

Old Tom of Nantucket

by **Joseph Alexander Altsheler, 1862-1919**

Published: 1897

in »Lippincott's Monthly Magazine«

Re-published: 2016

Richard M. Woodward



Abdallah ben Jussuf did not seek to conceal the trouble which lay heavy upon him, and as he strode about the deck of his ship the sailors took care that they never came within reach of the long, beautifully curved yataghan with the silver hilt that he wore in his belt. Abdallah ben Jussuf's right hand wandered more than once to his favorite weapon, and the brown sinewy fingers fitted themselves lovingly around the silver hilt, but there was no need for the sailors to fear him. Wrath he had a plenty, but it was stewing and steaming for the Christian dogs, and not for the Faithful, the pious followers of the greatest of the prophets. Abdallah ben Jussuf had made the pilgrimage, and it would ill become a devout Mussulman to raise his hand against his brethren.

But there was good cause for the wrath that consumed his soul. Abdallah ben Jussuf was known as the boldest and aye, hitherto, the luckiest of captains that sailed out of Algiers. Many a time had he returned to port with a shipful of treasure and Christian slaves, the spoil of his hand. Many a time had the Dey commended him as one who increased the wealth and glory of his master and who won favor from Allah by his faithful service in the cause of the true religion. He even remembered the Dey's words when he set out in the HAFIZ upon his cruise. Nor did he forget how the hope of bountiful spoil and many captives had flamed high in his breast when he heard those words.

For the first time the wind of favor had failed to fill Abdallah ben Jussuf's sails. Allah had turned his face away from him. He and his crew seemed alone upon the sea. Sail where they might, they could find no sight of Christian vessel. Day after day the HAFIZ sailed forward and then back, then tacked and cruised here and there and crossed the lines of travel which Abdallah ben Jussuf knew the Christian ships were accustomed to take. But the crew of the HAFIZ saw nothing save the blue sea under them and the blue sky overhead.

The devout Mussulman forgot none of his duties. In vain did he pray four times a day and turn his face toward Mecca. Still not a sail. Allah sent neither spoil nor captive into his hand. He looked upon his ship, and the sight was good. Not a finer corsair floated the crescent flag. And his crew? There they were, a numerous and hardy band, bare of foot and arm, dark of face, strong of muscle, and bold of heart. Some polished guns, others toiled at the spars and rigging: all carried wide-mouthed pistols and keen-edged yataghans in their belts. The eyes of Abdallah flashed with pride as he looked upon his dusky horde. He knew them. He had seen them, knives aloft, swarm over the decks of the Christian ships and slay the infidels who dared to oppose them. But Abdallah ben Jussuf also knew that, like the lions, they must be fed, or by and by when hunger gnawed they would turn and rend their keeper. He knew, moreover, that the Dey, his master, back in the city, was waiting for the treasure and slaves he expected his faithful servant Abdallah ben Jussuf to bring to him, as he had done many times before. But now he had neither the treasure nor the captives; and how could he return to his master and face him empty-handed? The Dey was seldom merciful to those who brought him nothing.

Thus the reasons were many and good for the discontent that preyed upon the vitals of Abdallah ben Jussuf. He took his strong marine glass which had come in the French tribute and which his master, the Dey, in a moment of high approval, had presented to him, and swept the wide circle of the sea in a prayerful search for a Christian sail. But he saw nothing to rejoice his heart. Overhead the little white clouds floated peacefully in a sky of blue; the sea, a bed of turquoise, tinged with lighter streaks where the waves broke, lapped lazily against his ship. The glare of the red sun beat down on ship and sea. Save for his own vessel, the ocean was silent and lonely. Abdallah ben Jussuf's heart sickened. He walked back and forth for a little while longer, and then called a sailor.

