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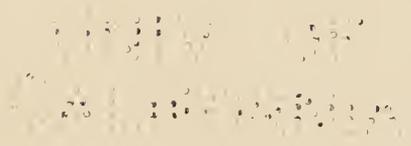


PIRACY

OFF THE FLORIDA COAST AND ELSEWHERE

BY

SAMUEL A. GREEN



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PIRACY OFF THE FLORIDA COAST AND ELSEWHERE

At a stated meeting of the MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, held in Boston on Thursday, February 9, 1911, Dr. SAMUEL A. GREEN presented the following paper:—

Few persons of the present day are aware how extensively piracy prevailed two centuries ago. There was no part of the high seas that was free from the depredation of roving robbers. At times they threatened towns on the coast, and at others they attacked ships on mid-ocean; and they seem to have followed their lawless pursuits at will. When caught, there was little delay in bringing them to trial and securing a conviction; and trivial technicality in forms played no part in reaching results. At times there were multiple executions, and in the community there was no morbid sentimentality shown for the miserable wretches. Not the least of their torture was sitting in the meeting-house on the Sunday before execution and listening to their own funeral sermons, when the minister told them what they might expect in the next world if they got their just dues. On June 30, 1704, six poor victims were hung, on the Boston side of the Charles River bank, for piracy and murder; and there was a great crowd to witness the tragedy. Among the spectators on this occasion was Chief-Justice Sewall, one of the judges of the Admiralty Court which had convicted the pirates, who did not think it beneath his dignity to be present. It was then considered a public duty to invest the scene of execution with as much awe as possible, and it was thought that official station would emphasize this feeling.

The following extract from "The Boston News-Letter," August 21, 1721, shows how in early times piratical craft, heavily manned and carrying many guns, sailed the high seas

and pursued their unlawful calling. The vessel was taken somewhere in the Sargasso Sea, off the coast of Africa.

These are to Certifie all Persons concerned that on the 7th Day of May last, William Russel Master of the Ship Mary of Charlstown, in his Voyage from Madera to Surranam in the Lat. 22 Deg. and 27 N. and Long. 25 and 27 W. from London was taken by a Pirate Ship upwards of 50 Guns, Commanded by Capt. Roberts, about 300 Men, who robb'd him of part of his Cargo, and Forced away from him two of his Men, against his and their own consent, viz. Thomas Russel born in Lexintown near Charlstown and the other Thomas Winchol born in Portsmouth, New-Hampshire in New England.

I have been led to make these introductory remarks on account of a manuscript recently given to the Library by Mrs. William B. Rogers, eldest daughter and sole surviving child of Mr. James Savage, who was for more than sixty years a member of this Society and for fourteen years its President. It consists of an extract from a letter written by her uncle William Savage to her father, dated at Havana, December 31, 1818, giving an account of the capture by pirates of the ship *Emma Sophia*, off the Florida coast, of which vessel he was supercargo. Since the receipt of the paper from Mrs. Rogers I have found in the "Boston Daily Advertiser," February 3, 1819, a fuller version of the letter; and for that reason I here follow the copy as given in the newspaper. Anything that relates to Mr. Savage or his family will always be in order at these meetings. At the unveiling of his bust in this room, on April 12, 1906, Mr. Adams, the President, said that "with the single exception of Mr. Winthrop no member of the Society since its beginning has left upon it so deep and individual an impression" as Mr. Savage has.

The account appears on the second page of the Advertiser, under the heading of "Marine Journal," as follows:—

MEMORANDA.

 The vessel mentioned in yesterday's paper, as having been plundered off Florida, is the Hamburg ship *Emma Sophia*, Capt. Frahm — the supercargo is Mr. William Savage, of this town. It is stated in the Charleston papers that she is insured at Lloyd's.

We have been favoured with the following extract, giving further particulars:

Extract of a letter from a gentleman of this town, supercargo of the ship Emma Sophia, dated Havana, 31st Dec. 1818.

On Saturday 19th inst. between the Bahama Bank and Key Sal Bank we were boarded and taken possession of by a small schr. of about 30 tons, having one gun mounted on a pivot and 30 men. She manned us with twelve men, Spaniards, French, Germans and Americans, and carried us towards the Florida coast. Being arrived on the coast nearly opposite to Havana, the privateer went in shore to reconnoitre, and our ship lay off and on. Next morning she returned with two small vessels, a schooner and sloop. We then all four steered over the reef towards the small islands, and on Tuesday afternoon were brought to anchor in a little harbour formed by the Florida isles and the Martyr's Reef, as snug a hole as buccaniers would wish. They had seen no papers, but those of the ship and the Manifest, but the latter was enough, and they asked not for invoices or bills of lading. As soon as we anchored, they threw off our boats, took off the hatches and began to plunder the cargo. They loaded their two small vessels and another that came in next morning, besides taking our valuables on board the privateer. Having filled their vessels with linens and nankins, we had still many left, for our ship was full when we sailed from Hamburg. Till Wednesday noon, our cabin had been respected, but then they came below and took packages of laces, gold watches from the trunks and other valuable goods. Every man had a knife about a foot long, which they brandished, swearing they would have money or something more valuable, that was concealed, or they would kill every soul of us, and they particularly threatened me. I appealed to their captain, told him I was in fear of my life, and went with him on board his privateer. He said he had no command, the crew would do as they pleased, that I need entertain no fear of my life, but had better tell at once if any thing was concealed. I told him there was not. After my return to the ship towards night, the pirates left us for the first time, and we hoped they had done with us. But next morning another sch'r and sloop appeared in the offing, and the privateer and one of the loaded sloops went out to meet them. They all returned together, the privateer anchored, and a boat's crew came towards us. I attempted to go on board the privateer to see her captain, but was ordered back, When they came on board, they said they had come to find where the gold &c. was, and that if we would not tell, they would hang every man of us and burn the ship. Davis, the spokesman, drew his knife and swore, that every man should die, unless he found the money, and first he

would hang the supercargo. He called for a rope, which he had brought on board, fitted with a hangman's noose, sent a man up to the mizen yard and rove it and brought the nook down — and one man held it, and another stood ready to hoist. Now, said Davis, tell me where is the money, where are your diamonds, or I will hang you this minute. In vain I repeated I had nothing more but my watch, which I offered and he refused. — Once more, said he, will you tell? I have nothing to tell, said I. On with the rope, said the villain, and hoist away. The fellow with the noose came towards me, and I sprang overboard. They took me up, after some time, apparently insensible. They took off all my cloaths, and laid me on my back on deck, naked as I was born, except having a blanket thrown over me. Here I laid five hours without moving hand or foot. Meanwhile they robbed us of every thing of the least value. Against me they seemed to have a particular spite, stealing even the ring from my finger, and all my cloaths from my trunks which they sent on board the privateer.

At night they left us, but returned once or twice, for a few minutes, to see how I was. That night the privateer, with two or three of her convoy went to sea, and next morning, Christmas day, we got under way. — Having taken good notice of the courses steered in coming in, and keeping the lead constantly going, we found our way out to *blue water* without much difficulty, and next morning, 26th, arrived without further accident at Havana.

The privateer was, I think, fitted out from this island. The Captain is a Spaniard, a short man with a remarkable good face, that nobody would suspect to belong to such a gang. The Lieutenant is a Frenchman, a creole of St. Domingo, but called himself an Italian. The man they called Davis, who ordered me to be hanged, is the pilot or sailing master, and their boarding officer. He is an American, belongs to New-York, and was the worst man on board. He is a good looking fellow, something perhaps over the middle size, but the most brutal rascal I ever met. There was another American on board, only a common hand, being a drunkard. — Two negroes are all the residue of the gentlemen with whom I had much acquaintance.

The goods taken from us were upwards of fifty thousand dollars worth, and I have no doubt are landed on the coast of this Island. The neighborhood of Cuba will be troubled waters until our government shall seriously determine to put down this system of piracy.

