

HILAIRE BELLOC



Hills and the Sea

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THE BIG NEST

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TOKYO · SYDNEY · CAPE TOWN · AUCKLAND · BEIJING

New Edition

Published by The Big Nest
www.thebignest.co.uk

This Edition first published in 2016

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ISBN: 9781911535669

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DEDICATION

TO
THE OTHER MAN
MR PHILIP KERSHAW

There were once two men. They were men of might and breeding. They were young, they were intolerant, they were hale. Were there for humans as there is for dogs a tribunal to determine excellence; were there judges of anthropoidal points and juries to, give prizes for manly race, vigour, and the rest, undoubtedly these two men would have gained the gold and the pewter medals. They were men absolute.

They loved each other like brothers, yet they quarrelled like Socialists. They loved each other because they had in common the bond of mankind; they quarrelled because they differed upon nearly all other things. The one was of the Faith, the other most certainly was not. The one sang loudly, the other sweetly. The one was stronger, the other more cunning. The one rode horses with a long stirrup, the other with a short. The one was indifferent to danger, the other forced himself at it. The one could write verse, the other was quite incapable thereof. The one could read and quote Theocritus, the other read and quoted himself alone. The high gods had given to one judgment, to the other valour; but to both that measure of misfortune which is their Gift to those whom they cherish.

From this last proceeded in them both a great knowledge of truth and a defence of it, to the tedium of their friends: a demotion to the beauty of women and of this world; an outspoken

hatred of certain things and men, and, alas! a permanent sadness also. All these things the gods gave them in the day when the decision was taken upon Olympus that these two men should not profit by any great good except Friendship, and that all their lives through Necessity should jerk her bit between their teeth, and even at moments goad their honour.

The high gods, which are names only to the multitude, visited these men. Dionysus came to them with all his company once, at dawn, upon the Surrey hills, and drove them in his car from a suburb whose name I forget right out into the Weald. Pallas Athene taught them by word of mouth, and the Cytherean was their rosy, warm, unfailing friend. Apollo loved them. He bestowed upon them, under his own hand the power not only of remembering all songs, but even of composing light airs of their own; and Pan, who is hairy by nature and a lurking fellow afraid of others, was reconciled to their easy comradeship, and would accompany them into the mountains when they were remote from mankind. Upon these occasions he revealed to them the life of trees and the spirits that haunt the cataracts, so that they heard voices calling where no one else had ever heard them, and that they saw stones turned into animals and men.

Many things came to them in common. Once in the Hills, a thousand miles from home, when they had not seen men for a very long time, Dalua touched them with his wing, and they went mad for the space of thirty hours. It was by a stream in a profound gorge at evening and under a fretful moon. The next morning they lustrated themselves with water, and immediately they were healed.

At another time they took a rotten old leaky boat they were poor and could afford no other—they took, I say, a rotten old leaky boat whose tiller was loose and whose sails mouldy, and whose blocks were jammed and creaking, and whose rigging frayed, and they boldly set out together into the great North Sea.

It blew a capful, it blew half a gale, it blew a gale: little they cared, these sons of Ares, these cousins of the broad daylight! There were no men on earth save these two who would not have

got her under a trysail and a rag of a storm-jib with fifteen reefs and another: not so the heroes. Not a stitch would they take in. They carried all her canvas, and cried out to the north-east wind: "We know her better than you! She'll carry away before she capsizes, and she'll burst long before she'll carry away." So they ran before it largely till the bows were pressed right under, and it was no human posser that saved the gybe. They went tearing and foaming before it, singing a Saga as befitted the place and time. For it was their habit to sing in every place its proper song—in Italy a Ritornella, in Spain a Segeduilla, in Provence a Pastourou, in Sussex a Glee, but an the great North Sea a Saga. And they rolled at last into Orford Haven on the very tiptop of the highest tide that ever has run since the Noachic Deluge; and even so, as they crossed the bar they heard the grating of the keel. That night they sacrificed oysters to Poseidon.

And when they slept the Sea Lady, the silver-footed one, came up through the waves and kissed them in their sleep; for she had seen no such men since Achilles. Then she went back through the waves with all her Nereids around her to where her throne is, beside her old father in the depths of the sea.

In their errantry they did great good. It was they that rescued Andromeda, though she lied, as a woman will, and gave the praise to her lover. It was they, also, who slew the Tarasque on his second appearance, when he came in a thunderstorm across the broad bridge of Beaucaire, all scaled in crimson and gold, forty foot long and twenty foot high, galloping like an angry dog and belching forth flames and smoke. They also hunted down the Bactrian Bear, who had claws like the horns of a cow, and of whom it is written in the Sacred Books of the East that:

A Bear out of Bactria came,
And he wandered all over the world,
And his eyes were aglint and aflame,
And the tip of his caudal was curled.

