

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

27 *The Rhyme of the Three Sealers*

*Away by the lands of the Japanee
Where the paper lanterns glow
And the crews of all the shipping drink
In the house of Blood Street Joe,
At twilight, when the landward breeze
Brings up the harbour noise,
And ebb of Yokohama Bay
Swigs chattering through the buoys,
In Cisco's Dewdrop Dining Rooms
They tell the tale anew
Of a hidden sea and a hidden fight,
When the Baltic ran from the Northern Light,
And the Stralsund fought the two.*

Now this is the Law of the Muscovite, that he proves with shot and steel,
When you come by his isles in the Smoky Sea you must not take the seal,
Where the grey sea goes nakedly between the weed-hung shelves,
And the little blue fox he is bred for his skin and the seal they breed for themselves.
For when the *matkas* seek the shore to drop their pups aland, 5
The great man-seal haul out of the sea, aroaring, band by band.
And when the first September gales have slaked their rutting-wrath,
The great man-seal haul back to the sea and no man knows their path.
Then dark they lie and stark they lie — rookery, dune, and floe,
And the Northern Lights come down o' nights to dance with the houseless snow; 10
And God Who clears the grounding berg and steers the grinding floe,
He hears the cry of the little kit-fox and the wind along the snow.
But since our women must walk gay and money buys their gear,
The sealing-boats they filch that way at hazard year by year.
English they be and Japanee that hang on the Brown Bear's flank, 15
And some be Scot, but the worst of the lot, and the boldest thieves, be Yank!

It was the sealer *Northern Light*, to the Smoky Seas she bore,
 With a stovepipe stuck from a starboard port and the Russian flag at her fore.
 (*Baltic*, *Stralsund*, and *Northern Light* — oh! they were birds of a feather —
 Slipping away to the Smoky Seas, three seal-thieves together!) 20
 And at last she came to a sandy cove and the *Baltic* lay therein,
 But her men were up with the herding seal to drive and club and skin.
 There were fifteen hundred skins abeach, cool pelt and proper fur,
 When the *Northern Light* drove into the bight and the sea-mist drove with her.
 The *Baltic* called her men and weighed — she could not choose but run — 25
 For a stovepipe seen through the closing mist, it shows like a four-inch gun
 (And loss it is that is sad as death to lose both trip and ship
 And lie for a rotting contraband on Vladivostok slip).
 She turned and dived in the sea-smother as a rabbit dives in the whins,
 And the *Northern Light* sent up her boats to steal the stolen skins. 30
 They had not brought a load to side or slid their hatches clear,
 When they were aware of a sloop-of-war, ghost-white and very near.
 Her flag she showed, and her guns she showed — three of them, black, abeam,
 And a funnel white with the crusted salt, but never a show of steam.

 There was no time to man the brakes, they knocked the shackle free, 35
 And the *Northern Light* stood out again, goose-winged to open sea.
 (For life it is that is worse than death, by force of Russian law,
 To work in the mines of mercury that loose the teeth in your jaw.)
 They had not run a mile from shore — they heard no shots behind —
 When the skipper smote his hand on his thigh and threw her up in the wind: 40
 “Bluffed — raised out on a bluff,” said he, “for if my name’s Tom Hall,
 “You must set a thief to catch a thief — and a thief has caught us all!
 “By every butt in Oregon and every spar in Maine,
 “The hand that spilled the wind from her sail was the hand of Reuben Paine!
 “He has rigged and trigged her with paint and spar, and, faith, he has faked her
 well — 45
 “But I’d know the *Stralsund*’s deckhouse yet from here to the booms o’ Hell.
 “Oh, once we ha’ met at Baltimore, and twice on Boston pier,
 “But the sickest day for you, Reuben Paine, was the day that you came here —
 “The day that you came here, my lad, to scare us from our seal
 “With your funnel made o’ your painted cloth, and your guns o’ rotten deal! 50
 “Ring and blow for the *Baltic* now, and head her back to the bay,

“And we’ll come into the game again — with a double deck to play!”

They rang and blew the sealers’ call — the poaching-cry of the sea —
And they raised the *Baltic* out of the mist, and an angry ship was she.
And blind they groped through the whirling white and blind to the bay again, 55
Till they heard the creak of the *Stralsund’s* boom and the clank of her mooring chain.
They laid them down by bitt and boat, their pistols in their belts,
And: “Will you fight for it, Reuben Paine, or will you share the pelts?”

A dog-toothed laugh laughed Reuben Paine, and bared his flenching-knife.
“Yea, skin for skin, and all that he hath a man will give for his life; 60
“But I’ve six thousand skins below, and Yeddo Port to see,
“And there’s never a law of God or man runs north of Fifty-Three:
“So go in peace to the naked seas with empty holds to fill,
“And I’ll be good to your seal this catch, as many as I shall kill!”

