



The Shellback's Progress

Walter Runciman Senior

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When the snow cloud rushed past in the hurricane, the crew were both surprised and cheered to observe a barque a little on the starboard bow, heading north under two close-reefed topsails. She was low in the water, and making heavy weather of it. The crew were seen in the mizen rigging, frantically waving. A tattered flag was flying beside them, but its nationality could not be discerned. It was impossible to render the assistance that was so eagerly sought for, but even if it had been possible it was too late, for a sea was seen to break right over her stern . . . and in a few minutes there was another added to the long list of North Atlantic tragedies.

Complete with foul weather, shipwrecks and piracy, life on the seas at the end of the nineteenth century is the subject of these keenly observed tales, written by an experienced British sailor.

"I have tried to portray the men as they were -- brave, dauntless, rugged, uncouth, illiterate, simple-minded, kind-hearted, and, at times, unmercifully savage," writes author James Runciman. "And yet there shined through all these conflictingly peculiar eccentricities a humorous kind of religion which belonged exclusively to themselves -- but which gave their characteristics a touch of sublimity."

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