Oh! they hunted him down and they cut him up, and they cured one of his hams and ate it, thereby acquiring something of his mighty spirit.... And they it was who caught the great Devil of Dax and tied him up and swunged him with an ash-plant till

he swore that he would haunt the woods no more.

And here it is that you ask me for their names. Their names! Their names? Why, they gave themselves a hundred names: now this, now that, but always names of power. Thus upon that great march of theirs from Gascony into Navarre, one, on the crest of the mountains, cut himself a huge staff and cried loudly:

“My name is URSUS, and this is my staff DREADNOUGHT: let the people in the Valley be afraid!”

Whereat the other cut himself a yet huger staff, and cried out in a yet louder voice:

“My name is TAURUS, and this is my staff CRACK-SKULL: let them tremble who live in the Dales!”

And when they had said this they strode shouting down the mountain-side and conquered the town of Elizondo, where they are worshipped as gods to this day. Their names? They gave themselves a hundred names!

“Well, well,” you say to me then, “no matter about the names: what are names? The men themselves concern me!... Tell me,” you go on, “tell me where I am to find them in the flesh, and converse with them. I am in haste to see them with my own eyes.”

It is useless to ask. They are dead. They will never again be heard upon the heaths at morning singing their happy songs: they will never more drink with their peers in the deep inglenooks of home. They are perished. They have disappeared. Alas! The valiant fellows!

But lest some list of their proud deeds and notable excursions should be lost on earth, and turn perhaps into legend, or what is worse, fade away unrecorded, this book has been got together; in which will be found now a sight they saw together, and now a sight one saw by himself, and now a sight seen only by the other. As also certain thoughts and admirations which the second or the first enjoyed, or both together: and indeed many

other towns, seas, places, mountains, rivers, and men—what-ever could be crammed between the covers.

And there is an end of it.

Many of these pages have appeared in the “Speaker,” the “Pilot,” the “Morning Post,” the “Daily News,” the “Pall Mall Magazine,” the “Evening Standard,” the “Morning Leader,” and the “Westminster Gazette.”

THE NORTH SEA

It was on or about a Tuesday (I speak without boasting) that my companion and I crept in by darkness to the unpleasant harbour of Lowestoft. And I say “unpleasant” because, however charming for the large Colonial yacht, it is the very devil for the little English craft that tries to lie there. Great boats are moored in the Southern Basin, each with two head ropes to a buoy, so that the front of them makes a kind of entanglement such as is used to defend the front of a position in warfare. Through this entanglement you are told to creep as best you can, and if you cannot (who could?) a man comes off in a boat and moors you, not head and stern, but, as it were, criss-cross, or slant-ways, so that you are really foul of the next berth alongside, and that in our case was a little steamer.

Then when you protest that there may be a collision at mid-night, the man in the boat says merrily, “Oh, the wind will keep you off,” as though winds never changed or dropped.

I should like to see moorings done that way, at Cowes, say, or in Southampton Water. I should like to see a lot of craft laid head and tail to the wind with a yard between each, and, when Lord Isaacs protested, I should like to hear the harbour man say in a distant voice, “*Sic volo, sic jubeo*” (a classical quotation misquoted, as in the South-country way), “the wind never changes here.”

Such as it was, there it was, and trusting in the wind and

God's providence we lay criss-cross in Lowestoft South Basin. The Great Bear shuffled round the pole and streaks of wispy clouds lay out in heaven.

The next morning there was a jolly great breeze from the East, and my companion said, "Let us put out to sea." But before I go further, let me explain to you and to the whole world what vast courage and meaning underlay these simple words. In what were we to put to sea?

This little boat was but twenty-five feet over all. She had lived since 1864 in inland waters, mousing about rivers, and lying comfortably in mudbanks. She had a sprit seventeen foot out-board, and I appeal to the Trinity Brothers to explain what that means; a sprit dangerous and horrible where there are waves; a sprit that will catch every sea and wet the foot of your jib in the best of weathers; a sprit that weighs down already overweighted bows and buries them with every plunge. Quid dicam? A Sprit of Erebus. And why had the boat such a sprit? Because her mast was so far aft, her forefoot so deep and narrow, her helm so insufficient, that but for this gigantic sprit she would never come round, and even as it was she hung in stays and had to have her weather jib-sheet hauled in for about five minutes before she would come round. So much for the sprit.

This is not all, nor nearly all. She had about six inches of free-board. She did not rise at the bows: not she! Her mast was dependent upon a forestay (spliced) and was not stepped, but worked in a tabernacle. She was a hundred and two years old. Her counter was all but awash. Her helm—I will describe her helm. It wagged back and forth without effect unless you jerked it suddenly over. Then it "bit," as it were, into the rudder post, and she just felt it—but only just—the ronyon!

She did not reef as you and I do by sane reefing points, but in a gimcrack fashion with a long lace, so that it took half an hour to take in sail. She had not a jib and foresail, but just one big headsail as high as the peak, and if one wanted to shorten sail after the enormous labour of reefing the mainsail (which no man could do alone) one had to change jibs forward and put up

a storm sail—under which (by the way) she was harder to put round than ever.

Did she leak? No, I think not. It is a pious opinion. I think she was tight under the composition, but above that and between wind and water she positively showed daylight. She was a basket. Glory be to God that such a boat should swim at all!

But she drew little water? The devil she did! There was a legend in the yard where she was built that she drew five feet four, but on a close examination of her (on the third time she was wrecked), I calculated with my companion that she drew little if anything under six feet. All this I say knowing well that I shall soon put her up for sale; but that is neither here nor there. I shall not divulge her name.

So we put to sea, intending to run to Harwich. There was a strong flood down the coast, and the wind was to the north of north-east. But the wind was with the tide—to that you owe the lives of the two men and the lesson of this delightful story; for had the tide been against the wind and the water steep and mutinous, you would never have seen either of us again: indeed we should have trembled out of sight for ever.

The wind was with the tide, and in a following lump of a sea, without combers and with a rising glass, we valorously set out, and, missing the South Pier by four inches, we occupied the deep.

For one short half-hour things went more or less well. I noted a white horse or two to windward, but my companion said it was only the sea breaking over the outer sands. She plunged a lot, but I flattered myself she was carrying Caesar, and thought it no great harm. We had started without food, meaning to cook a breakfast when we were well outside: but men's plans are on the knees of the gods. The god called Æolus, that blows from the north-east of the world (you may see him on old maps—it is a pity they don't put him on the modern), said to his friends: "I see a little boat. It is long since I sank one"; and altogether they gave chase, like Imperialists, to destroy what was infinitely weak.

I looked to windward and saw the sea tumbling, and a great number of white waves. My heart was still so high that I gave them the names of the waves in the eighteenth Iliad: The long-haired wave, the graceful wave, the wave that breaks on an island a long way off, the sandy wave, the wave before us, the wave that brings good tidings. But they were in no mood for poetry. They began to be great, angry, roaring waves, like the chiefs of charging clans, and though I tried to keep up my courage with an excellent song by Mr. Newbolt, "Slung between the round shot in Nombre Dios Bay," I soon found it useless, and pinned my soul to the tiller. Every sea following caught my helm and battered it. I hung on like a stout gentleman, and prayed to the seven gods of the land. My companion said things were no worse than when we started. God forgive him the courageous lie. The wind and the sea rose.

It was about opposite Southwold that the danger became intolerable, and that I thought it could only end one way. Which way? The way out, my honest Jingo, which you are more afraid of than of anything else in the world. We ran before it; we were already over-canvased, and she buried her nose every time, so that I feared I should next be cold in the water, seeing England from the top of a wave. Every time she rose the jib let out a hundredweight of sea-water; the sprit buckled and cracked, and I looked at the splice in the forestay to see if it yet held. I looked a thousand times, and a thousand times the honest splice that I had poked together in a pleasant shelter under Bungay Woods (in the old times of peace, before ever the sons of the Achæians came to the land) stood the strain. The sea roared over the fore-peak, and gurgled out of the scuppers, and still we held on. Till (Æolus blowing much more loudly, and, what you may think a lie, singing through the rigging, though we were before the wind) opposite Aldeburgh I thought she could not bear it any more.

I turned to my companion and said: "Let us drive her for the shore and have done with it; she cannot live in this. We will jump when she touches." But he, having a chest of oak, and being bound three times with brass, said: "Drive her through it.

It is not often we have such a fair-wind." With these words he went below; I hung on for Orfordness. The people on the strand at Aldeburgh saw us. An old man desired to put out in a boat to our aid. He danced with fear. The scene still stands in their hollow minds.

As Orfordness came near, the seas that had hitherto followed like giants in battle now took to a mad scrimmage. They leapt pyramidically, they heaved up horribly under her; she hardly obeyed her helm, and even in that gale her canvas flapped in the troughs. Then in despair I prayed to the boat itself (since nothing else could hear me), "Oh, Boat," for so I was taught the vocative, "bear me safe round this corner, and I will scatter wine over your decks." She heard me and rounded the point, and so terrified was I that (believe me if you will) I had not even the soul to remember how ridiculous and laughable it was that sailors should call this Cape of Storms "the Onion."

Once round it, for some reason I will not explain, but that I believe connected with my prayer, the sea grew tolerable. It still came on to the land (we could sail with the wind starboard), and the wind blew harder yet; but we ran before it more easily, because the water was less steep. We were racing down the long drear shingle bank of Oxford, past what they call "the life-boat house" on the chart (there is no life-boat there, nor ever was), past the look-out of the coastguard, till we saw white water breaking on the bar of the Alde.

Then I said to my companion, "There are, I know, two mouths to this harbour, a northern and a southern; which shall we take?" But he said, "Take the nearest."

I then, reciting my firm beliefs and remembering my religion, ran for the white water. Before I knew well that she was round, the sea was yellow like a pond, the waves no longer heaved, but raced and broke as they do upon a beach. One greener, kindly and roaring, a messenger of the gale grown friendly after its play with us, took us up on its crest and ran us into the deep and calm beyond the bar, but as we crossed, the gravel ground beneath our keel. So the boat made harbour. Then, without hesitation,

she cast herself upon the mud, and I, sitting at the tiller, my companion ashore, and pushing at her inordinate sprit, but both revelling in safety, we gave thanks and praise. That night we scattered her decks with wine as I had promised, and lay easy in deep water within.

But which of you who talk so loudly about the island race and the command of the sea have had such a day? I say to you all it does not make one boastful, but fills one with humility and right vision. Go out some day and run before it in a gale. You will talk less and think more; I dislike the memory of your faces. I have written for your correction. Read less, good people, and sail more; and, above all, leave us in peace.

THE SINGER

The other day as I was taking my pleasure along a river called "The River of Gold," from which one can faintly see the enormous mountains which shut off Spain from Europe, as I walked, I say, along the Mail, or ordered and planted quay of the town, I heard, a long way off, a man singing. His singing was of that very deep and vibrating kind which Gascons take for natural singing, and which makes one think of hollow metal and of well-tuned bells, for it sounds through the air in waves; the further it is the more it booms, and it occupies the whole place in which it rises. There is no other singing like it in the world. He was too far off for any words to be heard, and I confess I was too occupied in listening to the sound of the music to turn round at first and notice who it was that sang; but as he gradually approached between the houses towards the river upon that happy summer morning, I left the sight of the houses, and myself sauntered nearer to him to learn more about him and his song.

I saw a man of fifty or thereabouts, not a mountaineer, but a man of the plains—tall and square, large and full of travel. His face was brown like chestnut wood, his eyes were grey but ardent; his brows were fierce, strong, and of the colour of shining metal, half-way between iron and silver. He bore himself as though he were still well able to wrestle with younger men in

the fairs, and his step, though extremely slow (for he was intent upon his song), was determined as it was deliberate. I came yet nearer and saw that he carried a few pots and pans and also a kind of kit in a bag: in his right hand was a long and polished staff of ashwood, shod with iron; and still as he went he sang. The song now rose nearer me and more loud, and at last I could distinguish the words, which, were, in English, these:

“Men that cook in copper know well how difficult is the cleaning of copper. All cooking is a double labour unless the copper is properly tinned.”

This couplet rhymed well in the tongue he used, which was not Languedoc nor even Béarnais, but ordinary French of the north, well chosen, rhythmical, and sure. When he had sung this couplet once, glancing, as he sang it, nobly upwards to the left and the right at the people in their houses, he paused a little, set down his kit and his pots and his pans, and leant upon his stick to rest. A man in white clothes with a white square cap on his head ran out of a neighbouring door and gave him a saucepan, which he accepted with a solemn salute, and then, as though invigorated by such good fortune, he lifted his burdens again and made a dignified progress of some few steps forward, nearer to the place in which I stood. He halted again and resumed his song.

It had a quality in it which savoured at once of the pathetic and of the steadfast: its few notes recalled to me those classical themes which conceal something of dreadful fate and of necessity, but are yet instinct with dignity and with the majestic purpose of the human will, and Athens would have envied such a song. The words were these:

“All kinds of game, Izard, Quails, and Wild Pigeon, are best roasted upon a spit; but what spit is so clean and fresh as a spit that has been newly tinned?”

When he had sung this verse by way of challenge to the world, he halted once more and mopped his face with a great handkerchief, waiting, perhaps, for a spit to be brought; but none came.

The spits of the town were new, and though the people loved his singing, yet they were of too active and sensible a kind to waste pence for nothing. When he saw that spits were not forthcoming he lifted up his kit again and changed his subject just by so pinch as might attract another sort of need. He sang—but now more violently, and as though with a worthy protest:

Le lièvre et le lapin,
Quand c'est bien cuit, ça fait du bien.

That is: "Hare and rabbit, properly cooked, do one great good," and then added after the necessary pause and with a gesture half of offering and half of disdain: "But who can call them well cooked if the tinning of the pot has been neglected?" And into this last phrase he added notes which hinted of sadness and of disillusion. It was very fine.

As he was now quite near me and ready, through the slackness of trade, to enter into a conversation, I came quite close and said to him, "I wish you good day," to which he answered, "And I to you and the company," though there was no company.

Then I said, "You sing and so advertise your trade?"

He answered, "I do. It lifts the heart, it shortens the way, it attracts the attention of the citizens, it guarantees good work."

"In what way," said I, "does it guarantee good work?"

"The man," he answered, "who sings loudly, clearly, and well, is a man in good health. He is master of himself. He is strict and well-managed. When people hear him they say, 'Here is a prompt, ready, and serviceable man. He is not afraid. There is no rudeness in him. He is urbane, swift, and to the point. There is method in this fellow.' All these things may be in the man who does not sing, but singing makes them apparent. Therefore in our trade we sing."

"But there must be some," I said, "who do not sing and who yet are good tanners."

At this he gave a little shrug of his shoulders and spread down his hands slightly but imperatively. "There are such," said he. "They are even numerous. But while they get less trade they are also less happy men. For I would have you note (saving your respect and that of the company) that this singing has a quality. It does good within as well as without. It pleases the singer in his very self as well as brings him work and clients."

Then I said, "You are right, and I wish to God I had something to tin; let me however tell you something in place of the trade I cannot offer you. All things are trine, as you have heard" (here he nodded), "and your singing does, therefore, not a double but a triple good. For it gives you pleasure within, it brings in trade and content from others, and it delights the world around you. It is an admirable thing."

When he heard this he was very pleased. He took off his enormous hat, which was of straw and as big as a wheel, and said, "Sir, to the next meeting!" and went off singing with a happier and more triumphant note, "Carrots, onions, lentils, and beans, depend upon the tinner for their worth to mankind."

ON "MAILS"

A "Mail" is a place set with trees in regular order so as to form alleys; sand and gravel are laid on the earth beneath the trees; masonry of great solidity, grey, and exquisitely worked, surrounds the whole except on one side, where strong stone pillars carry heavy chains across the entrance. A "Mail" takes about two hundred years to mature, remains in perfection for about a hundred more, and then, for all I know, begins to go off. But neither the exact moment at which it fails nor the length of its decline is yet fixed, for all "Mails" date from the seventeenth century at earliest, and the time when most were constructed was that of Charles II's youth and Louis XIV's maturity—or am I wrong? Were these two men not much of an age?

I am far from books; I am up in the Pyrenees. Let me consider dates and reconstruct my formula. I take it that Charles II

was more than a boy when Worcester was fought and when he drank that glass of ale at Hotighton, at the "George and Dragon" there, and crept along tinder the Downs to Bramber and so to Shoreham, where he took ship and was free. I take it, therefore, that when he came back in 1660 he must have been in the thirties, more or less, but how far in the thirties I dare not affirm.

Now, in 1659, the year before Charles II came back, Mazarin signed the treaty with Spain. At that time Louis XIV must have been quite a young man. Again, he died about thirty years after Charles II, and he was seventy something when he died.

I am increasingly certain that Charles II was older than Louis XIV.... I affirm it. I feel no hesitation....

Lord! How dependent is mortal man upon books of reference! An editor or a minister of the Crown with books of reference at his elbow will seem more learned than Erasmus himself in the wilds. But let any man who reads this (and I am certain five out of six have books of reference by them as they read), I say, let any man who reads this ask himself whether he would rather be where he is, in London, on this August day (for it is August), or where I am, which is up in Los Altos, the very high Pyrenees, far from every sort of derivative and secondary thing and close to all things primary?

I will describe this place. It is a forest of beech and pine; it grows upon a mountain-side so steep that only here and there is there a ledge on which to camp. Great precipices of limestone diversify the wood and show through the trees, tall and white beyond them. One has to pick one's way very carefully along the steep from one night's camp to another, and often one spends whole hours seeking up and down to turn a face of rock one cannot cross.

It seems dead silent. There are few birds, and even at dawn one only hears a twittering here and there. Swirls of cloud form and pass beneath one in the gorge and hurry up the opposing face of the ravine; they add to this impression of silence: and the awful height of the pines and the utter remoteness from men