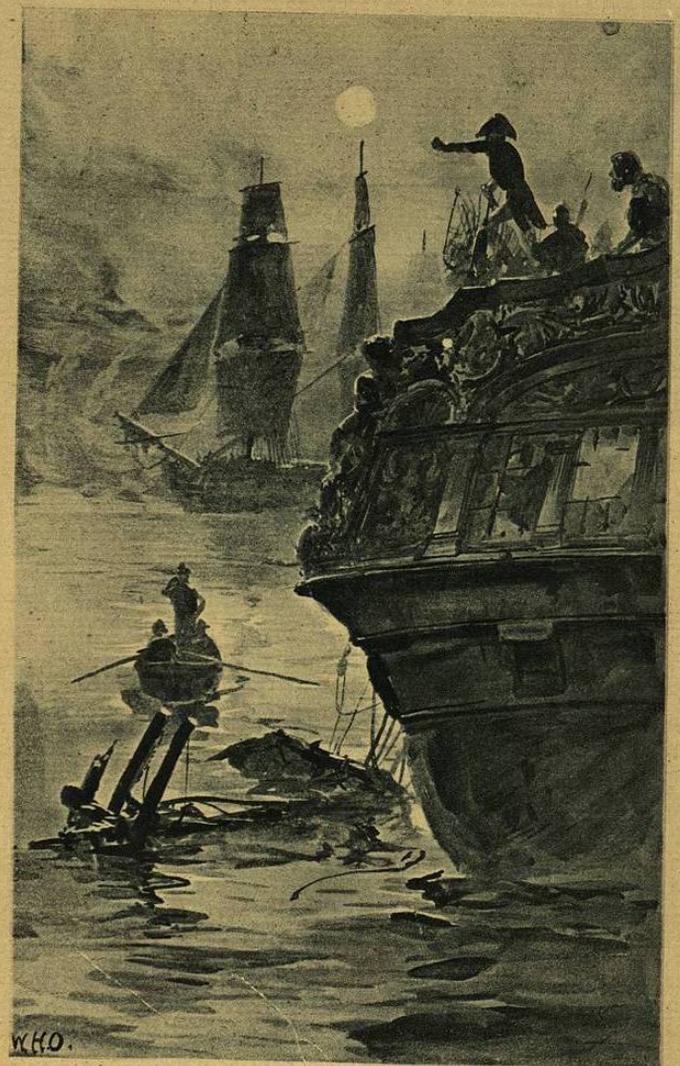
MR
MIDSHIPMAN
EASY

CAPT MARRYAT



Mr. Midshipman Easy

By Captain Frederick Marryat, 1792-1848

With Introduction by
W. L. Courtney, M. A., LL. D.

Dana Estes & Company
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INTRODUCTION

IT was a happy inspiration which led Captain Marryat to christen this brightest and most popular of all his novels "Mr. Midshipman Easy." There is a youthful gaiety in the very sound of the words that is assuredly not belied by the adventurous career of the ideal midshipman, a creation, it is true, of Marryat's own, but henceforth to figure gallantly in the pages of romance, and in more modern days to play his part on the boards of the burlesque stage. Jack Easy, "Equality Jack," is a hero of the masterful sort, as prone to fall into scrapes as Japhet of immortal memory, and certainly no less fertile in resources when his adventures appear likely to lead to disastrous results. He is the gallant adventurer about whose fate we have never the smallest uneasiness, being assured that, however overwhelming the odds, and however seemingly inevitable the imminent catastrophe, he will emerge smiling from the burning house or be tossed up scathless by the roaring billows. But Jack Easy is more than a mere hero of romance; he and his fortunes embody the robust comic spirit of the early Victorian age, and he is a true and lineal descendant of the Tom Joneses and Peregrine Pickles of a bygone time. More wonderful still, he is the exponent of an idea; for Captain Marryat is no longer content to be a mere spinner of seafaring yarns, he embarks lightheartedly upon the troubled waters of political controversy, and undertakes to re-fashion our ideas of liberty and equality with a few hints as to their practical application on the decks of a man-of-war. And the marvel is that he contrives to be didactic without for a moment being dull. To be sure we very soon forget the powder that lies beneath the jam. It is impossible to take Jack seriously—he comes into the world in so delightfully humorous a fashion. Fielding

or Dickens might have been proud to have written the introductory chapters, in which Mr. Nicodemus Easy, the champion of the equal rights of all men, gives way to Mrs. Easy, whilst asserting absolute authority over the name and future destiny of the long-delayed son and heir. The humour, too, of the excuse which the nurse offers for her misfortune to the righteous matron, "Please, ma'am, it was a very little one," if a little too broad to suit modern taste, is as unquenchable as the fun of Shakespeare's comedies or the sayings of the immortal Mrs. Gamp.

