

Our "Seaworthy"

The view from shore.

The resolutely emphatic words "It was made clear to you when you bought her!" came spilling overboard before the man who spoke them could be seen. Not far behind the utterance the hat and face of the ship inspector materialized, as he headed for the top of the ramp that would take him off the ship. He was followed just half a stride behind by a red-faced captain-capped man in uniform, who stopped at the rail. The inspector, pausing only momentarily as he noticed the group milling before him onshore, redirected his address toward that throng, stopping a few steps down the gangway and concisely enunciating said "You were told when you bought her for a song that the hull needed special care or she'd only be good for 30 years." He had been on board inspecting the lower rowing deck and the inner hull of the gleaming wooden galley "Seaworthy II." Spreading his footing in that way seafarers do to be ready for any lurch in the ship, there partway between the ship and the shore, he assessed their reaction without venturing far enough down to be face to face and thus toe to toe. A bit more softly he proceeded to say "We did guarantee the oarlocks for the life of the ship, but her usefull life is ending soon. There's no point repairing them. Besides, they are worn out because clearly they've been overused and I suspect either the wrong lubricant has been used at some point or you allowed grit to accumulate in them."

Someone from the gathering churning at the base of the gangway growlingly frothed "What makes you say our beloved Seaworthy's life is ending soon?"

Scanning the gallery of faces seeking the one to address, he replied "As anyone can see from her, you've all re-varnished the outer hull and upper deck regularly, but what I saw inside no vessel deserves." At this moment the flesh around his eyes drew in towards the pupils and his eyebrows scrunched like caterpillars about to make a move. What remained visible of his eyes looked out at the crowd and his voice took on a plodding preciseness in pronunciation again. "At her deepest depth inside, her wood is slowly rotting from the stale bilge water you allowed to gather and slosh around inside! Had you cleared the bilge regularly you'd be good for 100 years still! Then it would be worth repairing the oarlocks."

At that there was a change of rhythm to the proceedings, a freeze, a hesitation, like when 6 waves have arrived on shore in equal increments of

Our "Seaworthy"

The view from the rowers bench.

The cold, sharp words "It was made clear to you when you bought her!" came slicing from above before the man who ejected them could be seen. Not far behind the utterance the hat and ratty face of a ship inspector materialized, hastily making his way to the top of the ramp that would take him off the ship. He was followed just half a stride behind by an obviously flustered and embarrassed captain, who stopped at the rail. The inspector paused momentarily as if changing his mind about leaving the ship on seeing the group of us onshore, then began redirecting his words to'rd us, ship's people. He stopped a few steps down the gangway and saltily restated "You were told you when you bought her for a song that the hull needed special care or she'd only be good for 30 years." He'd been called onboard to inspect the rowing deck of our beloved ship "Seaworthy II." Later we'd learn he'd insisted on taking a further look around. He spread his feet apart in that arrogant way cocky know-it-all's have and from his position of elevated superiority he glared at us astonished recipients of his verdict for a moment before saying, "We did guarantee the oarlocks for the life of the ship, but her usefull life is ending soon. There's no point repairing them. Besides, they are worn out because clearly they've been overused and I suspect either the wrong lubricant has been used at some point or you allowed grit to accumulate in them."

Someone from among us at the base of the gangway had wits enough to challenge him "What makes you say our beloved Seaworthy's life is ending soon?"

Scanning us as if planning an escape route, he replied "As anyone can see from her, you've all re-varnished the outer hull and upper deck regularly, but what I saw inside no vessel deserves." At this moment a hostile, scowling look came over his entire face. It was a frightening change to see. Some thought he was about to charge into our midst with arms flailing at that point. His eyes looked piercingly and glaringly at us ordinary seafaring folk and his voice took on a distinctly threatening edge. "At her deepest depth inside, her wood is slowly rotting from the stale bilge water you allowed to gather and slosh around inside! Had you cleared the bilge regularly you'd be good for 100 years still! Then it would be worth repairing the oarlocks."

