

TWO YEARS BEFORE THE MAST

A Voice from the Forecastle



Based on the 1840 memoir by Richard Henry Dana, Jr.

*The little brig was no better
than a bathing-machine...
plunging madly into a
tremendous head sea.*

THE CURE FOR WEAK EYES WAS HARD WORK

Harvard College Yard, 1830s



The Departure: August 14, 1834

Privilege: Tight frock-coat, silk cap, kid gloves

He attempts to look like 'Jack Tar' but is instantly recognized as a landsman by his soft hands.

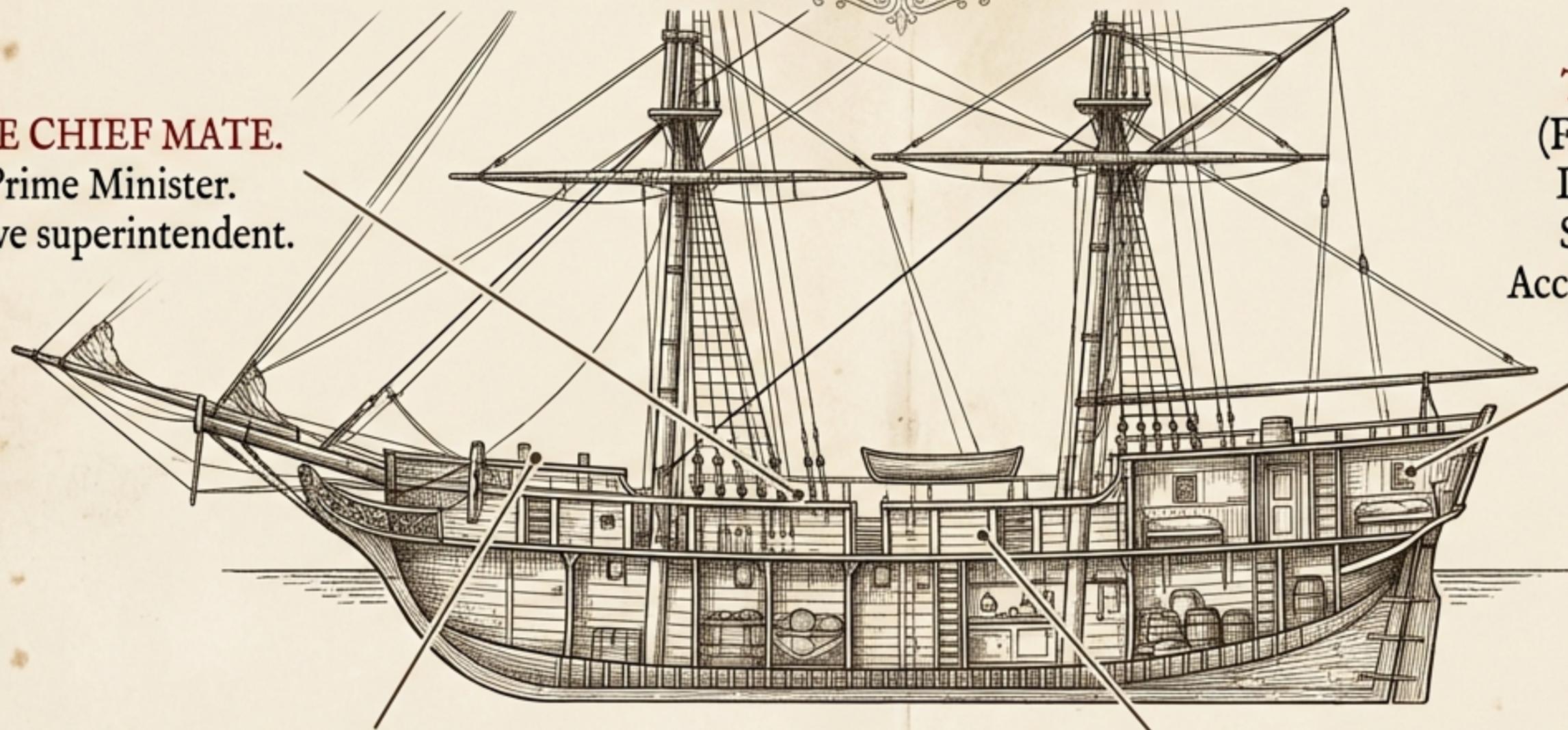


The Reality: Loose duck trousers, checked shirt, tarpaulin hat.

