

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

5 *The Ballad of the "Bolivar"*

*Seven men from all the world back to Docks again,
Rolling down the Ratcliffe Road drunk and raising Cain.
Give the girls another drink 'fore we sign away—
We that took the Bolivar out across the Bay!*

We put out from Sunderland loaded down with rails; 5
We put back to Sunderland 'cause our cargo shifted;
We put out from Sunderland — met the winter gales —
Seven days and seven nights to The Start we drifted.

Racketing her rivets loose, smoke-stack white as snow,
All the coals adrift adeck, half the rails below, 10
Leaking like a lobster-pot, steering like a dray —
Out we took the *Bolivar*, out across the Bay!

One by one the Lights came up, winked and let us by;
Mile by mile we waddled on, coal and fo'c'sle short;
Met a blow that laid us down, heard a bulkhead fly; 15
Left The Wolf behind us with a two-foot list to port.

Trailing like a wounded duck, working out her soul;
Clanging like a smithy-shop after every roll;
Just a funnel and a mast lurching through the spray —
So we threshed the *Bolivar* out across the Bay! 20

Felt her hog and felt her sag, betted when she'd break;
Wondered every time she raced if she'd stand the shock;
Heard the seas like drunken men pounding at her strake;
Hoped the Lord 'ud keep His thumb on the plummer-block!

Banged against the iron decks, bilges choked with coal; 25
Flayed and frozen foot and hand, sick of heart and soul;

'Last we prayed she'd buck herself into Judgment Day —
Hi! we cursed the *Bolivar* knocking round the Bay!

O her nose flung up to sky, groaning to be still —
Up and down and back we went, never time for breath; 30
Then the money paid at Lloyds' caught her by the keel,
And the stars ran round and round dancin' at our death!

Aching for an hour's sleep, dozing off between:
'Heard the rotten rivets draw when she took it green;
'Watched the compass chase its tail like a cat at play — 35
That was on the *Bolivar*, south across the Bay!

Once we saw between the squalls, lyin' head to swell —
Mad with work and weariness, wishin' they was we —
Some damned Liner's lights go by like a grand hotel;
'Cheered her from the *Bolivar* swampin' in the sea. 40

Then a greybeard cleared us out, then the skipper laughed;
"Boys, the wheel has gone to Hell — rig the winches aft!
"Yoke the kicking rudder-head — get her under way!"
So we steered her, pully-haul, out across the Bay!

Just a pack o' rotten plates puttied up with tar, 45
In we came, an' time enough, 'cross Bilbao Bar.
Overloaded, undermanned, meant to founder, we
Euchred God Almighty's storm, bluffed the Eternal Sea!

*Seven men from all the world back to town again,
Rollin' down the Ratcliffe Road drunk and raising Cain: 50
Seven men from out of Hell. Ain't the owners gay,
Cause we took the "Bolivar" safe across the Bay?*

1890

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