„Ibrahim,“ said the captain, „go thou below and bring before me the Christian dog, my slave.“

Then Ibrahim went and brought Old Tom of Nantucket. Years ago, perhaps half a dozen, perhaps eight or ten, the corsairs had taken Old Tom out of a merchant

schooner. He was a stout, likely fellow, and they made of him a slave to toil and to moil and to serve the children of the Prophet. Do not think that Old Tom of Nantucket, who had been a man-o'-war's-man in his time and had fought hilt to hilt on a bloody deck, submitted humbly to such a fate. But in the old African city to which they took him they had persuasive ways with their slaves. If there had been any Christian to listen Old Tom of Nantucket might have told tales of the bastinado and the torture, and then again he might have said nothing, for, like many another of his kind, Old Tom was a man who loved not a long tongue.

But here he was, bent and brown and looking meek and obedient enough when he came before his master, Abdallah ben Jussuf, captain of the good corsair HAFIZ.

There was a frown on the face of Abdallah, and his fingers lingered on the hilt of his yataghan, as he said to Old Tom—

Dog of a Christian, thou knowest that we have been sailing hither and thither for a long time and we see not a sail. The Christian ships are in the habit of passing this way, but we cannot find them. We have neither booty nor captives, and my men murmur. We are like those who wander in the desert and search for sweet water and find it not. Why is it? Hast thou bewitched the ship with thy Christian prayers?“

Old Tom, having a great fear of witchcraft himself, and not being a man of free speech in the best of times, was taken much aback, and looked around at the sea and the sky before replying.

„Answer!“ thundered Abdallah ben Jussuf, as his fingers clasped over the hilt of his yataghan. „Thou art my slave, and if thou hast thrown a spell upon the ship thou shalt die under the torture for it.“

„Nay,“ said Old Tom, „I am an honest man-o'-war's-man fallen into an evil plight, and I know naught of such things.“

„Is it not here, or near here, that the ships from thy country going to Italy and the lands beyond are accustomed to pass?“

Old Tom said that it was. Over there, just beyond the horizon, where the Spanish coast lay, he had been taken himself, and that was not an event he was likely to forget.

Abdallah ben Jussuf meditated awhile, with his hand still on the hilt of his yataghan. Then he told Ibrahim to take Old Tom below again, and when he had gone he resumed his discontented watch over the ocean looking and longing for a sail.

Old Tom felt some relief when he had been escorted below, for he did not like the manner of Abdallah ben Jussuf. Life was not of great value to him, but somehow he clung to it still, and he dreamed of a day when he should again be a trig man-o'-war's-man aboard the good sloop EAGLE, with Boatswain Ben Collins, his trusty chum, by his side. Many was the time Old Tom had lamented his folly in leaving the EAGLE and sailing in a merchant-ship, to fall into the hands of the corsairs. Then, as his visions of Boatswain Ben and the EAGLE faded and hope waxed weak, he would wonder if the stanch sloop still sailed the ocean. One night he dreamed that he had seen her lying on the bottom of the sea, with dead men on her decks. The white face of his chum, Boatswain Ben Collins, stared up at him.

For days after he dreamed that dream Old Tom was so slow in his work that Omar more than once prodded him with a knife to make him more lively. Omar was the chief cook of the HAFIZ, and it was the business of Old Tom of Nantucket, once a man-o'-war's-man, to wash the pots and kettles. Old Tom was glad there were no other Christians on board the ship to see him in his humiliation and behold the state into which he had sunk. Even should he escape he doubted if he could ever hold up his head again before his chum, Ben Collins, the boatswain.

The HAFIZ sailed about for two more days, and all the while the wrath of Abdallah ben Jussuf increased. And something like fear mingled with his wrath, for he knew that his master, the Dey, was not wont to be appeased with vain tales and excuses, and when the spoil and the captives were not forthcoming would treat him as Abdallah ben Jussuf himself had treated more than one slave who had fallen into his hands. Moreover, the dark faces around Abdallah ben Jussuf grew darker, and the murmurings grew louder. Sidi Mohammed, the second in command, came to him and suggested a dash upon the coast of Spain.