When once Jack is launched into the larger world, first of school and then of his Majesty's navy, equipped with a good heart, a full purse, and a head crammed with theories of absolute equality, it is certain that he will meet with as long a series of diverting adventures as did the renowned Don Quixote, his forerunner in the pursuit of impossible ideals. Take a reformer prepared to argue every point with the first comer, and put him down on the deck of a man-of-war, where discipline forbids the slightest hesitation in carrying out the most trifling order, and you will have the most delightful set of complications before your ship has crossed the Bay of Biscay. Man the vessel, too, with a crew of eccentrics culled from Captain Marryat's gallery of remembrance, and you may be certain that the fun will soon grow fast and furious. Such a crew had the *Harpy*, with her mathematical gunner; her irate boatswain preaching "duty before decency," until himself forced, by Jack's pranks, to come on board without his trousers; Mr. Pottyfar the lieutenant, with his universal medicine, and his inability to keep his hands out of his pockets; and Mr. Hawkins the chaplain, who cannot rid himself of the fighting impulses and swearing habits of an ex-naval officer. There are gentler touches here and there, such as the pathetic figure of the mate who cannot believe in the realisation of his long-deferred hopes of promotion, and dies in his incredulity. And there is even a love interest; but Jack Easy's love affairs interest us as little as do the sentimental parts in most of Charles Dickens's stories. Neither Dickens nor Marryat was intended to chronicle the gentler emotions; their genius lay in so portraying individual idiosyncrasies as to create enduring types. Marryat was also a writer of romance, and paid no further attention to the

delineation of his heroines than consisted in endowing them with peerless beauty, and permitting them to bestow their hand upon the gallant hero when victory crowned his efforts. Indeed, what more is required of a heroine of romance? She counts for very little where the whole interest is centred in the shivering of spears and the clash of sword-blades. If we are to have a tale brimful of fighting, replete from the first page to the last with the breathless adventure which hurries the hero from one gory encounter to another, there is not much room left for either the rights or the wrongs of the heroine. And if Jack Easy's adventures are not all of the high romantic order, they are sufficiently numerous and varied to divert all attention from the beauteous Donna Agnes.

The serious side of the book must not, however, be entirely overlooked. Marryat's ardour as a politician may perhaps have been no greater than his success, but one thing the rejected candidate for the Tower Hamlets division had greatly at heart, and that was the reform of his Majesty's navy. In his naval novels, as he tells us in Chapter xxi., he has often "pointed out the errors which have existed, and still do exist, in a service which is an honour to its country;" and he takes an innocent pride in the fact that My Lords of the Admiralty have not been above taking a lesson from the captain in "The King's Own," who, when requested to punish a man *instanter* for a fault committed, replies "that he never has and never will punish a man until twenty-four hours after the offence." More especially is Marryat concerned to correct that overbearing temper and inconsiderate behaviour too often characteristic of superior naval officers. Hence the introduction of the choleric Captain Tartar, and the duel in which he meets with so untimely a fate. Not that Marryat is disposed to waste much sentimental pity over the sacrifice of human life involved in such episodes. Men who sailed the high seas at the beginning of the century inevitably acquired a certain callousness in the face of bloodshed and violence, nowhere perhaps more strikingly instanced than in Chapter xviii. of the novel before us, where the two midshipmen make short work of the crew of the speronare. Moreover, if report speaks true, Captain Marryat himself was not averse from vindicating his honour by the ordeal of battle. It happened to the late Frederick Denison Maurice, the

most gentle and visionary of religious philosophers, in his youthful days to write a novel called "Eustace Conway," and to give to the villain of the story the name of Captain Marryatt. Imagine his astonishment when, one morning, he was confronted by two gentlemen bearing a challenge from the insulted captain. The soft answer returned may have turned away the wrath of the injured officer, but it can hardly have tended to soothe the wounded susceptibilities of the rising author. "Make my compliments to Captain Marryat," said Maurice, "and express to him my regrets that my cloth forbids my accepting his challenge. I beg, moreover, that he will accept my sincere apologies for the inadvertent use which I have made of a name which, until to-day, was totally unknown to me." Yet this was in 1834, when Marryat had already published "The King's Own" and "Peter Simple."

"Good wine needs no bush." Mr. Maurice's ignorance could not be shared by many of his contemporaries, and the author of "Mr. Midshipman Easy" runs small risk of being forgotten. An admirable comic motive, more definite in itself and more consistently used than is customary in many of his novels; a series of excellent portraits, drawn in clear bold lines and standing out with peculiar distinctness; a rollicking, irresistible gaiety, which carries the reader along breathless from one astonishing incident to another—these are the qualities which will ensure Marryat a circle of friends for many a year to come.

W. L. C.

October 1896.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS