

To face page 31

GEORGE LOVELESS ON THE COACH AT SALISBURY

## (V) THE HULKS



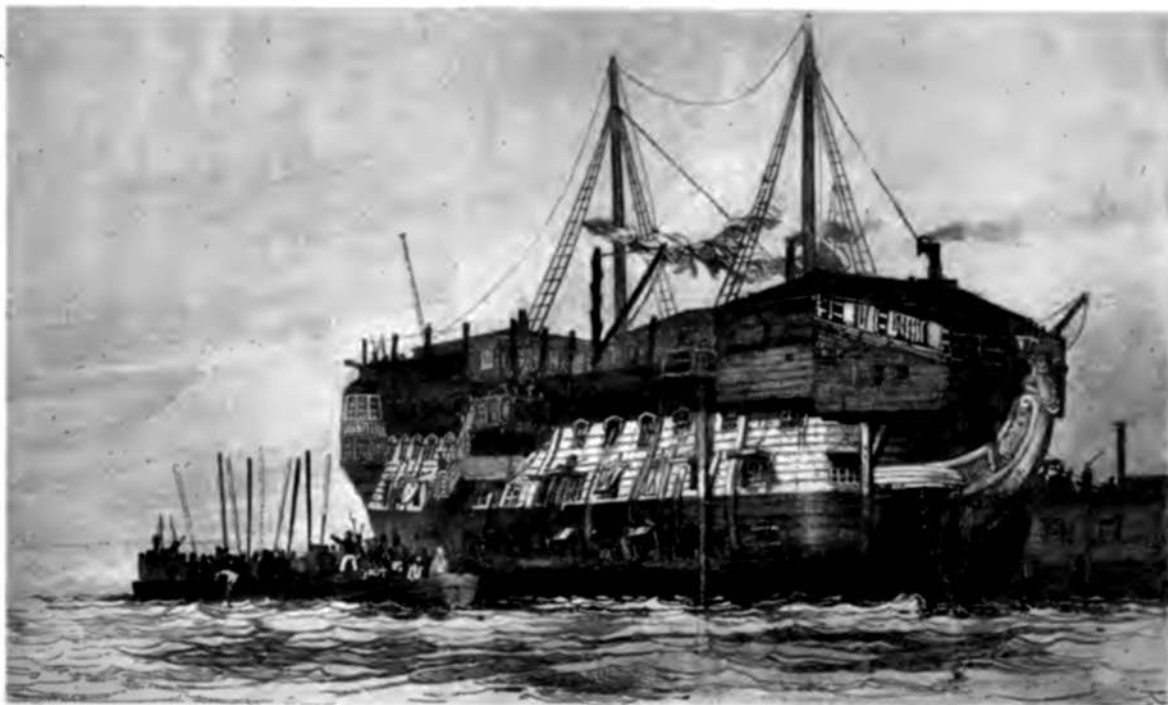
GEORGE LOVELESS was not in a fit condition, owing to illness, to travel with his other comrades when they were so hurriedly removed from Dorchester Castle to be interned in the dreaded prison hulks at Portsmouth. So it was that on March 27, 1834, James Hammett, the two Standfields, James Brine, and James Loveless were taken with hands and legs manacled, chained to each other, to the prison gate to await the coach.

All but George Loveless taken to Portsmouth

In those days travelling under the best of conditions was a toilsome business, but a journey commencing in the early hours of the morning and lasting until 8 o'clock at night, in cold weather, chained on the outside of a jolting and lurching coach, was a severe physical strain. Arrived at Portsmouth, they were rowed under guard to where the hulks were moored. Here the little party was separated. James Loveless was taken to the "Leviathan," whilst the others were confined on the "York." The irons which they had worn on the journey were struck off, fresh ones put on, and cold and dejected they were sent below.

The hulks were old wooden warships which, when their days of fighting were over, were used as floating prisons. They were originally intended for temporary use only. The prisons on shore, however, were full to overflowing and so the hulks remained in

Description of the hulks



THE YORK HULK

*From an old print*

Established  
for  
"atrocious  
offenders"

use for over seventy years. They were first established "for daring and atrocious offenders" at Woolwich when the loss of the American colonies in 1777 precluded further transportation to the New World. By the end of the century they



By courtesy of "Illustrated London News"

THE GALLERY

were generally recognised, in the words of a London magistrate, as "seminaries of profligacy and vice." By that time they had been introduced at Portsmouth, where they were moored at Gosport and Langston Harbour. They were soon to be established at Devonport, Plymouth, Chatham, Sheerness, Deptford and other sea ports. It was only with the opening years of the nineteenth century that they and their convict inhabitants came under the direct care of the Govern-

ment. Previously they had been handed over to the tender mercies of a contractor, who was paid so much a head for the upkeep of his prisoners and left to make what profit he could out of them.

A grim sidelight on those early days is obtained from the fact that during a quarter of a century, one man died out of every three who were confined on the hulks. Repulsive conditions, poorness and lack of proper food and clothing, and farcical medical attention, gave a terrible impetus to the death rate by encouraging gaol fever and other epidemics. But the worst factor, perhaps, was the depression of spirits which descended alike upon the sick and the healthy. "I have observed," wrote John Howard, the prison reformer, "that convicts from the country often pine away and die without any apparent sign of illness; and that of equal numbers, from the country and from Newgate, three or four of the former die for one of the latter." By the time the Dorsetshire labourers arrived at Portsmouth, however, conditions had improved somewhat under Government supervision.

The "York" was an old 90-gun line-of-battleship, sold to the Convict Establishment in 1820 and destined to serve as a floating prison for the rest of her days. On her three decks she housed an average of about 500 prisoners, in addition, of course, to the officers and guards who occupied the quarter-deck and stern cabins. Newcomers were allotted to the lower deck, where the air was foulest and bilge water occasionally slopped through

The "York"  
hulk



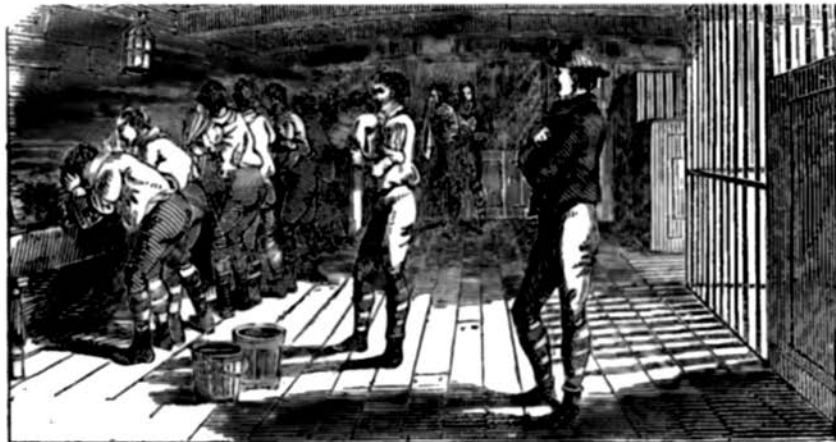
the cracks in the floor boards. Weaklings were congregated on the middle deck, usually the most crowded of the three. Those who had served the greater part of their sentences without actual transportation were accommodated in the upper deck, the most airy and consequently the most healthy and pleasant.

On their respective decks they lived when not at work, and slept at night. Never were they free from the chain between ankle and waist, which was one of the badges of their state and which clanked and rattled with every movement. Their bodies, their clothes, their beds, the very walls of the hulk itself were infested with vermin. Sickness—and especially scrofula, consumption and scurvy—was never absent, and epidemics of cholera, dysentery, smallpox and less frightful diseases swept like irresistible waves over the depot. Punishments were frequent and arbitrary, ranging from a reduction of rations or increase in the weight of the irons to a flogging of unspeakable severity.

