THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

CAPTAIN BONE'S "LOOKOUTMAN"

By William McFee

Mr. McFee's review is the eleventh of a series of longer book reviews to be published each month in THE BOOKMAN. *The books discussed will not necessarily be new nor will they be books which have never before been reviewed in the magazine. The aim of the editors is to present, in the selection of volumes and reviewers, articles which shall constitute solid pieces of criticism.*

IT is a source of pride to any merchant seaman within the meaning of the Act that, given the order and the circumstances, he will know what to do. Ours is an ancient and, we like to affirm, honorable craft; we are the inheritors of a formidable and complicated tradition, highly amusing at times to landsmen. We move within this linked and laminated harness of ours easily enough, well aware of its durable resilient and protective qualities, and satisfied that no emergency can arise with which we cannot cope, provided we are instructed in the conventional procedure of our lawful occasions.

It is with misgiving, therefore, that we have to record a case in which this admirable system has broken down, and a subordinate, having received his instructions, is aware of no precedent in the history of the service that might afford him any guidance, and is obliged to carry on as best he can upon his own initiative. With what success let the reader of this monograph decide!

For even the consolation of the Scriptures proves inadequate for one who discovers that his commander, a man very far removed from being an enemy, has written a book. That this same commander should desire a scathing review of his own work, couched in language designed to discourage circulation, is bound to occasion a certain amount of misery to the minion thus distinguished among his associates, even were the particular volume involved a work of despicable character. Which, upon investigation, it does not appear to be. So much for apology and preamble.

The kinds of literature in this western hemisphere we may consider broadly as two. Or we may be a trifle metaphysical, and speak of the dual character of imaginative writing. There is, in the first place, because of its preponderating volume and appeal, literature of sex. Now the writer is so sensible of the possible misapprehension of his meaning when he uses that abused and fundamental word, that he feels the need of a brief digression to elucidate. What he means by "the literature of sex" is certainly not that department of modern fiction that dwells, with svelte lubricity, upon the less admirable aspects of our social relations, and which conceals, beneath indubitable fine writing, a poisonous preoccupation with base desires. What he means to convey is something — to borrow a phrase that seems to elicit much amusement from the sophisticated — "better and finer".

He means that vast body of literature that is erected upon the emotions arising from dramatic encounters of men and women, emotions lovely and of good report, with all the reactions throughout the visible world deriving from these encounters; with the philosophies and heresies of human hearts colliding with fate; with the poetry that arises like a divine exhalation from our loves and our follies.

On the other hand we have a department of writing that draws its inspiration from the affections inspired by the secular phenomena of places and things, and includes the glamorous illusion of travel. At one end of the scale we find the reverberating harmonies and monastic rhythms of "Urn Burial" and "Opium Eater" (and parts of "Moby Dick"). At the other, the facile sprightliness of lady travelers who astound distant potentates with their inconceivable ineptitudes.

With these extremes, however, we have at present nothing to do. In between we can find, let us say, "The Sea and the Jungle" and "The Nigger of the Narcissus", books of profound significance because of their essential concern with men at grips with natural forces. Both Tomlinson and Conrad here develop their themes austerely, with a scornful obliviousness of the "heart interest" so noisily demanded by the crowd. They delight in the pure form of the emotion, not distorted by the agonies of sex, so that their books resemble philosophies written by poets, sombre thunder clouds riven by the lightnings of genius. They are like mystic umbilical cords holding us to our original mother earth and sea.

Subsidiary to these come, in due order and ranking, the books of classification, volumes born of great affection and pride, that emotion so effectively alluded to by a certain Secretary to the Admiralty when he said, "My Lord discovered a great love for his ship"; which indicates the measure of Pepys's mental range, for he was a man with an abundance of sex and full of potential follies. Yet he saw that love his patron had for his ship. We can but be sorry he made no catalogue of the ships to go with the models we have still in being. In the distance of time we have lost sight of many varieties of bottom, as a moment's thought must show, since every yard has its idiosyncrasies, and each fishing ground some fancy gadget or hollow stroke supposed to give an extra lick of speed or seaworthyness.

