

SHIPRIGGERS' PERILS

A BUSINESS THAT DEMANDS GREAT SKILL AND COURAGE.

Twenty Per Cent of the Men Regularly Following This Calling Are Halted Every Year—How They Learn the Dangerous Trade.

A skillful ship rigger never strikes. Come good times or bad, the supply of volunteers for this most desperate of occupations never falls below the demand. The ship riggers are to be seen along the water fronts of all great ports perched high in air, like great spiders busied with their strange architecture. They work in all sorts of weather, both by day and night. No other calling demands such a combination of skill and courage and the ability to work quickly in the face often of appalling danger.

There is no exaggeration in the statement that the rigging of ships, especially those requiring repairs after long service, is the most dangerous of occupations.

According to reliable statistics, fully 20 per cent of all regularly employed ship riggers are halted, often very seriously, every year. The proportion of riggers seriously injured in a lifetime is about 80 per cent. The greater number of accidents are caused by falls from aloft or by being struck by falling objects, such as blocks or spars or pieces of heavy rigging, falling from great heights. Serious knife wounds come next in order. The records of such accidents, as evidenced by the books of any hospital in a great seaport, are long and gruesome.

A rigger must be a steeple climber, a sailor, a tight rope walker, something of a trapeze artist and an experienced shipbuilder rolled into one. He must be literally a jack of all trades and a master at least of several of them. The ironworker who balances himself on steel girders on a great bridge or skyscraper, the trapeze artist in the circus or the "steeplejack" actually works in far less danger of his life.

The danger to the latter class of workers is more familiar and has been the more widely advertised. But a ship rigger must keep a perfectly cool head in the face of dangers which might stagger a Nelson or a Dewey. Your "steeplejack" may be perfectly self possessed at high altitudes, but then he works with the assurance that his support at least is stable. The structural iron worker feels that he can depend upon the solidity of the steel beams beneath him, while the most daring trapeze performer never ventures on ropes which have not been thoroughly tested and rarely without a net beneath him.

But the rigger knows no such safety in his support. The fact that his services are required aloft means, of course, that the complicated rigging is faulty. The masts or spars may be rotten to the breaking point, the ropes may part at any instant. It is just this uncertainty which renders the rigger's life extra hazardous. He must mount with the agility of a cat and work quickly in a network of rigging which may part at any instant. It would be different if he could even choose his own time and weather, but the rush inseparable from such work allows him no choice. Rain or snow or ice greatly increases the danger by rendering the spars or ropes treacherous to the hand and foot. Then, again, when the work goes forward by night the blinding rays of the searchlight to a man delicately balanced on icy ropes make it extremely difficult to judge distances and positions.

The most experienced sailor, no matter how much at home he may feel in the rigging in any weather, will often balk at the work of the rigger. The sailor is at least reasonably sure of the strength of his rigging if his ship be seaworthy. Then, again, if a sailor slips or falls the rolling of his ship is likely to throw him overboard into the water, where his fall is partly broken. It is different with the rigger, who if he falls must come down on the bare boards. The ship rigger must, besides, often work with the masts and spars practically denuded of their rigging without the safety which a full rigged ship lends to an experienced sailor.

The wages of the skilled ship rigger may seem high in comparison with those of the ordinary sailor or even a ship's officer. Considering the accidents which every rigger meets in his daily life, the work is of course one for which no amount of money can really compensate. A first class rigger commonly receives \$4 for a day's work. For all extra time the rate is double. Much of the work is of course done under the usual pressure of time. When an accident occurs to a merchant ship, for example, which is due perhaps with a perishable cargo at some distant port, every hour economized in making repairs counts against serious loss. A great part of the work of rigging is therefore done at night, the gangs of riggers relieving one another continuously until the ship is again ready for sea.

The ship rigger whose experience or skill does not enable him to do the most important work earns from \$3 to \$3.50 a day, with the same agreement for overtime. During the busy season in the great seaport towns it is not uncommon for the riggers to work continuously for from fourteen to sixteen hours a day. As a result it is not unusual for them to receive for months at a time as much as \$50 a week.

In nearly all great seaport towns, notably in New York city, the riggers are strongly organized. Their union is probably the oldest of its kind in the world. For only have they played an

important part throughout the history of American shipping, but their guild was an effective one in London when the ships were rigged which sailed against the Spanish armada. The laws which govern the riggers in America today had their origin in this ancient guild. A revolution has occurred meanwhile in the shipping of the world by the introduction of steam and the use of iron and steel in shipbuilding, but the dangers of the ship rigger's life, like the demand for his services, have somehow remained unchanged. So you may hear the riggers talk today much the same as they did two centuries since—of the benefit societies which support them when they lie injured, or the premiums of the lodges which bury them and care for their families when they are killed.

A curious thing about the accidents to riggers, as any one on the water front of our seaports who knows will tell you, is that the most dangerous accidents spectacularly are seldom very serious. Any old salt or idler who hauls the docks will be found full of marvelous stories of such hairbreadth escapes. In San Francisco a sailor recently was dropped nearly a hundred feet by the parting of a rotten spar. As he fell, apparently to certain death, he struck a rope, which caused him to turn two complete somersaults in his descent and landed him on a pile of loose sails, which considerably broke his fall. While every one stood aghast he picked himself up nimbly, shook himself and proceeded to climb back to his original position.

Another rigger in falling from a height which threatened instant death struck against a slack rope by great good luck, which broke his fall and swung him against a mast. Instinctively he clutched its smooth sides and slid quite unhurt to the deck below. There is a rigger in New York today, well known along the docks in South street, who lost almost his entire scalp in an accident a few years ago. A rotten spar falling from a considerable height struck him fairly on the head, scraping the skin clean from the skull, but without breaking the bones.

To become an expert rigger, qualified to superintend as well as execute the work, the man must undergo a long and exacting apprenticeship. He must begin his apprenticeship with at least two years of actual service before the mast; he must learn to know the ship to the last detail of her rigging. Before he can be trusted with the more technical problems of his trade the apprentice must pass to the drawing board, where he learns the theory of shipbuilding and ship rigging. This training is supplemented in turn by a course in some shipyard. Before a rigger undertakes to repair a ship, for instance, he must know the name and use of every rope, must be able to measure distance accurately at a glance and thereafter calculate to a nicety just what a ship needs. To all this he must of course bring skill to execute the theoretical side of his training, with the courage to be gained only by actual life at sea.—New York Herald.

Origin of Steam Whistles. As the train approached a crossing the engineer lifted a tin horn from the seat beside him and blew a long, resonant blast that was scarcely audible above the rattle of the cars. A farmer on his way to market failed to hear the warning blast. The next instant he, with his cart, a hundred pounds of butter and a thousand fresh eggs, was mixed up in a monster omelette by the side of the track. The farmer was unhurt, but very angry. He brought suit and recovered full damages from the railroad. This happened in England in 1833.

The president of the road sent for George Stephenson and said angrily: "Our engineers can't blow their horns loud enough to clear the tracks ahead. You have made your steam do so much, why don't you make it blow a good loud horn for us?" Stephenson pondered. An idea came to him. He visited a musical instrument maker and had constructed a horn that gave a horrible screech when blown by steam. From this horn the locomotive whistle of today descends.

Mr. Hearst went out and killed a lion to prove that he is qualified for the presidency. So there, now!

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