Motivation: To cure eye weakness through hard labor, plain food, and open air.

THE FLOATING DESPOTISM: SHIP HIERARCHY

THE CHIEF MATE.
Prime Minister.
Active superintendent.



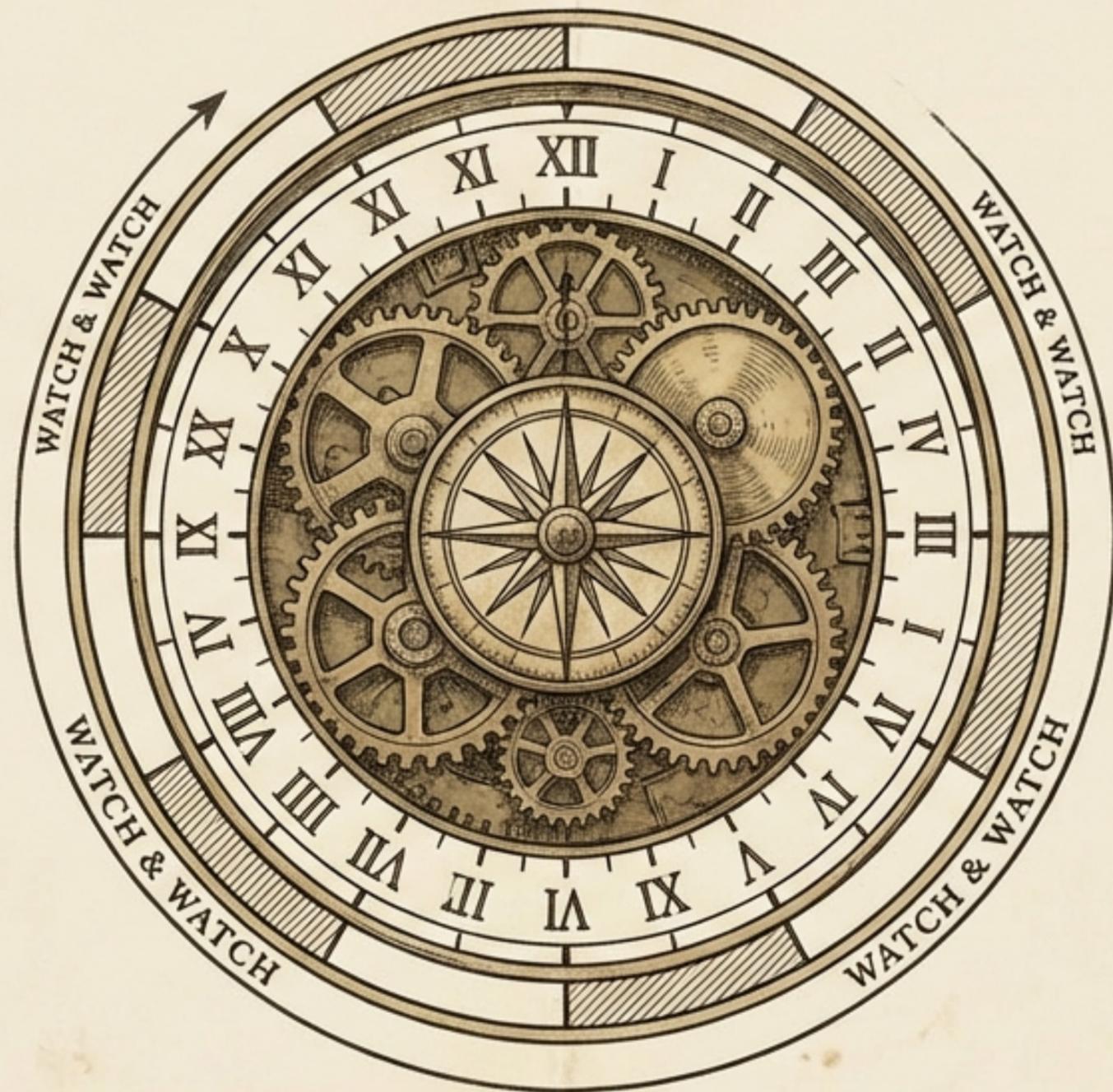
THE CAPTAIN
(Frank Thompson).
Lord Paramount.
Stands no watch.
Accountable to no one.

THE CREW ("The People").
Divided into Starboard
and Larboard watches.
Living in the "land of tin pots and kids."

THE SECOND MATE.
"Sailor's Waiter."
Eats the Captain's leftovers.
Neither officer nor man.