This brings us, with due dignity and deliberation, to the book the author desires us to regard with cold brutality. He calls it "The Lookoutman" and it is full of useful information. This, upon consideration, is the most damning thing we can discover to say of it at present, for we are well enough aware of the mess some great artists, and many smaller ones, would make of such a theme. It would be either better, or worse, than the theme required, and as such would fall short of our ideal, which is, that it should be written as a treatise on natural history. "The purpose of the book", he says, "is to familiarise the reader with the outward appearance of representative types of vessels, so that they may be recognized on occasion, and to offer a lookoutman's comments on their character and habits and tempers."

Now the reviewer is here assisted very materially by his author's allusion, dry enough in all conscience, to John Burroughs, an eminent and most lovable observer of certain aspects of nature. Burroughs went to

England by way of the Clyde and the Lowlands, and Bone notes that, while the great naturalist sees with most uncanny exactness the configuration of the land, the (to him) amazing juxtaposition of a cornfield and a half built steamship, the essential qualities of brae and loch, he never notes at all that most indigenous affair, the Clyde pleasure steamer, so different from the vocal monstrosities of his native lakes and rivers. This is the right spirit. Here you have one naturalist completing the other. For if ships are not fauna, what are they? How are we to describe so noble an extension of man's personality as those graciously modeled forms that carry him and his burdens of love and fortitude to distant regions? Let it be granted that ships form an order, with many interesting varieties and subclasses — a reasonable proposition. So we find massive and costly volumes devoted to the pure science of a ship's shape and structure, treatises of nautical anatomy as it were, with companion tomes preoccupied with its diseases. "Breakdowns at Sea" is an ominous but necessary book, by the way. One of the finest, a sort of practical derivative of these larger works, is entitled with refreshing candor and peremptory brevity "Know Your Own Ship". There is in this the bark of an order, and most of us who are afflicted with a passion for ships, at some time or other have endeavored to do what the author desires. And to these, holding out a friendly hand to the layman ashore, to assist him when he beholds strange craft on the beam or tied up beside him in harbor, comes "The Lookoutman", classifying and describing, with affectionate precision, the notable figures in the unending procession of vessels up and down the high and narrow seas.

It is necessary to insist, however, upon the true character of the inspiration of such a book. The love of a man for a ship must be accepted by the public ashore, and especially the great inland public of America, as one of the major emotions of the human heart. It is the peer of the love we bear horses and houses and native air. It stands well above the narrow obsession of cobblers for leather, for example, or the small minded ferocity of the fellow whose trade or calling happens to be subjected to criticism. National as it is in the sense that a ship is instantly recognized as "one of ours", yet it transcends frontiers and flags, and we can take a dark pleasure in the bizarre contraptions that indicate for us a ship's "country of origin"!

It is the extraordinary and minute observation forming the basis of such a book as this that gives us the key to its inspiration. What we are interested in we remember; as anyone may admit who has reflected upon the miraculous memory a boy has for the records of his idols in games, or a racing man for the unfathomable details of form and pedigree. We remember a ship by many things — according to our rating in her — from the mate, who recalls an unfortunate windlass, to the messroom boy, with horrible memories of an always choked pantry scupper. And looking out upon our neighbors we can see marvelous discrepancies in their gear. We can tell by the cut of the counter if she comes from the Clyde or the northeast coast. Our eyes detect the mysterious hieroglyphics on her funnel, and we have been known to announce, from a mile away, that the captain had his wife aboard!

"The Lookoutman", however, keeps dourly to the main classifications of

ships at sea. He comprehends that the vital issues of life ashore, the Sunday newspaper and golf, earning a living and bringing up a family, will prevent the lay reader from becoming an expert in nautical natural history, so he divides all craft into a dozen definite and easily recognized groups. His comments upon modern naval architecture are sound and humanely tolerant toward the fashion that leads the designer to imitate a hotel with his "baronial halls", Renaissance smoke rooms, and Louis Quinze lounges. Such fancies mean very little to the critic except that they emphasize the danger of cutting deck beams to give extravagant head room for domes and Byzantine ceilings. They have their virtues, as our author points out, since the demand for excessive luxury on the part of the traveler has brought along with it decent comfort for the seaman and safety for us all.