In "The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh," the authenticity of which was accepted by the late Lord Birkenhead after investigation, a graphic account is given of what such punishment meant. Rashleigh, after having escaped from the "Leviathan," was recaptured after a few days. He was ordered to receive ten dozen lashes in view of the whole of the assembled convicts. "Naked, he was securely bound to the gratings which had been lashed to the bulwarks, and a powerful boatswain's mate stood ready with the lash. . . . The first dozen strokes from the knotted raw-hide lash were like jagged wire tearing furrows in his flesh, and the second dozen seemed like the filling of the furrows with molten lead, burning like fire into the raw flesh. These two sensations of intense and intolerable pain alternated until the first four dozen—each of which was laid on by a separate seaman with a fresh lash—had been applied, after which his whole body seemed numbed, and the feeling during the remaining six dozen was curiously as though his lacerated and bloody back was receiving heavy thuds from great clubs. The flogging endured for longer than an hour, and when he was unbound he collapsed insensible on to the deck, whence he was borne to the hospital ship. Resuscitation was effected brutally, and he came to his senses screaming with the pain inflicted by the salt dressing which

Prisoners in chains

Lashed for an hour

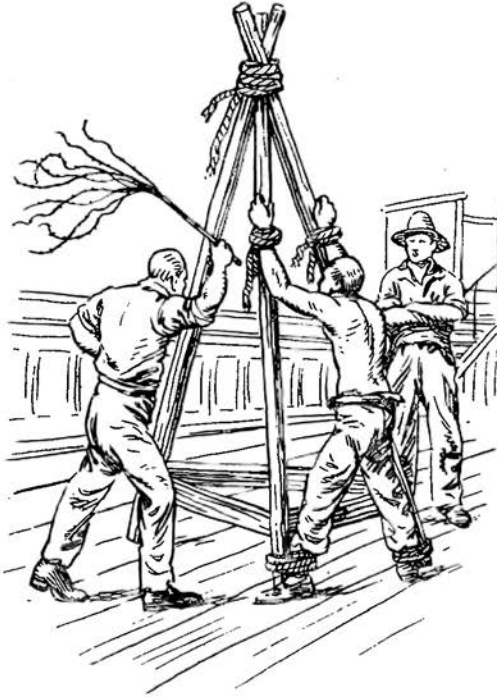


By courtesy of "Illustrated London News"

WASHING ROOM

had immediately been applied to his unsightly back. The pain caused by this rudimentary treatment was infinitely worse than anything he had felt during the actual flogging, so that he was nigh driven out of his mind by the stabbing, gnawing horrors of the action of the salt upon his wounds. He cursed and roared under the treatment, which was repeated every day as each new dressing was applied, though it was

the rough stripping of the old ones from the festering back that gave Rashleigh a never-fading memory of the torture of being flayed alive."



The "Leviathan" was the other large hulk at Portsmouth. She was an ancient 74-gun battleship, now with nothing standing but the fragments of two masts, and, like the "York," with a large shed built on her upper deck. It was here that James Loveless was confined. She possessed a library of which the better characters were permitted to have free use. Judging from what is known of other hulk libraries, which contained a haphazard selection of almost laughably inappropriate books, it was little used. Better, if you valued your peace of mind or the wholeness of your skin, to sing or fight or gamble with the rest, taking the most uproarious as your leader.

With such laxity of discipline everywhere apparent, it is not surprising that disturbances were frequent. It is seldom that we can learn much about them as the authorities naturally strove for the suppression of any such news. In 1847, Portsmouth was the scene of one of the most serious outbreaks in the chequered history of the hulks. On board the "York" especially, the prisoners were in a state of virtually open mutiny. Disorder grew so widespread and the situation looked so threatening that the local authorities demanded permission to mount a permanent military guard on board every vessel.