At that utterance there a stunned shockwave went through us. We were intimidated and frozen with fear and shock. No one knew what to say, nor

time, but the seventh takes longer and you wonder if it is coming.

Then, "Nonsense!" hollered a man who stood a head taller than the others, "You just don't want to honour your word in the guarantee you gave!"

The people had stood portrait-still until and as he spoke. When he finished there were affirming exhalations and nods and a communal shifting of body weight from one foot to the other in a jostling simultaneous-but-not-synchronized penguin waddle-dance.

"I'm telling you," said the inspector, still resolute, yet now with a resigned hint of caving to pressure as well "that those bottom staves are weak, you *must* do something about them soon, and very soon, or you will be meeting Davey Jones or your Maker out on the deep somewhere when you least expect it."

Then, without speaking another word and without more words coming back to him from the multitude, he completed his descent to shore and waded into the crowd, which parted just enough for him to not touch them as he passed through.

A murmur arose and gained force as the people turned to one another and grouped off and spontaneously began a gaggle of conversations with each other.

As this happened, the captain turned and disappeared.

Several long minutes later, someone raised his voice above the others, and as he began speaking he took a few backwards steps up the gangway to claim some eyes and a hearing. "People! People!" and then when the murmuring settled "Folks, a few of us have just decided that while the rest of us proceed on our journey we will leave our bespectacled bookmaster on shore to press our suit, to press our case that the shipseller *must* honour the guarantee of the oarlocks." There were assenting grunts as he continued. "Maybe the next time we berth here they will see that we will not let up and they'll replace the squeaking and rattling oarlocks."

A voice began to speak from out of the crowd and people around took a step away from that speaker as if he was suddenly on fire or contagious. "But what about the hull! He says its rotting! Will it be safe?"

The elevated man responded quickly to the objector, and said, with drama, flair, force and passion that made it clear he was convinced and was not to be disputed "To Hell with the hull! The Seaworthy II is just what her name says, and she has served us well for 30 years, and will do so for another 30. That inspector - who's in the pocket of and clearly acting at the behest of the slimy shipseller - thinks we will just roll over and accept his

dared anyone even move.

Then someone gathered some courage. "Nonsense" one of our taller men said firmly, "You just don't want to honour your word in the guarantee you gave!"

When he finished we knew he was right and many let it be known that they agreed with him. His solitary and outstanding courage gave us a release from fear so we dared move again, and we all began to relax a little, shifting our positions and breathing freely again.

"I'm telling you," the inspector retorted, steadfastly sticking to his story "that those bottom staves are weak, you *must* do something about them soon, and very soon, or you will be meeting Davey Jones or your Maker out on the deep somewhere when you least expect it."

When no further debate gave him opportunity to defend his job and employer further, without speaking another word, he completed his descent to shore and waded into the crowd, which let him pass. There was clearly no point arguing with him.

We all began conversing about what to do. We were a close-knit community that could count on some of the silvered heads to come up with a solution fast.

As this happened, the captain turned and disappeared.

Ten minutes later, someone raised his voice above the others, and as he began speaking he made sure he was standing where everyone could hear him clearly. "People! People!" and then, as people turned to their attention to him "Folks, a few of us have just decided that while the rest of us proceed on our journey we will leave our bespectacled bookmaster on shore to press our suit, to press our case that the shipseller *must* honour the guarantee of the oarlocks." People audibly indicated their assent. He continued, "Maybe the next time we berth here they will see that we will not let up and they'll replace the squeaking and rattling oarlocks."

Someone began to speak from among us and people around the man took a step away so he could be heard and seen. "But what about the hull! He says its rotting! Will it be safe?"