THE PHILADELPHIA CATECHISM

Six days shalt thou labor and do all thou art able...



The Reality of Labor:

- **Maintenance:** A ship is like a lady's watch, always out of repair.
- **Manufacturing:** Creating spun-yarn and marline from "old junk".
- **Discipline:** No conversation allowed. Officers are "drivers".
- Idleness is a punishable offense.



SPUN-YARN



PICKING OAKUM.

THE PERFECT SILENCE OF THE SEA



The Physical Toll: Seasickness as an “effectual emetic.”
The brutal transition from green hand to crewman.

The Mental Toll: Total separation from intellectual and social enjoyment.

The Revelation: A night watch realization of the “perfect silence of the sea”
—no city hum, no birds, only wind and water.

Cook's Advice: *“You are well cleaned out... turn to upon good hearty salt beef and ship bread.”*

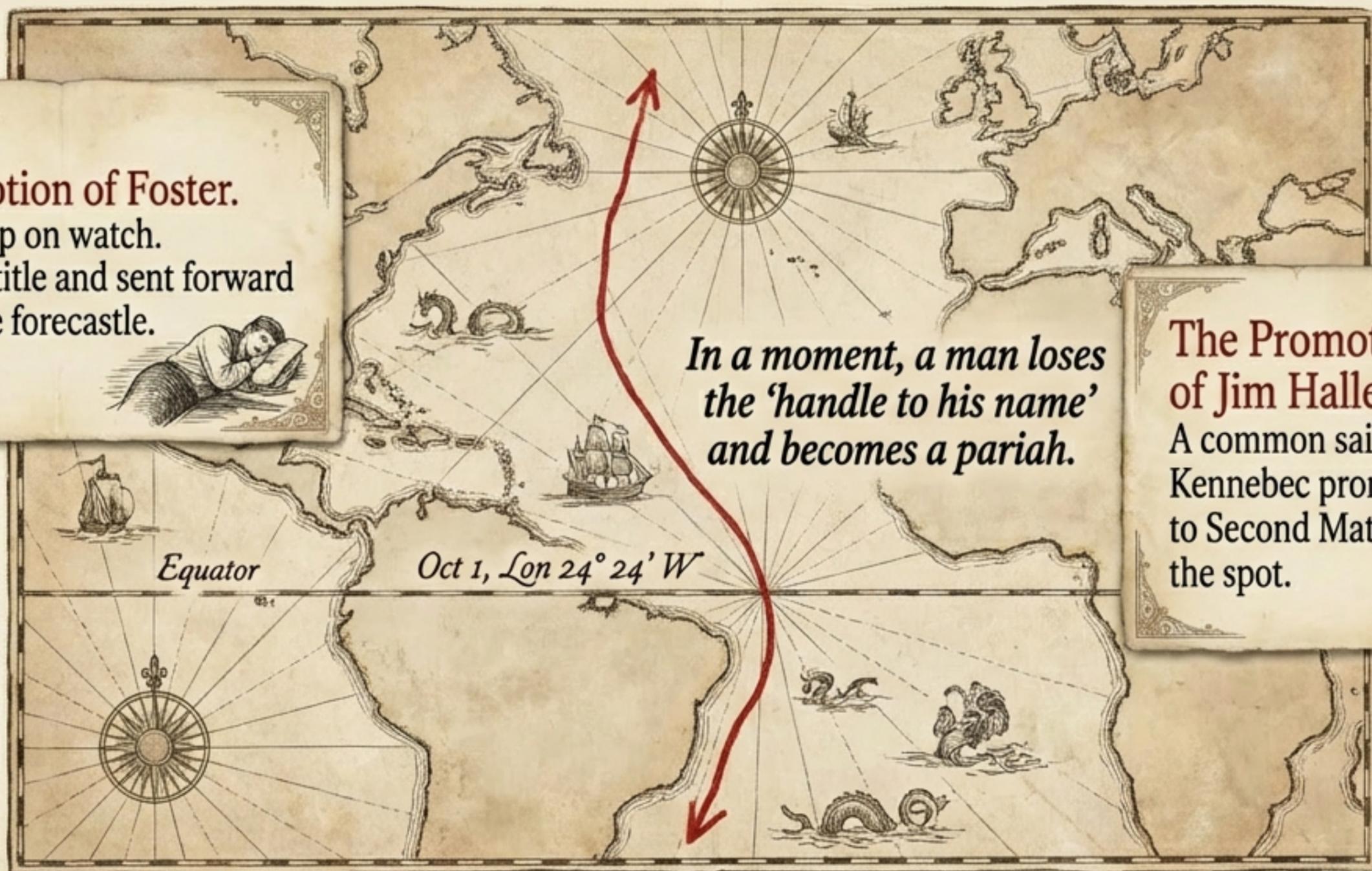
CROSSING THE LINE: BREAKING MEN

**The Fall
The Demotion of Foster.**
Found asleep on watch.
Stripped of title and sent forward
to live in the forecastle.



