

Written at the turn of this century by a very wise Royal Navy captain who later rose to the rank of admiral, the following poem -- a rhyming advice lecture, actually -- is one of the most famous and oft-quoted pieces of naval literature ever penned. But its fame is in-house; it is virtually unknown outside Anglo-American naval officers' circles, apart from a couple of rare reprintings over the past 50-odd years in arcane yachting publications. Today, quite apart from its inherent naval parlance, some references are themselves arcane. For example, if offering it to others you may wish to substitute the words "strong armoured" for the author's "Harveyised" -- not since before World War I has anyone associated Mr. Harvey with development of nickel-steel armour plate for warships. But the poem's salty particulars cannot hide the essence of good advice for young hopefuls, whatever their sphere. Admiral Hopwood's words are all-encompassing and timeless, and deserve much more general appreciation.

THE LAWS OF THE NAVY

by Adm. R. A. Hopwood, RN

Now these are the laws of the Navy,
Unwritten and varied they be;
And he who is wise will observe them,
Going down in his ship to the sea.

As naught may outrun the destroyer,
So it is with the law and its grip,
For the strength of a ship is the Service,
And the strength of the Service the ship.

Take heed what you say of your seniors,
Be your words spoken softly or plain,
Let a bird of the air tell the matter,
And so shall ye hear it again.

If you labour from morn until even,
And meet with reproof for your toil,
'Tis well, that the gun may be humbled
The compressor must check the recoil.

On the strength of one link in the cable,
Dependeth the might of the chain.
Who knows when thou may'st be tested?
So live that thou bearest the strain!

When a ship that is tired returneth,
With the signs of the seas showing plain;
Men place her in dock for a season,
And her speed she reneweth again.

So shall ye, if perchance ye grow weary,
In the uttermost parts of the sea,
Pray for leave, for the good of the Service,
As much and as oft as may be.

Count not upon certain promotion
But rather to gain it aspire;
Though the sightline may end on the target
There cometh per chance the miss-fire.

Can'st follow the track of the dolphin?
Or tell where the sea swallows roam?
Where Leviathan taketh his pastime?
What ocean he calleth his own?

So it is with the words of the rulers,
And the orders these words shall convey;
Every law is naught beside this one:
Thou shalt not criticise, but Obey.

Say the wise: How may I know their purpose?
Then acts without wherefore or why.
Stays the fool but one moment to question,
And the chance of his life passes by.

If ye win through an African jungle,
Unmentioned at home in the press,
Heed it not. No man seeth the piston,
But it driveth the ship none the less.

Do they growl? it is well. Be thou silent,
If the work goeth forward amain.
Lo! the gun throws the shot to a hair's breadth
And shouteth, yet none shall complain.

Do they growl, and the work be retarded?
It is ill, be whatever their rank.
The half-loaded gun also shouteth,
But can she pierce target with blank?

Doth the paintwork make war with the funnels
And the deck to the cannons complain?
Nay, they know that some soap and fresh water
Unites them as brothers again.

So ye, being heads of departments,
Do you growl with a smile on your lip,
Lest ye strive and in anger be parted,
And lessen the might of your ship.

Dost deem that thy vessel needs gilding,
And the dockyard forbears to supply?
Put thy hand in thy pocket and gild her --
There are those who have risen thereby.

Dost think in a moment of anger
'Tis well with thy seniors to fight?
They prosper, who burn in the morning,
The letters they wrote overnight.

For many are shelved and forgotten,
With nothing to thank for their fate,
But that on a half sheet of foolscap
A fool "Had the honour to state."

Should the fairway be crowded with shipping
Beating homeward the harbour to win,
It is meet that lest any should suffer,
The steamers pass cautiously in.

So thou, when thou nearest promotion,
And the peak that is gilded is nigh,
Give heed to words and thine actions,
Lest others be wearied thereby.

It is ill for the winners to worry,
Take thy fate as it comes, with a smile,
And when thou art safe in the harbour
They may envy, but will not revile.

Uncharted the rocks that surround thee,
Take heed that the channels thou learn,
Lest thy name serve to buoy for another
That shoal the "Court-Martial Return".

Though a Harveyised belt may protect her
The ship bears the scar on her side;
'Tis well if the Court should acquit thee --
But 'twere best had'st thou never been tried.

MORAL

As the wave washes clear at the hawse pipe,
Washes aft, and is lost in the wake;
So shalt thou drop astern all unheeded
Such time as these laws ye forsake.

Take heed in your manner of speaking
That the language ye use may be sound,
In the list of the words of your choosing
"Impossible" may not be found.

Now these are the Laws of the Navy,
And many and mighty are they.
But the hull and the deck and the keel
And the truck of the law is -- OBEY.