

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

26 *The Rhyme of the Three Captains*

[*This ballad appears to refer to one of the exploits of the notorious Paul Jones, an American pirate. It is founded on fact.*]

. . . At the close of a winter day,
Their anchors down, by London town, the Three Great Captains lay;
And one was Admiral of the North from Solway Firth to Skye,
And one was Lord of the Wessex coast and all the lands thereby,
And one was Master of the Thames from Limehouse to Blackwall, 5
And he was Chaplain of the Fleet — the bravest of them all.
Their good guns guarded their great grey sides that were thirty foot in the sheer,
When there came a certain trading brig with news of a privateer.
Her rigging was rough with the clotted drift that drives in a Northern breeze,
Her sides were clogged with the lazy weed that spawns in the Eastern seas. 10
Light she rode in the rude tide-rip, to left and right she rolled,
And the skipper sat on the scuttle-butt and stared at an empty hold.
“I ha’ paid Port dues for your Law,” quoth he, “and where is the Law ye boast
“If I sail unscathed from a heathen port to be robbed on a Christian coast?
“Ye have smoked the hives of the Laccadives as we burn the lice in a bunk, 15
“We tack not now for a Gallang prow or a plunging Pei-ho junk;
“I had no fear but the seas were clear as far as a sail might fare
“Till I met with a lime-washed Yankee brig that rode off Finisterre.
“There were canvas blinds to his bow-gun ports to screen the weight he bore,
“And the signals ran for a merchantman from Sandy Hook to the Nore. 20
“He would not fly the Rovers’ flag — the bloody or the black,
“But now he floated the Gridiron and now he flaunted the Jack.
“He spoke of the Law as he crimped my crew — he swore it was only a loan;
“But when I would ask for my own again, he swore it was none of my own.
“He has taken my little parrakeets that nest beneath the Line, 25
“He has stripped my rails of the shaddock-frails and the green unripened pine.
“He has taken my bale of dammer and spice I won beyond the seas,
“He has taken my grinning heathen gods — and what should he want o’ these?
“My foremast would not mend his boom, my deck-house patch his boats;

“He has whittled the two, this Yank Yahoo, to peddle for shoe-peg oats. 30
“I could not fight for the failing light and a rough beam-sea beside,
“But I hulled him once for a clumsy crimp and twice because he lied.
“Had I had guns (as I had goods) to work my Christian harm,
“I had run him up from his quarter-deck to trade with his own yard-arm;
“I had nailed his ears to my capstan-head, and ripped them off with a saw, 35
“And soused them in the bilgewater, and served them to him raw;
“I had flung him blind in a rudderless boat to rot in the rocking dark,
“I had towed him aft of his own craft, a bait for his brother shark;
“I had lapped him round with cocoa-husk, and drenched him with the oil,
“And lashed him fast to his own mast to blaze above my spoil; 40
“I had stripped his hide for my hammock-side, and tasselled his beard in the mesh,
“And spitted his crew on the live bamboo that grows through the gangrened flesh;
“I had hove him down by the mangroves brown, where the mud-reef sucks and draws,
“Moored by the heel to his own keel to wait for the land-crab’s claws.
“He is lazar within and lime without; ye can nose him far enow, 45
“For he carries the taint of a musky ship — the reek of the slaver’s dhow.”
The skipper looked at the tiering guns and the bulwarks tall and cold,
And the Captains Three full courteously peered down at the gutted hold,
And the Captains Three called courteously from deck to scuttle-butt: —
“Good Sir, we ha’ dealt with that merchantman or ever your teeth were cut. 50
“Your words be words of a lawless race, and the Law it standeth thus:
“He comes of a race that have never a Law, and he never has boarded us.
“We ha’ sold him canvas and rope and spar — we know that his price is fair,
“And we know that he weeps for the lack of a Law as he rides off Finisterre.
“And since he is damned for a gallows-thief by you and better than you, 55
“We hold it meet that the English fleet should know that we hold him true.”
The skipper called to the tall taffrail: — “And what is that to me?
“Did ever you hear of a Yankee brig that rifled a Seventy-three?
“Do I loom so large from your quarter-deck that I lift like a ship o’ the Line?
“He has learned to run from a shotted gun and harry such craft as mine. 60
“There is never a law on the Cocos Keys, to hold a white man in,
“But we do not steal the niggers’ meal, for that is a nigger’s sin.
“Must he have his Law as a quid to chew, or laid in brass on his wheel?
“Does he steal with tears when he buccaneers? ’Fore Gad, then, why does he steal?”
The skipper bit on a deep-sea word, and the word it was not sweet, 65
For he could see the Captains Three had signalled to the Fleet.

But three and two, in white and blue, the whimpering flags began: —
 “We have heard a tale of a — foreign sail, but he is a merchantman.”
 The skipper peered beneath his palm and swore by the Great Horn Spoon: —
 “Fore Gad, the Chaplain of the Fleet would bless my picaroon!” 70
 By two and three the flags blew free to lash the laughing air: —
 “We have sold our spars to the merchantman — we know that his price is fair.”
 The skipper winked his Western eye, and swore by a China storm: —
 “They ha’ rigged him a Joseph’s jury-coat to keep his honour warm.”
 The halliards twanged against the tops, the bunting bellied broad, 75
 The skipper spat in the empty hold and mourned for a wasted cord.
 Masthead — masthead, the signal sped by the line o’ the British craft:
 The skipper called to his Lascar crew, and put her about and laughed: —
 “It’s mainsail haul, my bully boys all — we’ll out to the seas again —
 “Ere they set us to paint their pirate saint, or scrub at his grapnel-chain. 80
 “It’s fore-sheet free, with her head to the sea, and the swing of the unbought brine —
 “We’ll make no sport in an English court till we come as a ship o’ the Line:
 “Till we come as a ship o’ the Line, my lads, of thirty foot in the sheer,
 “Lifting again from the outer main with news of a privateer;
 “Flying his pluck at our mizzen-truck for weft of Admiralty, 85
 “Heaving his head for our dipsy-lead in sign that we keep the sea.
 “Then fore-sheet home as she lifts to the foam — we stand on the outward tack,
 “We are paid in the coin of the white man’s trade — the bezant is hard, ay, and black.
 “The frigate-bird shall carry my word to the Kling and the Orang-Laut
 “How a man may sail from a heathen coast to be robbed in a Christian port; 90
 “How a man may be robbed in Christian port while Three Great Captains there
 “Shall dip their flag to a slaver’s rag — to show that his trade is fair!”

1890

(From *Rudyard Kipling’s Verse*. Definitive edition. London, 1940)