*In a moment, a man loses
the 'handle to his name'
and becomes a pariah.*

**The Promotion
of Jim Haller, of Jim Hall.**
A common sailor from the
Kennebec promoted
to Second Mate on
the spot.



HERE COMES CAPE HORN

Conditions:

Rain, hail, snow,
and sleet (Summer
in November).

The Routine:

Wet clothes are
never dried, just
wrung out.

Sensory:

The brig plunges
like a “bathing
machine.”

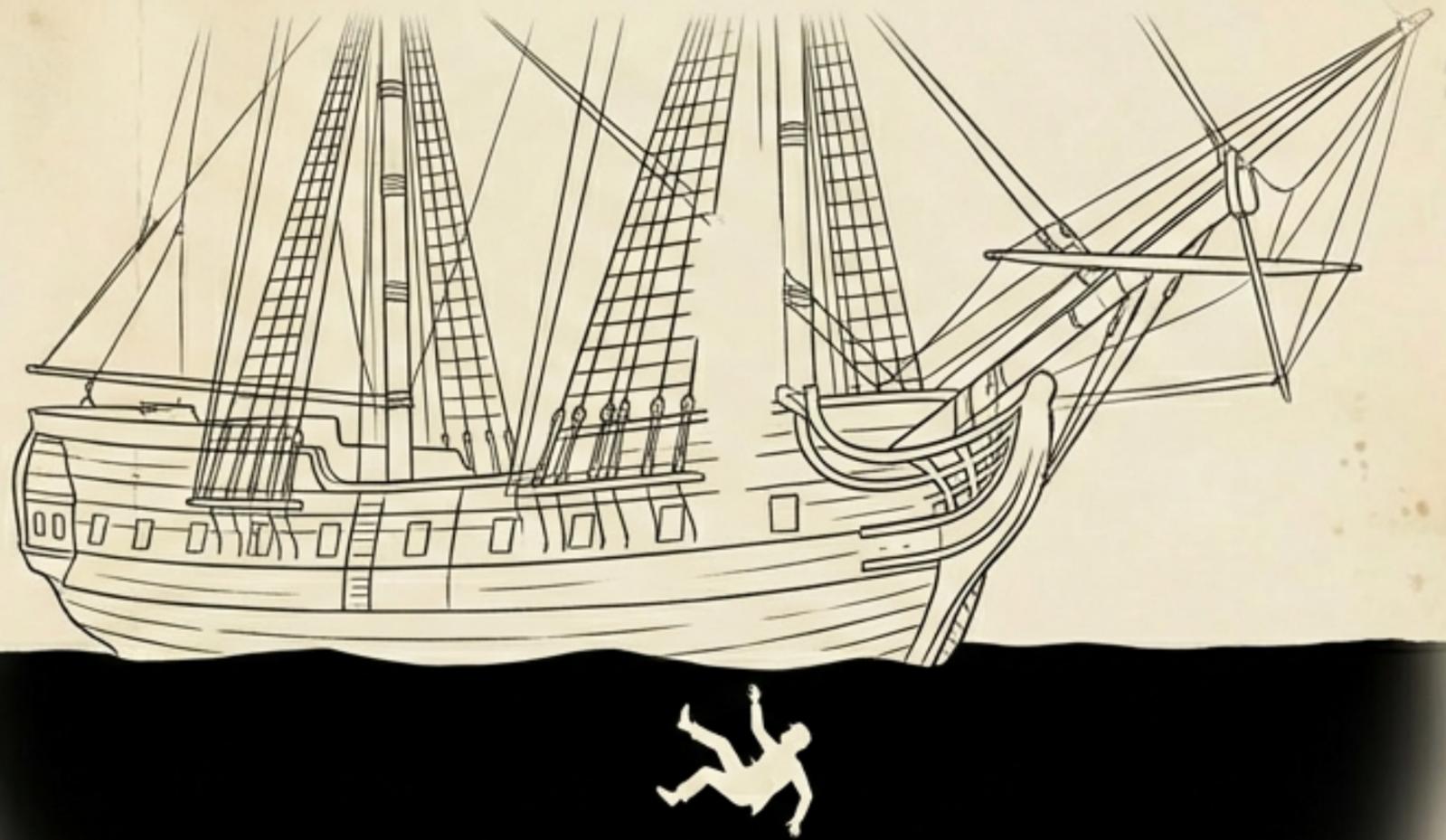
Nature:

The beauty of the
Albatross vs. the
terror of the gale.