„We can fall upon a village at night,“ he said, „and carry off the women. The Spanish girls are fair, and would bring a fine price in the slave-market.“

But Abdallah shook his head. Upon the sea, where blood left no stain, he was ready to dare anything, but he cared not for adventure upon land. He feared that his master, the Dey, would not approve, for the times were not as they were of old, and some of the rights of the Faithful had been abridged.

While Abdallah was in this mood Old Tom of Nantucket was not a pleasing sight to him. The sailor's face reminded him too often of the object of his cruise and his failure to attain that object. He thought several times that the application of the bastinado to Old Tom would divert his own feelings and those of his crew; but on second thoughts he would let the matter pass. The slave's work was of value, and, as Allah held out no prospect of more slaves, it was not worth while to injure him.

But on the third day there came a change of fortune. Allah could not be forgetful always of his children. The sailor at the mast-head, peering out over the ocean, saw a brown speck on the rim of the horizon. Though but a common sailor and entitled only to a common sailor's share, his heart thrilled at the sight, and he returned thanks to Mahomet, for he knew the brown speck was a ship, and he believed that it would be a prize. But he looked again and still again, in order to be sure that his joy had not been premature, and then he hailed Abdallah, who stood on the deck below, and told him of the ship.

The joy of Abdallah was not inferior to that of the man at the mast-head, but it did not become one of his gravity to show it in his face and manner. He turned and looked at the brown speck upon the horizon, which was now visible even from the deck, and presently he called out—

„Canst thou see the vessel well enough, Hamet, to tell what she is?“

„She looks like a trading-ship, my lord, but I can tell nothing more as yet,“ replied Hamet from the mast-head.

It was the habit of Abdallah to prepare for all things, and he would not be guilty of any neglect which might let a rich prize slip through his fingers. The men were summoned to quarters: a fierce crew they were, with their muskets and pistols and crooked knives, and their eyes gleaming with the lust of blood. The cannon

were loaded, the ship was trimmed for action, and every man was ready for the fray which was to bring him booty.

„Allah has been kind to us at last,“ said Abdallah to Sidi Mohammed, who stood at his side; „for, see, the stranger ship comes nearer, and she will surely fall into our hands. Verily the Prophet watches over the true believers and delivers their enemies unto them.“

Then he watched the ship through his glass, and by and by he told Sidi Mohammed that he believed she was Amerikano. At this Sidi Mohammed rubbed his hands and remarked that it was well, for it was a long way to the land of the Amerikano, and the ship would not make such a journey without being well loaded. A pleased expression came over Abdallah's face, but it was followed by a frown, for he looked around at his ship and he saw that the appearance of the HAFIZ was likely to give alarm in those suspicious days to any peaceful merchant-vessel. Some of the Amerikano ships were very swift. This, perchance, being one of them, might outsail the HAFIZ and escape, to the great loss of Islam, and especially of Abdallah ben Jussuf and his crew, than whom there were no more devout followers of the true faith.

Abdallah walked the deck for a few minutes, and then the right course came to him. He ordered the men away from the rail and made them conceal themselves about the deck of the ship. Some lay behind the boats or in them. Others crouched behind heaps of cordage or lurked at the head of the stairways. The ship bore a hundred cutthroats with arms in each hand, but they were visible only to those who stood upon her own deck. Her masts and rigging looked like those of a Spanish or Italian ship. Before sailing away from port Abdallah had been wise enough to provide for that.

When everything had been arranged to suit his critical eye, Abdullah had Old Tom brought before him. He pointed to the distant ship, and asked of the American—

„Dost thou see the ship yonder?“

„Ay, ay, sir,“ said Old Tom; „I see her. What is she?“

„That is for you to say. Is she not one of the ships of thy nation? Is she not Amerikano?“

There was a queer sensation at the heart of Old Tom, which surprised him. He believed that he was long since dead to sympathy and all kindred feelings; but the ship was now near enough for him to see floating over her a flag which he knew and loved. The two vessels were sailing down the sides of a triangle, and unless one or the other altered her course they would meet at its point.