Akin to this subject it may be proper to record an incident which many years ago concerned myself, and might have been tragical in its result. In the month of February, 1854, it fell

to my lot to sail out of Boston harbor for Malta, aboard the bark *Sylph*, of Liverpool, Nova Scotia. At that period vessels sailing under the English flag were known in this country as *lime-juicers*, so called because in the British navy the consumption of lime or lemon juice was enforced as an anti-scorbutic remedy. The only other passenger beside myself was Gen. William A. Aiken, now of Norwich, Connecticut. The vessel was in command of Captain Roberts, of Liverpool; and the first officer was Mr. Hicks, and the second officer, Mr. Wharton. According to my recollection there were eight in the fore-castle, which number, together with the cook and steward, made up a complement of fourteen persons, all told, aboard the bark. The cook and steward were represented by a single person of African descent, who prided himself both on his hair and his cooking, as well as on his brotherly kinship to the self-styled rival of Jenny Lind, who was then called the "Black Swan" (Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield), a singer, well-known in her day. His hair deserves a word of special note, as it was sometimes closely associated with his cooking, inasmuch as its elaborate dressing was done before a glass hanging just beside a stove in the cook's galley. He generally kept his long wool tightly furled in numerous curling papers that stood out from his head like spikes. On great occasions, such as Sundays and wonderful deliverances from storms, he used to unfurl his kinky locks which seemed ample enough then to fill a bushel basket.

After a delay of a week or ten days in the harbor, owing to head winds or inclement weather we set sail; and I remember well that the pilot, Fowler by name, as he was about to leave the vessel, throwing his leg over the bulwarks, said in his gruff voice to our skipper, "I will give you twenty-eight days to the Straits."

There is little to write about the trip on the Atlantic side of the voyage more than it was very monotonous, so much so that both Aiken and myself for some slight relief used occasionally to help the captain "take the sun" at noon, and in this way we both became more or less expert in navigation. It was also interesting to watch the sailors in their various duties and pleasures; and from them we learned to splice ropes and to tie fancy knots. We learned, too, the words of command in proper sequence, as given by the captain, when he ordered

the men to tack ship or to wear ship, all which was of great interest to us. Occasionally in good weather we used to take our trick at the wheel in order to break the monotony of the voyage. Sometimes we would catch a porpoise, of which the liver would give us a taste of fresh meat and remind us of home. Off Cape Trafalgar we sailed over the waters which floated the English fleet when Nelson fought his famous fight. I recollect the first glimpse we had of Cape Spartel, a point of land in the northwest corner of the African continent, overlooking the Straits, which we made early in the morning of March 16, my birthday. With a head-wind it took two days to beat into the Mediterranean, where we had many calms and much bad weather. At one time we came near being wrecked in a gale off Cape de Gato on the southern coast of Spain, but generally we were cruising along the north coast of Africa, within a few leagues of land, as our sailing course was dependent upon the wind. At times we could see buildings and villages on the shore, and then would sink them behind as we sailed away.

The incident to which I have already alluded, occurred in the latter part of March, off Cape Tres Forcas on the Barbary Coast. One afternoon, as we were sailing along at low speed with little wind, two or three leagues from land, we spied two lateen-rigged feluccas, apparently following us, which at first sight attracted but little attention. Captain Roberts soon became suspicious of their movements and watched them closely, as they were gaining on us. We were going hardly more than two or three knots an hour, having little more than steering way, but they spreading much sail were faster. The captain soon gave orders to have an inventory taken of the firearms on board that could be used in case of need, but these were found to be few in number and in poor condition. The cook was ordered to heat as much boiling water as his small galley would allow, to be ready to repel any attempt to board the vessel. There was great excitement on the bark, and we fully expected to be attacked, but fortunately for us

