last updated: July 5, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230706

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpcanada.net>

Sea Fever

By LOUIS ARTHUR CUNNINGHAM

Illustrated

by

E. J. DINSMORE

At the *Jolly Ploughboy*, where, in the snug and heart-warming sanctuary of the bar his elbow had long since worn a shining hollow. Alf Stamm was hailed as “Captain” and treated by the villagers and even the gamekeepers with the awe and deference due his proud station. He was “Cap’n Stamm.” He wore a black cap with a glazed peak and a blue coat with brass buttons. A seagoing air and a sailor’s gait had Alf.

“But,” said he one night at the *Ploughboy*, “there are captings an’ captings.” He took a deep draught of extra stout, set down his mug with his right hand, and wiped his mustache with his left in a marvellous synchronizing of the two actions that held a suggestion of the sublime. “Captings, gen’l’men, an’ captings.”

Wot I mean to say (he continued after a pause) is that around the *Ploughboy* here, among friends so t’speak, an’ along the river for maybe a distance of forty mile up an’ down, in a matter of, say, twelve villages an’ towns, an’ at percisely five locks. I’m known an’ considered as a capting. “Capting Alf,” says one an’ “Cap’n Alf,” says t’other, all in the way you says it. And it’s all very right an’ proper.

But when I goes beyond these here limits an’ surroundin’s, as described, gen’l’men, I’m wary o’ that capting business—wary an’ cautious. I allus remember that though “Capting Stamm” I may be here at the *Ploughboy* an’

in the places aforementioned, I am arter all only the capting of a barge, the *Maggie Lister*, an' that there are captings an' captings. Yus, I allus is most careful about bein' Capting Stamm, for I can never forget, nor ever will forget until I've tied up for the last time, what happened to 'Erb Bates, who was, like meself an' in similiar circumstances. Capting 'Erb Bates.

Ran a barge, 'Erb did—a neat, roomy, well-found vessel as ever made a lock or was towed by a donkey. Snug little cabin, blue curtains on the winders, an' nice pink and red geraniums growin' in tins on the windersills. There in that little cabin 'Erb would sit in the sun an' read po'try—aye, po'try. An' what kind o' po'try, d'ye think, mates? Sea po'try. That's wot! Sea po'try—all about tall ships, an' stars t' steer 'em by, an' whales an' storms an' shipwreck.

“Alf,” 'e used to say to me when 'e'd been readin' deep in them books an' when there'd come in his eye—I says 'eye' becos you only could look in one at a time—when there'd come in his eye a dreamy an' far-off look like a man wot's been 'it on the 'ead with a pint porter-pot an' ain't yet recovered. “Alf,” 'e'd say. “the sea's the thing. The sea's the place for a man wot calls hissself a seaman. Am I a seaman? No. Are you a seaman? No. We own vessels, we sail on the water, but compared with real seamen we are as nothing. Think of the sea, of a tall ship with all sail set, crackin' along in the Trades, her masts a-scrapin' the stars, her lee rail under, the salt spray a-flyin' in yer fyce an' the wind stingin' yer cheek—”

“An' all the big rocks ye can run into,” says I, “an' the cold an' the onpleasantness of bein' soaked with ice water an' sittin' around in wet socks.”

“Ah, Alf,” sighs 'Erb. “You don't see the rowmance of it. It don't enter into your soul, is wot. It ain't in your blood an' ye don't crave for it like I do. It's like a fever in me blood, an' all I arsk is a tall ship an' a star t' steer 'er by.”

“If,” says I, “you was capting of a seagoin' vessel an' started steerin' her by a star, I'd like to know where you'd end up.”

“In the 'Esper-ides,” says 'Erb with his far-off look. “In the Islands o' the 'Esper-ides.”

“In the Orkneys, ye mean,” I says, “or in the dry dock for repairs.”

But 'Erb just keeps lookin' afar off an' then readin' more sea po'try, an' when by chance I'd see him a-passin' Lower Tiddleham or enterin' the lock at Bristock-on-the-Stye, 'e'd be standin' up in the bow of his barge, the

Pansy L., standin' like Napoleon in the pitchers an' pertendin' he's roundin' the Horn in a field of icebergs or beatin' across the Bay o' Biscay or standin' off from the Islands o' the 'Esper-ides.

He has it bad, has 'Erb Bates. It gets to be his monymaniactal point, an' it comes to a head when he takes a trip up to Tilbury Docks to see a great sailin' ship wot has just come over from America; to see this here great ship an' meet 'is doom in the shape of a woman—which is the shape doom usually takes.

Her name is Polly Billings an' she's good-lookin' enough, if you like 'em plump an' black-eyed. She's as rowmantic as 'Erb is, an' it's this same rowmantic fever that brings her down to Tilbury Docks to look at this here big ship the same day as 'Erb arrives there for the same purpose.



Suddenly 'Erb 'ears a deep sigh at his elbow.

Well, 'Erb is a-standin' on the dock, with one eye lookin' toward Greenwich an' t'other cast up at this tall ship, an' no doubt he's thinkin' of stars to steer 'er by an' sharks astern an' a stiff breeze blowin'. He wears a cap an' reefer like mine an' looks every inch the sailor. Suddenly, he 'ears a deep sigh at his elbow like a bicycle tire wots been stuck with a pin. He looks around an' there is Polly.

“Ahem,” says ’Erb, bein’ a shy man with a great respect an’ weakness for the other sect.

“Ain’t it grand?” says she. “Ain’t it a gorjus sight, captin’? You are a captin’, ain’t you?”

“Yes, mum,” says ’Erb with a bit of a flush an’ a rowmantic stirrin’ in ’is ’eart. “Captin’ ’Erb Bates.”

“I knew it,” says she. “An’ is this ’ere your vessel?”

“No,” says ’Erb. “Oh, no. Not that one.”

“I’ll be bound,” says Polly, “you’ve made some wonderful voyages an’ had some awful adventures in your ship. Wot’s her name, Captin’ Bates?”

“The *Narwhal*,” says ’Erb on the spear o’ the moment, it bein’ a name he’d read somewheres an’ the first to come into his head. “The *Narwhal*.”

Well, ’Erb an’ Polly get to talkin’ an’ it ain’t no time till ’Erb has fallen in love with her an’ she’s told him she owns a pub wot her father left ’er an’ a tidy bit of money, an’ she’s free an’ unattached, all of which makes ’Erb love her more. So he invites her to have a glass o’ beer at a place near the docks, an’ they go an’ have their beer an’ a bite to eat—all very nice an’ chummy. ’Erb tells her a pack of lies about his adventures on the seven seas an’ she listens with mouth open, with fear an’ admiration in ’er eyes.

“Lor, captin’!” says she. “Wot a dangerous life you lead! Your wife would be a widda in next to no time.”

“A seaman’s life,” says ’Erb. “is on the lap of Nepchoone, an’ the sea is his mistress.”

Just then, into this place where ’Erb an’ Polly is sittin’ an’ gettin’ to know each other well, there comes a man with a seafarin’ look about him who walks right over to their table, says, “’Ello, Polly,” an’ sits down without by your leave or anythink.

“This is Captin’ ’Eney Chuff,” says Polly. “’Eney, I want you to meet Captin’ Bates of the barque *Narwhal*.”

“Oh!” says ’Eney Chuff, who has a cold an’ fishy eye an’ gives ’Erb the benefit of it, makin’ him uncomfortabler an’ uncomfortabler. “’E is, is ’e!”

“Yes,” says ’Erb, gettin’ angry an’ not likin’ the tone which Captin’ Chuff is usin’.

“Lyin’ over to Groves Docks, ain’t you, Captin’ Bates?”

“Why,” says ’Erb, beginnin’ to feel weak. “I don’t—”

“I know the *Narwhal* well,” says Chuff. “Fine ship, fine master. Pleased to meetcha, Captin’g Bates.”

’Erb feels relieved when he sees Chuff is friendly like. He never suspects, ’Erb doesn’t, what a wiper he is now dealin’ with. This Captin’g Chuff is, like ’Erb himself, the owner of a barge, but he admits it. Polly Billings knows it an’ Chuff ’as for a long time been tryin’ to marry Polly an’ her pub.

“Tell us some more o’ your adventures. Captin’g Bates,” says Polly.