Answered the snap of a closing lock — the jar of a gun-butt slid, 65
But the tender fog shut fold on fold to hide the wrong they did.
The weeping fog rolled fold on fold the wrath of man to cloak,
As the flame-spurts pale ran down the rail and the sealing-rifles spoke.
The bullets bit on bend and butt, the splinter slivered free
(Little they trust to sparrow-dust that stop the seal in his sea!), 70
The thick smoke hung and would not shift, leaden it lay and blue,
But three were down on the *Baltic’s* deck and two of the *Stralsund’s* crew.
An arm’s length out and overside the banked fog held them bound,
But, as they heard or groan or word, they fired at the sound.
For one cried out on the Name of God, and one to have him cease, 75
And the questing volley found them both and bade them hold their peace.
And one called out on a heathen joss and one on the Virgin’s Name,
And the schooling bullet leaped across and led them whence they came.
And in the waiting silences the rudder whined beneath,
And each man drew his watchful breath slow-taken ’tween the teeth — 80
Trigger and ear and eye acock, knit brow and hard-drawn lips —
Bracing his feet by chock and cleat for the rolling of the ships.
Till they heard the cough of a wounded man that fought in the fog for breath,
Till they heard the torment of Reuben Paine that wailed upon his death:

“The tides they’ll go through Fundy Race, but I’ll go never more 85
“And see the hogs from ebb-tide mark turn scampering back to shore.
“No more I’ll see the trawlers drift below the Bass Rock ground,
“Or watch the tall Fall steamer lights tear blazing up the Sound.
“Sorrow is me, in a lonely sea and a sinful fight I fall,
“But if there’s law o’ God or man you’ll swing for it yet, Tom Hall!” 90

Tom Hall stood up by the quarter-rail. “Your words in your teeth,” said he.
“There’s never a law of God or man runs north of Fifty-Three.
“So go in grace with Him to face, and an ill-spent life behind,
“And I’ll be good to your widows, Rube, as many as I shall find.”
A *Stralsund* man shot blind and large, and a warlock Finn was he, 95
And he hit Tom Hall with a bursting ball a hand’s-breadth over the knee.
Tom Hall caught hold by the topping-lift, and sat him down with an oath,
“You’ll wait a little, Rube,” he said, “the Devil has called for both.
“The Devil is driving both this tide, and the killing-grounds are close,
“And we’ll go up to the Wrath of God as the holluschickie goes. 100
“O men, put back your guns again and lay your rifles by,
“We’ve fought our fight, and the best are down. Let up and let us die!
“Quit firing, by the bow there — quit! Call off the *Baltic’s* crew!
“You’re sure of Hell as me or Rube — but wait till we get through.”

There went no word between the ships, but thick and quick and loud 105
The life-blood drummed on the dripping decks, with the fog-dew from the shroud.
The sea-pull drew them side by side, gunnel to gunnel laid,
And they felt the sheer-strakes pound and clear, but never a word was said.

Then Reuben Paine cried out again before his spirit passed:
“Have I followed the sea for thirty years to die in the dark at last? 110
“Curse on her work that has nipped me here with a shifty trick unkind —
“I have gotten my death where I got my bread, but I dare not face it blind.
“Curse on the fog! Is there never a wind of all the winds I knew
“To clear the smother from off my chest, and let me look at the blue?”
The good fog heard — like a splitten sail, to left and right she tore, 115
And they saw the sun-dogs in the haze and the seal upon the shore.
Silver and grey ran spit and bay to meet the steel-backed tide,
And pinched and white in the clearing light the crews stared overside.

O rainbow-gay the red pools lay that swilled and spilled and spread,
And gold, raw gold, the spent shells rolled between the care-less dead — 120
The dead that rocked so drunkenwise to weather and to lee,
And they saw the work their hands had done as God had bade them see!

And a little breeze blew over the rail that made the headsails lift,
But no man stood by wheel or sheet, and they let the schooners drift.
And the rattle rose in Reuben's throat and he cast his soul with a cry, 125
And "Gone already?" Tom Hall he said. "Then it's time for me to die."
His eyes were heavy with great sleep and yearning for the land,
And he spoke as a man that talks in dreams, his wound beneath his hand.

"Oh, there comes no good o' the westering wind that backs against the sun;
"Wash down the decks — they're all too red — and share the skins and run. 130
"*Baltic, Stralsund, and Northern Light* — clean share and share for all,
"You'll find the fleets off Tolstoi Mees, but you will not find Tom Hall.
"Evil he did in shoal-water and blacker sin on the deep,
"But now he's sick of watch and trick and now he'll turn and sleep.
"He'll have no more of the crawling sea that made him suffer so, 135
"But he'll lie down on the killing-grounds where the holluschickie go.
"And west you'll sail and south again, beyond the sea-fog's rim,
"And tell the Yoshiwara girls to burn a stick for him.
"And you'll not weight him by the heels and dump him over-side,
"But carry him up to the sand-hollows to die as Bering died, 140
"And make a place for Reuben Paine that knows the fight was fair,
"And leave the two that did the wrong to talk it over there!"

*Half-steam ahead by guess and lead, for the sun is mostly veiled —
Through fog to fog, by luck and log, sail you as Bering sailed;
And if the light shall lift aright to give your landfall plain, 145
North and by west, from Zapne Crest you raise the Crosses twain.
Fair marks are they to the inner bay, the reckless poacher knows,
What time the scarred see-catchie lead their sleek seraglios.
Ever they hear the floe-pack clear, and the blast of the old bull-whale,
And the deep seal-roar that beats off-shore above the loudest gale. 150
Ever they wait the winter's hate as the thundering boorga calls,
Where northward look they to St. George, and westward to St. Paul's.*

*Ever they greet the hunted fleet — lone keels off headlands drear —
When the sealing-schooners flit that way at hazard year by year.*

Ever in Yokohama port men tell the tale anew

155

Of a hidden sea and a hidden fight,

When the Baltic ran from the Northern Light,

And the Stralsund fought the two.

1893

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