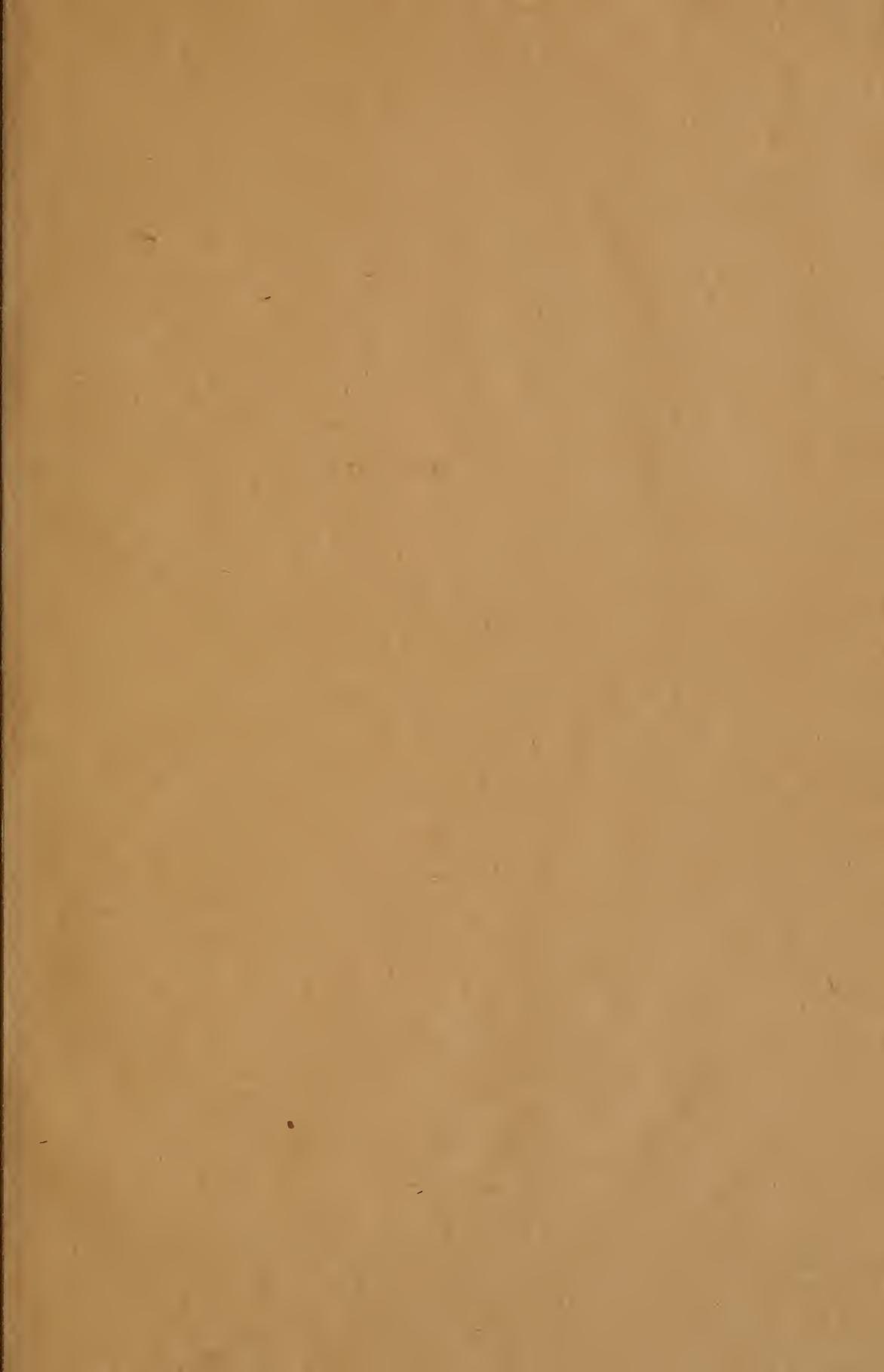
The shades of night were falling fast,

and soon the sun went down. We then changed our course a point or two and threw a sail over the binnacle light so that the

suspected pirates could not follow us; and thus we escaped what might have been a tragedy.

After our arrival at Malta we learned that three vessels had been taken by the Riff pirates, as they were called, near the time when we were threatened, and near the same point of land. Without doubt the captors belonged to the same crew as those that followed us. We were on the Mediterranean Sea at the time when the Crimean War broke out, England having declared war on March 28. This new condition of public affairs caused great confusion in the movement of steamers and in transportation generally, as steamships were much needed for military purposes; on which account my stay at Malta was somewhat prolonged. During this time I saw a good deal of the American consul, Mr. William Winthrop, who was a kinsman of our former President, Mr. Winthrop, and at a later period a Corresponding Member of this Society. At the regular monthly meeting held on November 8, 1882, Mr. Robert C. Winthrop, Jr., paid a handsome tribute to the consul, on the occasion of the Society's receiving a liberal bequest from him. He ended his remarks by saying of him: "He took a pride, however, in being a Corresponding Member, — the only one in nearly a century who, so far as I am aware, ever left the Society a dollar, and I much fear that, in this respect, he is likely long to remain unique."





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