

## The Dead Man at the Wheel in Cooper's *Homeward Bound* (1838)

(Introductory Comment by Norman Barry)

James Fenimore Cooper, in his maritime novel *Homeward Bound, or The Chase*, spun a tale that may be regarded as containing striking elements found in the anonymous sketch "The Helmsman of Lake Erie."

The "man at the wheel" is only introduced in the final pages of Ch. XXVIII. Captain Truck's stranded packet, the *Montauk*, has just escaped after being seized by and freed from marauding Arabs on the west coast of Africa but still has the obstacle of a dangerous reef to overcome. The fate of the vessel lies in the hands of its anonymous pilot, a seaman later referred to by the generic name "Jack."<sup>1</sup>

Of particular interest is the exchange between the captain and his wheelsman. Granted, the dialogue is completely different, but the element of danger is overwhelming and the fate of the ship rests on the pilot's shoulders. "Old weather-beaten" Captain Truck (2), noticing that his pilot is not responding to his orders has become a volcano, about to explode in anger. Only when young Paul grabs the wheel from the pilot does it become clear that the pilot is dead, shot in the back with a bullet piercing his heart. Paul is able to turn the ship in the nick of time.

The situation of the pilot of the *Montauk*, who even in death, clung to the spokes of the wheel, is strongly reminiscent of John Maynard, remaining at his post until death.

When Captain Truck finally grasps what his pilot had endured, and how he would not let go of the wheel, even in death, he orders a funeral befitting a hero.

It will be recalled that "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" ends on a very religious note with John Maynard's ascension to Heaven and his being likened to a Christian martyr. The funeral and burial at sea of the anonymous pilot of the *Montauk* also contain the motif of life after death for those who believe in their Redeemer.

Cooper's concluding sentence, a stroke of poetic genius, pays tribute to the sense of loss of a heroic and steadfast mariner: "*The day was fast closing notwithstanding, and the skies were losing their brilliancy in hues that were still softer and more melancholy, as if nature delighted, too, in sympathizing with the feelings of these lone mariners!*"

The *Montauk* tale, although not developing the character of the wheelsman as fully as in "The Helmsman of Lake Erie," could, with only a slight stretch of the imagination, be regarded as a harbinger of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" only seven years later.

1) Whether the actual name was indeed "Jack" is far from certain. Cooper often uses "Jack" when the actual name is "John."

2) The very expression applied to John Maynard is applied to Captain Truck – "the weather-beaten old seaman," 4<sup>th</sup> page from the end of Ch. XXVI. The age of the dead pilot is not specified.

An excerpt from *Homeward Bound* (the final pages of Ch. XXVIII):  
The Tale of the Dead Wheelsman

The course at first was nearly before the wind, when the flat rock, so often named, being reached, the ship was compelled to haul up on an easy bowline, in order to pass to windward of it. Here the stay-sails aft and the spanker were set, which aided in bringing the vessel to the wind, and the fore-tack was brought down. By laying straight out of the pass, a distance of only a hundred yards, the vessel would be again clear of everything, and beyond all the dangers of the coast, so long as the present breeze stood. But the tide set the vessel bodily towards the rock, and her condition did not admit of pressing hard upon a bowline. Captain Truck was getting to be uneasy, for he soon perceived that they were nearing the danger, though very gradually, and he began to tremble for his copper. Still the vessel drew steadily ahead, and he had hopes of passing the outer edge of the rocks in safety. This outer edge was a broken, ragged, and pointed fragment, that would break in the planks should the vessel rest upon it an instant, while falling in that constant heaving and setting of the ocean, which now began to be very sensibly felt. After all his jeopardy, the old mariner saw that his safety was at a serious hazard, by one of those unforeseen but common risks that environ the seaman's life.

"Luff! luff! you can," cried Captain Truck, glancing his eye from the rock to the sails, and from the sails to the rock. "Luff, sir--you are at the pinch!"

"Luff it is sir!" answered the man at the wheel, who stood abaft the hurricane-house, covered by its roof, over which he was compelled to look, to get a view of the sails.

"Luff I may, and luff it is, sir."

Paul stood at the captain's side, the crew being ordered to keep themselves as much covered as possible, on account of the bullets of the Arabs, which were at this time pattering against the vessel, like hail at the close of a storm.

"We shall not weather that point of ragged rock," exclaimed the young man, quickly; "and if we touch it the ship will be lost."

"Let her claw off," returned the old man sternly. "Her cutwater is up with it already. Let her claw off."

The bows of the ship were certainly up with the danger, and the vessel was slowly drawing ahead; but every moment its broadside was set nearer to the rock, which was now within fifty feet of them. The fore-chains were past the point, though little hope remained of clearing it abaft. A ship turns on her centre of gravity as on a pivot, the two ends inclining in opposite directions; and Captain Truck hoped that as the bows were past the danger, it might be possible to throw the after-part of the vessel up to the wind, by keeping away, and thus clear the spot entirely.

"Hard up with your helm!" he shouted, "hard up!--Haul down the mizzen-stay-sail, and give her sheet!"

The sails were attended to, but no answer came from the wheel, nor did the vessel change her course.

"Hard up, I tell you, sir--hard up--hard up, and be d---d to you!"

The usual reply was not made. Paul sprang through the narrow gangway that led to the wheel. All that passed took but a minute, and yet it was the most critical minute that had yet befallen the Montauk; for had she touched that rock but for an instant, human art could hardly have kept her above water an hour.

"Hard up, and be d---d to you!" repeated Captain Truck, in a voice of thunder, as Paul darted round the corner of the hurricane-house.

The seaman stood at the wheel, grasping its spokes firmly, his eyes aloft as usual, but the turns of the tiller rope showed that the order was not obeyed.

"Hard up, man, hard up! are you mad?" Paul uttered these words as he sprang to the wheel, which he made whirl with his own hands in the required direction. As for the seaman, he yielded his hold without resistance, and fell like a log, as the wheel flew round. A ball had entered his back, and passed through his heart, and yet he had stood steadily to the spokes, as the true mariner always clings to the helm while life lasts.

The bows of the ship fell heavily off, and her stern pressed up towards the wind; but the trifling delay so much augmented the risk, that nothing saved the vessel but the formation of the run and counter, which, by receding as usual, allowed room to escape the dangerous point, as the Montauk hove by on a swell.

Paul could not see the nearness of the escape, but the purity of the water permitted Captain Truck and his mates to observe it with a distinctness that almost rendered them breathless. Indeed there was an instant when the sharp rock was hid beneath the counter, and each momentarily expected to hear the grating of the fragment, as it penetrated the vessel's bottom. "Relieve that man at the wheel, and send him hither this moment," said Captain Truck, in a calm stern voice, that was more ominous than an oath.

The mate called a seaman, and passed aft himself to execute the order. In a minute he and Paul returned, bearing the body of the dead mariner, when all was explained.

"Lord, thy ways are unsearchable!" muttered the old master, uncovering himself, as the corpse was carried past, "and we are but as grains of seed, and as the vain butterflies in thy hand!"

The rock once cleared, an open ocean lay to leeward of the packet, and bringing the wind a little abaft the beam, she moved steadily away from those rocks that had been the witnesses of all her recent dangers. It was not long before she was so distant that all danger from the Arabs ceased. The barbarians, notwithstanding, continued a dropping fire and furious gesticulations, long after their bullets and menaces became matters of indifference to those on board.

The body of the dead man was laid between the masts, and the order was passed to bend the sails. As all was ready, in half an hour the Montauk was standing off the land under her three topsails, the reef now distant nearly a league. The courses came next, when the top-gallant yards were crossed and the sails set; the lighter canvas followed, and some time before the sun disappeared, the ship was under studding-sails, standing to the westward, before the trades.

For the first time since he received the intelligence that the Arabs were the masters of the ship, Captain Truck now felt real relief. He was momentarily happy after the combat, but new cares had pressed upon him so soon, that he could scarcely be said to be tranquil. Matters were now changed. His vessel was in good order, if not equipped for racing, and, as he was in a low latitude, had the trade winds to befriend him, and no longer entertained any apprehension of his old enemy the Foam, he felt as if a mountain had been removed from his breast.

"Thank God," he observed to Paul, "I shall sleep to-night without dreaming of Arabs or rocks, or scowling faces at New York. They may say that another man might have shown more skill in keeping clear of such a scrape, but they will hardly say that another man could have got out of it better. All this handsome outfit, too, will cost the owners nothing--literally nothing; and I question if the poor Dane will ever appear to claim the sails and spars. I do not know that we are in possession of them exactly according to the law of Africa, for of that code I know little; or according to the law of nations, for Vattel, I believe, has nothing on the subject; but we are in possession so effectually, that, barring the nor'-westers on the American coast, I feel pretty certain of keeping them until we make the East River."

"It might be better to bury the dead," said Paul; for he knew Eve would scarcely appear on deck as long as the body remained in sight. "Seamen, you know, are superstitious on the subject of corpses."

"I have thought of this; but hoped to cheat those two rascals of sharks that are following in our wake, as if they scented their food. It is an extraordinary thing, Mr. Blunt, that these fish should know when there is a body in a ship, and that they will follow it a hundred leagues to make sure of their prey."

"It would be extraordinary, if true; but in what manner has the fact been ascertained?"

"You see the two rascally pirates astern?" observed Mr. Leach.

"Very true; but we might also see them were there no dead body about the ship. Sharks abound in this latitude, and I have seen several about the reef since we went in.

"They'll be disappointed as to poor Tom Smith," said the mate, "unless they dive deep for him. I have lashed one of Napoleon's busts to the fine fellow's feet, and he'll not fetch up until he's snugly anchored on the bottom."

"This is a fitting hour for solemn feelings," said the captain, gazing about him at the heavens and the gathering gloom of twilight. "Call all hands to bury the dead, Mr. Leach. I confess I should feel easier myself as to the weather, were the body fairly out of the ship."

While the mate went forward to muster the people, the captain took Paul aside with a request that he would perform the last offices for the deceased.

"I will read a chapter in the Bible myself," he said; "for I should not like the people to see one of the crew go overboard, and the officers have no word to say in the ceremonies; it might beget disrespect, and throw a slur on our knowledge; but you man-of-war's-men are generally more regularly brought up to prayers than us liners, and if you have a proper book by you, I should feel infinitely obliged if you would give us a lift on this melancholy occasion."

Paul proposed that Mr. Effingham should be asked to officiate, as he knew that gentleman read prayers in his cabin, to his own party, night and morning.

"Does he?" said the captain; "then he is my man, for he must have his hand in, and there will be no stammering or boggling. Ay, ay; he will fetch through on one tack. Toast, go below, and present my compliments to Mr. Effingham, and say I should like to speak to him; and, harkee, Toast, desire him to put a prayer-book in his pocket, and then step into my state-room, and bring up the Bible you will find under the pillow. The Arabs had a full chance at the plunder; but there is something about the book that always takes care of it. Few rogues, I've often remarked, care about a Bible. They would sooner steal ten novels than one copy of the sacred writ. This of mine was my mother's, Mr. Blunt, and I should have been a better man had I overhauled it oftener."

We pass over most of the arrangements, and come at once to the service, and to the state of the ship, just as her inmates were assembled on an occasion which no want of formality can render anything but solemn and admonitory. The courses were hauled up, and the maintopsail had been laid to the mast, a position in which a ship has always an air of stately repose. The body was stretched on a plank that lay across a rail, the leaden bust being enclosed in the hammock that enveloped it. A spot of blood on the cloth alone betrayed the nature of the death. Around the body were grouped the crew, while Captain Truck and his mates stood at the gangway. The passengers were collected on the quarter-deck, with Mr. Effingham, holding a prayer-book, a little in advance.

The sun had just dipped into the ocean, and the whole western horizon was glorious with those soft, pearly, rainbow hues that adorn the evening and the morning of a low latitude, during the soft weather of the autumnal months. To the eastward, the low line of coast was just discernible by the hillocks of sand, leaving the imagination to portray its solitude and wastes. The sea in all other directions was dark and gloomy, and the entire character of the sunset was that of a grand picture of ocean magnificence and extent, relieved by a sky in which the tints came and went like the well-known colours of the dolphin; to this must be added the gathering gloom of twilight. Eve pressed the arm of John Effingham, and gazed with admiration and awe at the imposing scene.

"This is the seaman's grave!" she whispered.

"And worthy it is to be the tomb of so gallant a fellow. The man died clinging to his post; and Powis tells me that his hand was loosened from the wheel with difficulty."