Public opinion was eventually wakened to the disgrace and evil of the hulks as a whole, and preparations were made for housing the prisoners in prisons ashore. It was in 1850 that the Portsmouth depot was closed down, and during the winter of that year some of the convicts were employed in breaking up the "York." One can well imagine with what gusto they set about the complete destruction of their old and hated dwelling. As the

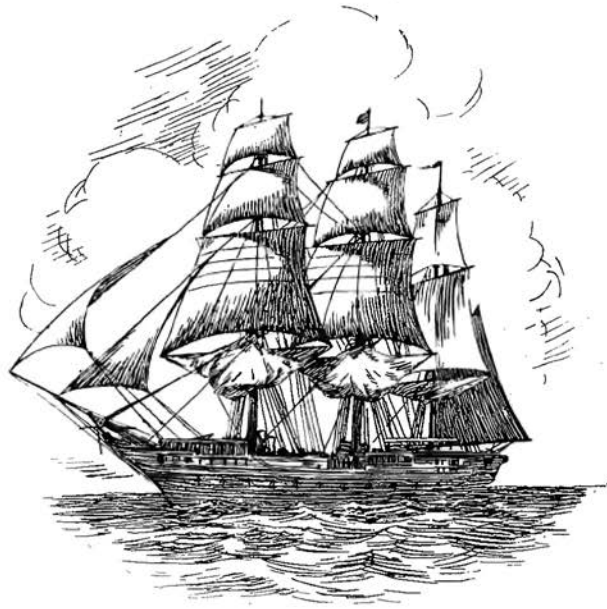
Frequent disturbances on board

Public opinion aroused

Governor stated "they frequently worked, at the first dawn of day, in the coldest weather, up to their knees in water. Not one of them had been ordered to work in this manner, but they had done so as volunteers and because they could thus work to better advantage." So ended the detested "York" hulk.

Breaking up  
the "York"

The two Standfields, Hammett and Brine remained on the "York" until March 29, when they were ordered on deck, there to be examined before being despatched overseas. After the examination, another pair of irons were riveted on them. Then, with about 100 other prisoners, they were taken in a lighter to Spithead to join the convict ship "Surrey," which was to convey them to Australia. At Spithead they were joined by James Loveless and another 100 men from the hulk "Leviathan." They sailed round to Plymouth where a further sixty men were taken on board. On Friday, April 11, 1834, the anchor was weighed and the "Surrey" bore away for New South Wales.



George Loveless was meanwhile lying ill in prison. On April 2, he heard that his brother and his four fellow-sufferers had left the prison for the hulks. Although far from being well, he entreated the doctor to allow him to depart in the hope of overtaking them. It was not, however, until Saturday, April 5, that he was declared fit to travel. At that time the "Surrey," with his friends on board, was lying at Plymouth. There was ample time for him to reach there before she sailed on April 11. It is apparent, however, that the authorities intended him to be separated from them. Their destination was to be New South Wales. He was to go to Tasmania or Van Diemen's Land, 700 miles from them. Four weary years were to pass before he looked upon any of them again.

George  
Loveless  
separated  
from his  
comrades

George Loveless was accompanied on his journey from Dorchester to Portsmouth by the Clerk of the Prison. Like his comrades, he was locked on the coach with his legs and arms manacled. At Salisbury, where a halt was called, the Clerk offered to take the irons off his legs. Loveless inquired if he meant to put them on again on leaving Salisbury. The Clerk replied in the affirmative, but suggested that, as they would have to walk through some part of the town, he had better have them