Old Tom gazed long, and the queer sensation came over him again. There could be no mistake. Through the glass which Abdallah had forced him to use he could see every star and stripe on the flag when the wind unrolled its folds. There was the ship, sailing peacefully on and bearing her unsuspecting crew into certain death or slavery. Old Tom looked around at the lurking devils on the HAFIZ, and the queer sensation at his heart grew stronger.

Abdallah whispered to Sidi Mohammed, who went below and came back presently with an old violin and bow that had been saved from some former prize. Abdallah tapped the silver hilt of his yataghan, and, pointing to the violin, said to Old Tom—

„Thou knowest the use of the instrument, for we have heard thee. Sit upon the boat here, where thou canst be seen from the other ship, and make thy Amerikano music. We would let them know that friends are near who would bear them company.“

Abdallah's smile was full of satisfaction, and Sidi Mohammed nodded approval. Old Tom looked again at the distant ship and the flag he loved, and shook his head.

„Mebbe I've consorted with robbers and pirates so long that there ain't much of human natur, leastways of the human natur that is good, left in me,“ he said; „but I'm darned ef I'll draw my countrymen into your bloody hands.“

It was said in Abdallah ben Jussuf's tongue, but that is how it would have sounded in Old Tom's own dialect. The corsair's eyes flashed, and he drew his yataghan. Then he thought better of it and thrust his weapon back in his girdle.

„Dog of a Christian,“ he said, „thou art my slave and must obey my commands. Thou refusest? Well, I have ways to make thee.“

Abdallah called to his men and gave them some orders. Four stout fellows seized Old Tom and threw him upon his back.

„Carry him behind the boat there,“ said Abdallah, „and try the bastinado.“

Old Tom resisted and struggled in the grip of the men, but his efforts were of no avail. His feet were bared, and a fifth man came with a club. Abdallah stood over him, and asked—

„Wilt thou obey my orders and make the music?“

Old Tom sullenly snook his head. Abdallah gave a sign, and the club descended upon the soles of the bare feet. The whole form of the prostrate man shrank and shivered, but no sound came from his lips. The club descended again and again, and the blood broke through the bruised flesh and stained the deck. Human endurance was passed, and a groan broke from the lips of Old Tom.

„Wilt thou do as I say?“ asked Abdallah.

Old Tom still shook his head, and the club descended again. Then the old sailor fainted with pain and exhaustion. A dish of sea-water was thrown in his face, and he revived.

Abdallah then commanded them to lift him up until he could see the strange ship.

Illustration:
The ship yonder

„Thou seest the ship yonder,“ said Abdallah. „We would make a prize of her. Do as I bid thee, or thou shalt be put to the torture again.“

The ship was now much nearer, and Old Tom looked at her long and keenly. He stroked his bruised feet, and then he said to Abdallah ben Jussuf—

„It's a hard thing that you ask of me, to draw my own countrymen into a snare, but that club of yours is more than I can stand. Give me the fiddle, an' I'll do it.“

„Sit upon the boat there, where they can see thee plainly,“ said Abdallah, „and do thou be sure that thou dost not give them warning, or by the beard of Mahomet I will cut thee to pieces myself.“

Old Tom climbed painfully into a conspicuous position on the boat, and fixed the violin under his chin. Abdallah crouched behind the boat, and drew his yataghan.

„Play, play, thou dog of a Christian!“ he exclaimed, as he reached up and prodded Old Tom in the calf of his leg with his yataghan. Old Tom drew the bow across the violin and began an old tune, „*The World's Turned Upside Down*“. His fingers were somewhat stiffened, but he drew fair music from the violin. While he played he watched the other ship, and Abdallah, crouched behind the boat, did the same.