A VACANCY IN THE FORECASTLE

- **Event:** Nov 17. George Ballmer falls overboard from the starboard shrouds.
- **The Difference:** Death at sea leaves only a “vacancy”—one less man at the wheel, one less at the mess.
- **The Aftermath:** The auction of the dead man’s clothes while the body is barely cold.



“It is like losing a limb.”

JUAN FERNANDEZ: THE LAND OF ROBINSON CRUSOE



- **Context:** First landfall since Boston (Nov 25).
- **The Island:** A Chilean penal colony. “The laziest people on earth” living in huts.
- **The Contrast:** Fresh water, cherries, and strawberries vs. salt beef and hardtack.
- **Dana’s Reaction:** A “romantic, classic island.” He collects a flower and sandalwood.

CALIFORNIA: THE OPEN ROADSTEAD

Arrival: Jan 14, 1835.
150 days from Boston.

The Danger: "Southeasters."
Vessels must anchor 3 miles
out, ready to run to sea.

The Impression: Desolate.
Santa Barbara is a "dark-
looking town" with no sound
but the roar of the surf.

Surf Work:
Landing boats
on the tops of
combers; keeping
stern-out to sea.



THE CALIFORNIA BANK NOTE



The Labor:

- **HEAD WORK:** Hides are stiff, dry, and heavy.
- Sailors balance two hides on their heads to wade through surf.
- **Scale:** The ship "Alert" requires 40,000 hides. Years of collection.

DON, DOÑA, AND SERF: CALIFORNIA SOCIETY

Caste System:

- Strictly determined by blood (Spanish vs. Indigenous).



The Don



The Doña



The Indigenous Serf

Economy:

- No credit. Silver and Hides are the only currency.

Lifestyle:

- Men are always on horseback; they “can hardly go from one house to another without mounting.”

SAN PEDRO AND THE INDEFINITE VOYAGE

The Depot:

- The “Hell of California”.

The Gloom:

- The crew becomes a tender for the ship “Alert”. The voyage stretches from 2 years to 4.