“Why,” says ’Erb. “I’ve told ’em all.”

“No, you haven’t,” says she. “You didn’t finish the one about the time a iceberg knocked the fo’c’s’le off your vessel.”

“Oh,” says ’Erb, “didn’t I?” An’ he has to continue the lie under ’Energ Chuff’s cold an’ suspicious eye. ’Energ sees he’s got a rival, an’ a dangerous one. He can tell this from the way Polly’s black eyes shine on ’Erb, with a sort of adorin’ look.

’Energ Chuff don’t seem to have a chance with a ’ero like Captin’g Bates. Polly invites the captin’g to visit ’er an’ treats ’im like a lord an’ everything goes smooth as silk. ’Erb an’ Polly gettin’ thicker ’n thicker, till at last ’Erb gets up courage an’ proposes to ’er.

“’Erb,” she says. “I love you an’ I accept your proposal—on one condition.”

’Erb feels terrible. He’s told her such a parcel of lies that he thinks maybe she will want him to take her around the world.

“Wot,” says he, “is this here condition?”

“That you never go to sea again,” says Polly.

“Wot!” says ’Erb, turnin’ pale with his good fortune. “You don’t want me to go to sea no more?”

“No,” says Polly. “I know it’s askin’ you to give up a awful lot, but if you love me you’ll stay with me.”

“Polly,” says ’Erb. “I’ll give up that dangerous life on the sea an’ linger by your side.” An’ he clasps her in his arms.

“It’s a great sacrifice you’re makin’ for me, ’Erb,” she says.

“Yus,” says ’Erb. “It is. For the sea is in me blood, Polly, if ever it was in any man’s, an’ all I’ve ever arsked is a tall ship an’ a star to steer ’er by.”

Just then Capting ’Eneery Chuff comes in, an’ Polly blushes an’ tells him the news. He never cracks a smile, this Chuff. When Polly tells him how, for her sake, ’Erb is givin’ up the sea he loves, Chuff looks real sympathetic an’ says: “That is real noble of him, ain’t it?” An’ Polly says it is.

“Suppose,” says Chuff, “we all take a trip down to the *Narwhal*, Polly an’ Capting Bates? You ain’t seen the capting’s ship as yet, I gather, Polly?”

“No,” says Polly. “Yes, we’ll all go down so ’s ’Erb can say good-by to her an’ to his mates for ever.”

“But,” says ’Erb, seein’ Polly an’ the pub all vanish from his clutches, “I don’t think it would be wise to do that.”

“Why not?” says Polly.

“Well . . .” ’Erb has a great idea. “It’s like this, Pol. If ever I go near that ship again the sea fever might get in me blood an’—an’—”

“You promised me, ’Erb,” says Polly. “An’ I know you love me better than you do the sea. I’ll trust you. ’Erb—I will. Let’s go.”

Erb is in the lowest depths o’ despair. Polly will find out now what a liar an’ deceiver he’s been an’ will hate him. He curses Chuff, quiet-like of course, as they ride down to the docks in a cab Chuff has been good enough to hire. ’Erb, lookin’ pale an’ worried, racks his brains for a way out o’ this mess, but can’t think of nothink. An’ Polly babbles on an’ Chuff talks about how much a born sailor like Capting Bates is goin’ to miss his vessel an’ pine for the sea.

“It gets an awful powerful holt on a man the sea does, especial-like if it be a man wot’s had the wonderful an’ startlin’ adventures the capting has had,” Chuff is saying. “Just fancy ’aving the fo’c’s’le knocked right off your ship by a iceberg. Tsch-tsch!”

’Erb Bates is deprived of speech. Like a man walkin’ in his sleep he goes up the gangplank to a vessel he has never afore set eyes on, but there is her name in gold letters—*Narwhal*—an’ a likely lookin’ craft she is. This, thinks ’Erb, is the end of all me dreams. I’ll be exposed now an’ Polly will turn on me an’ never again have nothing to do with me.

Suddenly, on the deck of the *Narwhal*, he notices something funny. Seamen an' officers is there an' each an' all of them salutes him an' says: "Good day, capting," and "How d'ye do, sir," an' "Welcome aboard, Cap'n Bates."

'Erb is in a daze worse 'n he was afore. He looks from one to the other, but no one bats an eye. Polly is all smiles an' blushes when 'Enry Chuff interduces her to the officers as the casting's bride-to-be.

"An', gents," says Chuff, "for love of Polly, the capting 'ere has promised to give up the sea, to give up the old *Narwhal* which 'e commanded on so many brave an' adventurous voyages. He's a-goin' to give it all up an' settle down with Polly."

"Ain't that noble of him!" says a big red-faced man with a nasty eye. Mr. 'Arris, his name is, an' he's supposed to be the mate. "Ain't that just too noble! I don't know how the ship will ever get along without 'im. It's goin' to be 'ard, ain't it, mates? It won't seem like the same ship without Capting Bates on the quarterdeck. A friend an' 'elper to all of us, that's wot 'e was." An' he wipes away a tear.

'Erb, by this time, is feelin' better. Chuff winks at him. An' it dawns on him that Chuff has arranged all this so as not to give him away, which, he thinks, is uncommon decent on Chuff's part. So 'Erb acts the capting to the best of his ability an' gets away with it fine. Everyone goes down into the cabin an' they have a glass all around an' toasts are drunk to the capting an' his bride an' their future 'appiness. An' tears are shed because they're goin' to miss the capting so much.

Then it came time to go ashore an' Chuff gets close to 'Erb an' whispers:

"Stay a while longer."

"No," says 'Erb. "I better be goin' ashore."

"Listen," whispers Chuff. "I done this all for you. I got my friend Capting 'Arris here to pertend you was really the master o' the *Narwhal*. We stood by a pal, that's what we did. So you do as I say."

"The capting," announces 'Arris, when Chuff winks at him, "would like to stay a few minutes to say a last good-by to his old shipmates. You won't mind, Miss Polly, will you?"

"Why, no," says Polly. "I think that would be a very nice thing to do. I feel so bad about takin' him away from his ship an' from the sea which he

loves so well. But I couldn't marry a man that was away half the time an' loved his ship more than he did me. You won't be long, 'Erb?"

"No," says 'Erb, "I'll be with you in a little while, Polly."

"Unless," laughs 'Arris, "the sea has a stronger holt on him than love has. But I don't think so, Miss Polly—not when it's a girl like you."

Polly, blushin' all over, goes away with Captin' 'Eney Chuff an' 'Erb waves her good-by. Then he turns to 'Arris, who, as he knows by now, is really the master of the *Narwhal*.

"Captin'," he says, "I'm in your debt."

"Not a-tall," says 'Arris. "Come below an' have a drink. It's a pleasure to oblige a friend like 'Eney Chuff an' help a nice, honest, deservin' lad like you."

So they go below an' 'Erb has a drink or two an' then a few more, an' gets to be great friends with 'Arris. Then he goes to sleep an' wakes up in the fo'c's'le. He staggers out on deck just in time to get his last glimpse of the coast. He spies Captin' 'Arris and rushes aft, bellowin' an' carryin' on like a madman.

"Wot's this mean!" he yells. "How dare you keep me on this 'ere ship! I'll have the law—"

"Wot's this! Wot's this!" Captin' 'Arris looks amazed. "A stowaway, is it! I thought you went ashore, my man. Arter all we done for you, you ungrateful wretch, you stow away on my ship an' go off to the sea which you love so much an' leave that poor dear girl alone. Serve you right, you low ruffian, if she got angry at you an' turned around an' married 'Eney Chuff."

An' that, mates, is just what Polly did. When 'Erb failed to show up an' Chuff told her, confidential-like, that the sea was too much in 'Erb's blood for him ever to be content ashore. "Whereas me," says Chuff, "I'm a home body, a bargeman. I'll stay by ye, Polly."

An' he did.

It were a year an' more afore 'Erb Bates came back, covered with bruises an' with all his rowmantic ideas of the sea gone with his first meal on board the *Narwhal*. By night he sneaked past the snug little bar of Polly's pub. He seen Chuff in there a-drinkin' pineapple rum, an' just gazed for a

moment at Polly's dark head bendin' over Chuff, an' then went back to his barge an' dumped all his sea po'try into the river.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Sea Fever* by Louis Arthur Cunningham]