They were silent, for Captain Truck uncovered himself, as did all around him, placed his spectacles, and opened the sacred volume. The old mariner was far from critical in his selections of readings, and he usually chose some subject that he thought would most interest his hearers, which were ordinarily those that most interested himself. To him Bible was Bible, and he now turned to the passage in the Acts of the Apostles in which the voyage of St. Paul from Judea to Rome is related. This he read with steadiness, some quaintness of pronunciation, and with a sort of breathing elasticity, whenever he came to those verses that touched particularly on the navigation.

Paul maintained his perfect self-command during this extraordinary exhibition, but an unbidden smile lingered around the handsome and chiseled mouth of Mr. Sharp. John Effingham's curved face was sedate and composed, while the females were too much impressed to exhibit any levity. As to the crew, they listened in profound attention, occasionally exchanging glances whenever any of the nautical expedients struck them as being out of role.

As soon as this edifying chapter was ended, Mr. Effingham commenced the solemn rites for the dead. At the first sound of his voice, a calm fell on the vessel as if the spirit of God had alighted from the clouds, and a thrill passed through the frames of the listeners. Those solemn words of the Apostle commencing with "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord, he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet he shall live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, he shall never die," could not have been better delivered. The voice, intonation, utterance, and manner, of Mr. Effingham, were eminently those of a gentleman; without pretension, quiet, simple, and mellow, while, on the other hand, they were feeling, dignified, distinct, and measured.

When he pronounced the words "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth, and though, after my skin, worms destroy my body, yet in my flesh shall I see God," &c. &c. the men stared about them as if a real voice from heaven had made the declaration, and Captain Truck looked aloft like one expecting a trumpet-blast. The tears of Eve began to flow as she listened to the much-loved tones; and the stoutest heart in that much tried ship quailed. John Effingham made the responses of the psalm steadily, and Mr. Sharp and Paul soon joined him. But the profoundest effect was produced when the office reached those consoling but startling words from the Revelations commencing with, "I heard a voice from Heaven saying unto me Write, From henceforth blessed are the dead who die in the Lord," &c. Captain Truck afterwards confessed that he thought he heard the very voice, and the men actually pressed together in their alarm. The plunge of the body was also a solemn instant. It went off the end of the plank feet foremost, and, carried rapidly down by the great weight of the lead, the water closed above it, obliterating every trace of the seaman's grave. Eve thought that its exit resembled the few brief hours that draw the veil of oblivion around the mass of mortals when they disappear from earth.

Instead of asking for the benediction at the close of the ceremony, Mr. Effingham devoutly and calmly commenced the psalm of thanksgiving for victory, "If the Lord had not been on our side, now may we say, if the Lord himself had not been on our side, when men rose up against

us, they would have swallowed us up quick, when they were so wrathfully displeased with us." Most of the gentlemen joined in the responses, and the silvery voice of Eve sounded sweet and holy amid the breathings of the ocean. Te Deum Laudamus, "We praise Thee, O God! we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord!" "All the earth doth worship thee, the Father everlasting;" closed the offices, when Mr. Effingham dismissed his congregation with the usual layman's request for the benediction.

Captain Truck had never before been so deeply impressed with any religious ceremony, and when it ceased he looked wistfully over the side at the spot where the body had fallen, or where it might be supposed to have fallen--- for the ship had drifted some distance--as one takes a last look at the grave of a friend.

"Shall we fill the main-topsail, sir?" demanded Mr. Leach, after waiting a minute or two in deference to his commander's feelings; "or shall we hook on the yard-tackles, and stow the launch?"

"Not yet, Leach; not yet. It will be unkind to poor Jack to hurry away from his grave so indecently. I have observed that the people about the river always keep in sight till the last sod is stowed, and the rubbish is cleared away. The fine fellow stood to those spokes as a close-reefed topsail in a gale stands the surges of the wind, and we owe him this little respect."

"The boats, sir?"

"Let them tow awhile longer. It will seem like deserting him to be rattling the yard-tackles and stowing boats directly over his head. Your gran'ther was a priest, Leach, and I wonder you don't see the impropriety of hurrying away from a grave. A little reflection will hurt none of us."

The mate admired at a mood so novel for his commander, but he was fain to submit. The day was fast closing notwithstanding, and the skies were losing their brilliancy in hues that were still softer and more melancholy, as if nature delighted, too, in sympathizing with the feelings of these lone mariners!

(Submitted Feb. 2022)