The HAFIZ looked as peaceful and harmless as an ordinary Spanish or Italian trading-vessel. A few men strolled lazily about the deck, and, perched high above the concealed crew, Old Tom of Nantucket sawed industriously upon the fiddle. Sails were spread over the cannon. The tompions were in the port-holes, and there was nothing visible to arouse even the fears of the most suspicious on the other vessel. It was merely a lazy ship with a lazy crew floating placidly on under a summer sun.

The American ship seemed to be lulled into perfect confidence and security; but she looked like an untidy vessel at best. Some of her sails hung awry. There was a litter about her decks. A man with a straw hat sat on a stool by the rail, lazily smoking a pipe. Another man swung in a hammock, and three or four sailors slouched about the deck.

„Do they appear to suspect us?“ asked Abdallah of Old Tom.

„I can see naught to show that they do,“ replied the seaman. „It looks like a lazy, sleepy crew over thar. You might sail right through ‘em before they knowed it. God forgive me for drawin’ ‘em on to destruction!“

„Allah himself wills the punishment of the infidel,“ said Abdallah. „Play on, thou dog, and beware that thou sayest and doest nothing to alarm them.“

The two ships slowly neared each other. It was not Abdallah's plan to sail directly for the American, for fear of alarming her. He kept on down his side of the triangle; the prize remained true to her original course, which would be sure to bring them together.

Out over the waters floated the queer old tune that Old Tom played on the violin. On the American ship they could hear the strains, for one of the sailors danced a few steps, and the man in the hammock sat up to listen. He looked intently at the Algerine, gave some orders to the sailors, and in a few minutes the ship sheered off a bit.

„He suspects us! Play faster! Play faster!“ exclaimed Abdallah, as he prodded Old Tom again in the leg with the keen knife-point.

Old Tom plied the bow with a vigor worthy of his younger days. Abdallah altered the course of the HAFIZ a bit, until she was approaching the American as fast as before. But the prize seemed to have got over her alarm. The man lolled back in the hammock again. The other on the stool still stolidly smoked his pipe. The light-footed sailor began to dance again.

When they were within hailing distance the man on the stool pulled his pipe out of his mouth and called out—

„What ship is that?“

„Do not answer,“ exclaimed Abdallah to Old Tom. „Let them think we are Italian or Spanish and do not understand their tongue. Play on.“

Old Tom shook his head. The man hailed a second time, and when Old Tom shook his head again, he put his pipe back to his mouth and resumed smoking as calmly as if it made no difference to him whether he got a reply or not.

„The prize is ours! The prize is ours!“ exclaimed Abdallah, exultantly. „See, Allah bringeth him into our hands.“

Sidi Mohammed, crouching near, nodded approval, and scores of fierce black eyes gleamed with joy. Abdallah gave a signal to his helmsman. The course of the HAFIZ was altered, and she bore down directly upon the prize.

„Now, my children,“ shouted Abdallah, springing to his feet, scimitar in hand, as the two ships almost touched. „Forward, by Allah, and the ship is ours!“

The pirates rose up in a swarm, but at the same moment the man on the stool uttered a cry in his strange tongue and leaped back. The black muzzles of a dozen cannon were thrust suddenly through the portholes of his ship. There was a tremendous rolling broadside, a sheet of flame, and the huge balls of iron crashed and tore their way through the HAFIZ and beat down the men on her decks. There was an awful moment of suspense, then the HAFIZ shivered, reeled far over on her side, filled with water, and went down in a whirlpool.

* * * * *

„How on airth did ye know us, old partner?“ asked Boatswain Ben Collins an hour later of Old Tom of Nantucket, who leaned, exhausted but happy, against a coil of rope on the deck of the stanch sloop Eagle, where the sailors had put him when they dragged him from the water.

„Did you think I’d ever forget the old ship?“ said Old Tom. „She was too far away for me to know her the first time I saw her. But when they fetched me up for the second look I knowed her in a second. I guessed what ye was up to. So I jest drawed them bloodhounds on to their death, when they thought I was drawin’ you to yours.“