The man who had taken leadership responded with a conviction, force and passion that was admirable aside even from the sensibility of his words "To Hell with the hull! The Seaworthy II is just what her name says, and she has served us well for 30 years, and will do so for another 30. That inspector - who's in the pocket of and clearly acting at the behest of the slimy shipseller - thinks we will just roll over and accept his verdict. He's just scarin' us to avoid honourin' his company's guarantee and possibly to make a new sale! Take a fresh look at our

verdict. He's just scarin' us to avoid honourin' his company's guarantee and possibly to make a new sale! Take a fresh look at our faithful transporter, see our Seaworthy as she sits there, isn't she the sleekest, shiniest example of seaworthy woodcraft you have ever seen? Think of the source of her design, the history of her lineage, begun with Jean Cauvain's very own prototype! Folks, fellow travellers, I challenge any of you to bring anyone from the village over here to come and see our vessel and I assure you they will without hesitation agree to sail with us into the mild blue yonder. I challenge anyone here to take an awl and try punch a hole anywhere in this hull, Hell, take a hammer to 'er. If you can make a hole anywhere, *then* we'll talk about safety." He paused with one of those cocked and defiant pauses, poised and ready to pounce on anyone non-affirmingly breaking it.

When the extended silence made it clear his bully-bluster had worked, he scanned the crowd once more from side to side and declared "Now, let's get to finishin' the loadin' and cast off."

The objector however, gathered the arm of his wife and they determinedly headed inland, walking right past the waiting cargo that others began picking up and carrying aboard.

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When time came for the journey to resume, it was found that their Captain had taken a position on one of those new, large wave-action driven ships. This was a blow, as that Captain had been meticulous in his navigation calculations, in his vigilance over greasing the oarlocks, and had been popular with the rowers for his ability to come and chum with them as they leaned into their oars.

Word went out, and someone was found who had some education in navigation skills and who was looking for a change of pace and an adventure. He agreed to captain the ship for the next leg of her journey. All boarded the boat. And so the Seaworthy II, built thirty years prior by the company Jean Cauvain himself had founded centuries earlier, journeyed on. Thirty years ago she had been the cutting edge. Sleeker of shape than the boxy ships of her day, with her new way of arranging the rowers in a semi circle, her innovation in aligning the oars, Seaworthy II had been the talk of the serious sea-folk.

Once again the tethering ropes were cast off their posts, men and women manned the oars, and away they went, stroking in rhythm, singing the tunes that motivated them. The new captain sang along.

The new captain had a different approach to things than usual. He delegated others to grease the oarlocks and he only got involved if there were known problems with them not functioning. He had

faithful transporter, see our Seaworthy as she sits there, isn't she the sleekest, shiniest example of seaworthy woodcraft you have ever seen? Think of the source of her design, the history of her lineage, begun with Jean Cauvain's very own prototype! Folks, fellow travellers, I challenge any of you to bring anyone from the village over here to come and see our vessel and I assure you they will without hesitation agree to sail with us into the mild blue yonder. I challenge anyone here to take an awl and try punch a hole anywhere in this hull, Hell, take a hammer to 'er. If you can make a hole anywhere, *then* we'll talk about safety." He paused as one who knows they have spoken the truth well does, knowing how foolish it would be to dispute such sound reasoning.

Clearly everyone saw the truth in what he said, and after he had given ample time for anyone who disagreed to speak out, he declared "Now, let's get to finishin' the loadin' and cast off."

The objector however, no doubt overcome by his own superstitions and fears janked the arm of his wife and dragged her inland, leaving the rest of us to load the cargo.

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When time came for the journey to resume, it was discovered that the former Captain had bailed on us and had taken a position on one of an unproven experimental ship that it was believed could be powered by wave action. This was a bit of a blow, as that Captain had been doing a great job and had been deeply appreciated, particularly by the rowers among us..

We got the search word out, and found a son of a fisherman who had navigation skills and who said he was looking for a change of pace and an adventure away from the fishing, which wasn't good those days. He agreed to captain our ship for the next leg of her journey. Everyone boarded the boat. And so the majestic Seaworthy II, built 30 years prior based on innovations on the founder's centuries-old designs, journeyed on. She was still every bit as sleek and beautiful as she cut her way through the waters as the day she was launched and christened. She was home to us.

So, once again she set out to sea, with faithful men and women at the oars, stroking in rhythm, singing the age old and new tunes that motivated them to keep at their task. The new captain sang along, at first.

But this new captain proved to have a different approach to his job than any before. The first time people suspected trouble was when, shortly after leaving the harbour, he delegated others to grease the oarlocks. He said he'd only get involved if there were known problems with them or with the

less to do with the rowers than any previous captain. He did spend time with the others - the non rowers, and was good - at first - at bringing new people on board at ports. Aside from that he spent a lot of time exploring the ship, and a lot of time in his cabin, purportedly studying. He studied the charts very intensely, day in and day out. At night he could be found on deck gazing at the stars and just thinking. He would spend the time inbetween such tasks reading about modern design ideas in shipbuilding. He also spent time sniffing the wind, and sounding the depths when they were near shore. He certainly familiarized himself with every nook and cranny of the ship.

So it was that he found something that disturbed him. It began as a smell below deck that didn't seem right. His curiosity led to it being he who began to ask about the puddle of bilge sloshing around between the raised slat floor and the hull. It was he who found the trickle of seepage. It was he who saw the night watch going down when he thought he was unobserved and taking scoops of the sloshing bilgewater and tossing it overboard. It was he who could not get anyone to answer his questions whenever he asked about the effect of the stagnant water on the wooden hull. Repeatedly he was dismissed and rebuffed, until he got adamant one day.

But leading up to that, when he would inquire "Has the hull been checked for rot?" people would respond "Isn't it wonderful how hard the people are still rowing despite their years? Would you want to ruin their enjoyment by exaggerating concern about our Seaworthy's hull? Don't go overboard with this. Just do what we hired you for."

He would say "but the seepage is increasing! Any day, if there is rot, we could have a rupture!"

Yet few took him seriously. Most were hostile. Some did seem to agree. But they were not the rowers. They were the cleaners, and the lamplighters, and the freeloaders. There were also a few who had never learned rowing right so they'd been excused from that responsibility. They had been allowed to stay and assist with singing, or to just fill a seat and be conversational with the rowers.

Once, when they stopped in a small port, and new passengers approached the captain asking for passage, he found himself discouraging them. It was a shock to him to hear himself do this about the ship he was captaining.

* * *

operators.

Over time it became clear he preferred doing many things other than being among the rowers who enlisted him. The bulk of his non-navigational time was spent reading dreamily about modern design ideas in shipbuilding. He tried to get other people talking about those ideas, but no one really had an interest. Who needs dreams when life is going along swimmingly?

People also found it odd that he spent time sniffing the wind, and sounding the depths when they were near shore. At times folks would find him on deck at night gazing at the stars as if looking for a sign from the gods or something. We became convinced he was avoiding us rowers, and the more we observed him the more we saw it was true.

This captain was also often found scouting around the ship, examining every nook and cranny as if planning a place to hide for a game of hide and seek. Though odd, those behaviours were all tolerated by the boat's inhabitants, as the ship was still moving along, on course, and not running aground. There was some order to things. If it had stayed at that, the rowers would have continued to make do with such an unorthodox captain.

But then, a few weeks outbound, he really began to annoy people. He found what he seemed to have been looking for: some-thing to make a stink about. He claimed something didn't smell right in the very belly of the ship. He started asking questions, and trying to get people worked up about the bilgewater that had been there for years. He claimed he'd found a seepage. He was persistent about it. Folks didn't know how to handle such a difficult person, and so it was felt wise to just keep their distance, as in every conversation he seemed to have new questions and new attacks about the quality and seaworthiness of our great ship.

He got belligerent eventually. He would buttonhole people and inquire "Has the hull been checked for rot?" but of course people were deeply bothered by his negativity. The braver ones, who dared speak to him, would try to get him to be more positive instead of spewing negativity all the time. They'd demonstrate for him how it was done, saying "Isn't it wonderful how hard the people are still rowing despite their years? Isn't it clear they love this life, this journey, this ship?" and then they'd try nobly to convince him further "Would you want to ruin their enjoyment by exaggerating concern about our hull? Don't go overboard with this. Just do what we hired you for and everything will be fine. In fact your not doing what you were hired to is creating a huge disturbance on this ship."

When they tried to talk that kind of sense into him, he would get more intense, and would only

Then one otherwise fine sunny day at sea, it all got nasty. They had anchored near a heavily forested Island. Several of those who had expressed their sense of dis-ease to the new captain -- in fact some of them people he himself had brought on board -- chose to jump overboard and swim for the island and wait for another ship rather than continue with this one.

This created shortages of workers. Rowers would now have to switch off and do other duties. When they set out again, they had to set a slower pace.

The captain gathered the master rowers and said "This cannot continue. Something is terribly wrong. Can't you see our Seaworthy is not safe her current state. We must get to drydock and have her carefully inspected, repaired if necessary, and while we are at it we would do ourselves a favour to get a mast with a yard spar across it to hold a sail wide and catch the wind. We have fewer and fewer rowers who are also getting older an older. It is only wise to make use of God's own natural means to mobilize this ship."

He was astounded at the response. He was sternly reminded, first of all, that he had been hired to navigate, to set latitudinal and longitudinal direction, to give orders related to moving the ship ahead, to grease the oarlocks - which he was duly reprimanded for not doing himself in person - and to encourage the people, not cause fear.

He fell silent and retreated to his cabin, hoping and waiting for reality to sink in with the rowers before it sank them.

He was put off at the next port and the ship continued it's journey without a captain.

increase his verbal attacks saying unhelpful things like "but the seepage is increasing! Any day, if there is rot in the staves, we could have a rupture!"

Wisely, few of the leaders took him seriously. But eventually he did get to some of the helpers and some of them stayed behind in port or fled like rats across the ropes to a ship that had tied up alongside.

Once, in a small port restocking stop, someone overheard him discouraging new passengers from coming aboard. It was a shock to hear of one's own captain doing this. How did that help further the ship's journey? Seaworthy needed paying passengers or workers to be able to proceed on her journey.

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Then one otherwise fine sunny day, it all got really nasty. The ship was anchored near a heavily forested Island. Several of those who had begun whining in harmony with the Captain - a few of them even the younger rowers by now - chose to jump overboard and swim for the island and wait for another ship rather than continue with this one. That was nearly the last straw.

This of course created shortages of workers. Rowers would now have to switch off and do other duties. When she set out again, she had to set a slower pace. But her people were determined.

The captain demanded a meeting with the master rowers and there gave an ultimatum "This cannot continue. Something is terribly wrong. This ship is not seaworthy in its current state. We must get to drydock and have her carefully inspected, repaired if necessary, and while we are at it we would do ourselves a favour to get a mast with a yard spar across it to hold a sail wide and catch the wind. We have fewer and fewer rowers who are also getting older an older. It is only wise to make use of God's own naturally provided means to mobilize this ship. Something has to change." And he rambled on about wave power and solar power and other modern gobbledegook.

Well, that was it. The last straw. He was taken aside and most sternly reprimanded and reminded, first of all, that he had been hired merely to navigate, to set latitudinal and longitudinal direction, to give orders related to moving the ship ahead, to grease the oarlocks -- which he was again duly reprimanded for not doing himself in person -- and was made aware again of the fact he was hired to encourage the people in their rowing, certainly he was not hired not foment fear.

Then, of all things, he wouldn't respond. He wouldn't explain. He fell silent and retreated to his cabin and now won't come out. We will leave him on shore at the next port.

Name of author withheld so that:

- readers can focus on the stories and what they represent or say to them
- to avoid the danger of a 'narrow' application of the story

Name of author available privately to those who request it via comment by identifying themselves and giving an email address.

Reflection Questions:

As you read the stories what did you think they were about? What are they a fable of to you?

Is the story an accurate reflection of life?

How did you feel? Who did you sympathize with?

What if anything did you notice as you read through the second telling of the story? What was the same? What changed?

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