Moreover, as is also remembered by "The Lookoutman", these millionaire gadgets can be humanized into genuine ship garniture in time; and they evoke in the naval architect a very fine art in the design of the hull to carry them. Such ships are full of beautiful contrivances and compromises and reenforcements. The mere insertion of the trunks for those gilded cages that slide up and down to hoist the passenger to the sun deck or deposit him on the dining room level, is a problem for the designer. The layout of bathrooms, with all their attendant pipes, is worth noting. The critic remembers the launch of the "Lusitania" and the comments of a local ship yard foreman who had traveled all the way from South Wales to Liverpool just to see her, the most wonderful ship of her day. He came back in a condition of amiable incoherence, for his own work lay in the building of coasters and the repair of tramps. Yet as he had wandered along those stripped and freshly riveted gangways and noted the justness and beauty of her modeling he had comprehended, with a fellow craftsman's science, the problems involved. "Man, she has nine decks", he whispered, almost in awe. "Do you hear what I say? Nine decks!"

Deep calling unto deep!

"The Lookoutman", by virtue of his office, finds it necessary to warn the public that "the maritime importance of a nation in the ways of commerce is not wholly measured by the numbers and tonnage of fast and luxurious steamships possessed, but rather by the countless smaller and perhaps unimposing vessels that carry its national flag to remote places." This admonition should be taken to heart by American newspaper men, who are particularly prone to adopt the immigrants' idea of four funnels' being bigger and better than one or none at all. Indeed the main difficulty in the way of getting a sane body of public opinion in the United States on the subject of shipping is the importance given by eastern ship news reporters to the enormous vessels that carry prime donne and rich bankers to Europe. The inland folk who never see a ship naturally derive a false notion entirely of what constitutes a merchant marine. The business of shipping is not acquired in a day, or even in a generation. Big ships with Pompeian swimming baths and so on can be built only if wealth is being made out of the freight paid for the tramp steamers' cargo, just as the revenue of a railroad comes, not from Limited Fliers but from the long trains of freight cars that rumble through in the small hours. This has to be re-

membered to explain the comparatively small proportion of "The Lookoutman's" interest centred upon the very large "liners" that secure so much publicity in the press. He knows that the harder it is to determine the exact status of that ship on the horizon, the more important she may be, as a class, to her nation.

We discover too, in this book of affectionate description and competent appraisal, a feeling of sound conservatism in the matter of design. The connoisseur of ships has suffered severely of late years by reason of the hideous and unseamanlike contraptions that rear themselves up before his scandalized gaze in the harbors and seas of the world. Possibly nothing worried him so much as the straight line configuration of the fabricated ship. It was like beholding a tree with a square trunk or a horse with rectangular anatomy. There is a fundamental lack of science and morality in those dreadful structures offering their ugly and weak superficies to the weight of a winter's gale. The flat uncambered deck, the houses like harsh iron sheds erected upon a scow, were an unhappy necessity in the urgent days of war. But it is with ships as with churches and furniture and human beings — beauty is the bright shadow of strength—the two are inseparable. Flare and sheer and camber are not put on the ship as ornaments; they are the outward and visible symbols of design. They are the marks of her breeding and ancestry, and may be regarded, if you so please, as the conditions of her poise and buoyancy. The builder of ships is like any other artist — he is bound by the medium in which he works.

Another point of some interest which may be noted here briefly is the individual character of each ship after she has left the ways. "The Lookoutman" has been unable to deal with this matter, since his space is compactly filled with generalizations. But he would agree readily enough that it is a remarkable fact how two ships, built to the same blue prints from steel of the same mills, in every way identical, if built in different yards will exhibit striking divergences of behavior, even to a knot of speed. The expert's answer is that one yard builds a stiffer ship, one that lacks resiliency in a sea way and never seems to get in tune with her engines. Which may explain the fact, but leaves the spiritual mystery unsolved.

There are many ships the critic has seen about, which he would like to have included in this collection, but he refrains from mentioning them, save one. He alludes to those fascinating and enigmatic affairs the Happy Ships. They are the ships we all wish to sign with, the ships we remember through the years and sigh for when we have the misfortune to sail in the other kind. There is no doubt "The Lookoutman" has seen them now and again, for his observation is keen enough.

Everything in sight has been reported.

The Lookoutman. By David W. Bone. Harcourt, Brace and Co.