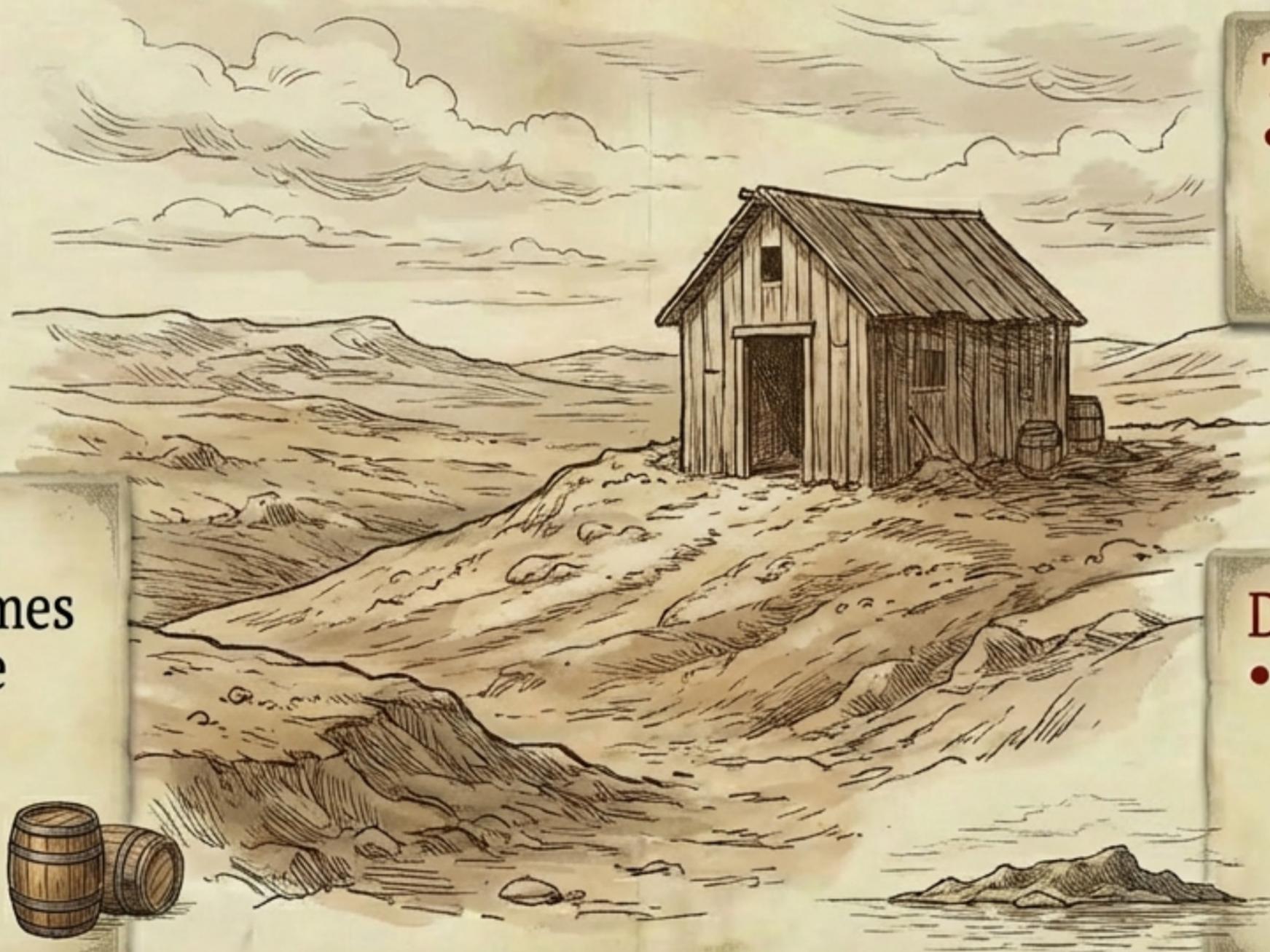
The Labor:

- Rolling heavy barrels up steep, slippery hills.



Dead Man's Island:

- A small, dreary island in the bay; a symbol of their potential fate.



THE CRISIS: FLOGGING

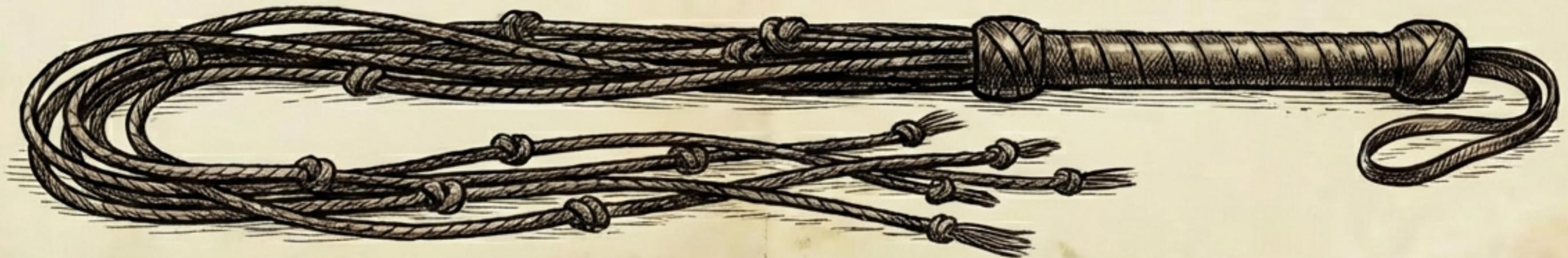
“If you want to know what I flog you for, I’ll tell you. It’s because I like to do it! It suits me! That’s what I do it for!” – Captain Thompson

The Incident:

Sam and John the Swede flogged for “impudence” and asking questions.

The Blasphemy:

“Don’t call on Jesus Christ... **Call on Frank Thompson! He’s the man!**”



A VOICE FROM THE FORECASTLE



The Vow:

- “I vowed that, if God should ever give me the means, I would do something to redress the grievances...”

The Transformation:
The Harvard student becomes the Sailor Advocate.

Transformation Complete.

The Legacy:

- The memoir sparked public sympathy and changed maritime law for common sailors.