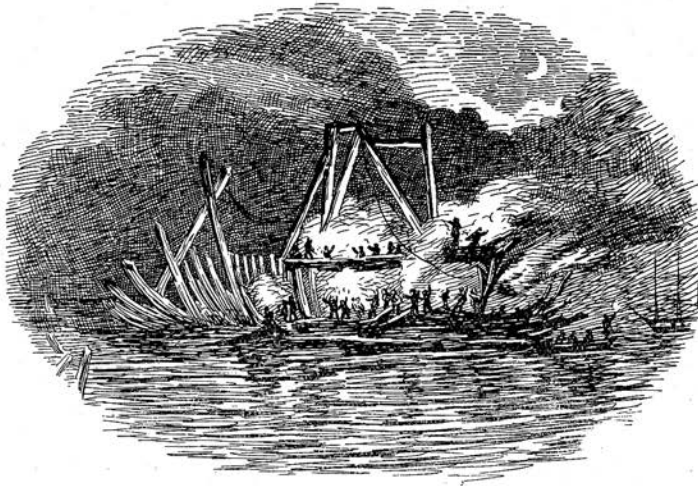


taken off, as the rattling of the chain would cause people to look at them. Loveless told him that he did not wish for any such thing, as he was not ashamed to wear the chain, conscious of his innocence.

Arrival at  
Portsmouth

It was not until 9 p.m. that he arrived at Portsmouth where he was given in charge of an officer of the "York" hulk. George Loveless was appalled at the sight which greeted him. Men stripped to the waist, lurching rather than walking, with clanking chains fastened to their legs, the majority a type of crushed and brutalised humanity which the peaceful countryman had never dreamed to exist. Fortunately, he was treated with consideration. Although he was manacled like the rest, he was put into one of the quietest wards on the vessel, in consequence of the good report which the Captain had received about him from the prison. He remained working each day in the gun wharf party.

That this was not pleasant duty may be imagined from the testimony of James Hardie Vaux, who transported for theft, says in his Memoirs, that the convicts were employed in various kinds of labour in gangs of sixteen to twenty men, under the direction of a guard. "These guards are most commonly of the lowest class of human being, wretches, devoid of all feeling, ignorant in the extreme, brutal by nature and rendered tyrannical and cruel by the consciousness of the power they possess. No others but such as I have described would hold the situation, their wages being not more than a day labourer would earn in London. They invariably carry a ponderous stick with



THE END OF THE "YORK"

which without the smallest provocation they will fell an unfortunate convict to the ground, and frequently repeat their blows long after the poor sufferer is insensible." The working parties laboured from 7 a.m. until sunset, and were fed on victuals of the worst kind, both the weight and measure being deficient. Such were the conditions under which George Loveless toiled for the six weeks immediately before his departure for Tasmania.

One day, whilst on the wharf, weighing old iron he overheard a conversation between two gentlemen who were standing by idly watching the convicts at work. One of them casually remarked to the other: "O'Connor has done all he can for the Trade Unionists, but the Government has determined to transport them." Loveless pricked up his ears at this, and from further conversation he gathered that

The  
conversation  
on the  
wharf



many meetings had been held protesting against the sentences. It gave him renewed courage to know that he was not forgotten, and that many thousands were so steadfastly fighting his battle.

On May 17, he was told to prepare for transportation. After having stripped off his clothes, he put on a new suit, new irons were riveted on him, and he joined the ship "William Metcalfe" at Spithead. The vessel remained there a week, during which the final preparations for the voyage were made.

In a letter to his wife on the eve of his departure, the splendid courage and unflinching spirit of George Loveless is displayed. He wrote:—

"I thank you, my dear wife, for the kind attention you have ever paid me, and you may safely rely upon it that as long as I live it will be my constant endeavour to return that kindness in every possible way, and hope to send to you as soon as we reach our place of destiny, and that I shall never forget the promise made at the Altar; and though we may part awhile, I shall consider myself under the same obligations as though living in your immediate presence. Be satisfied, my dear Betsy, on my account. Depend upon it it will work together for good and we shall yet rejoice together. I hope you will pay particular attention to the morals and spiritual interest of the children. Don't send me any money to distress yourself. I shall do well, for He who is Lord of the winds and waves will be my support in life and death."

On Sunday, May 25, 1834, the anchor was taken up, the sails were set and with her bows dipping and curtsying to the swell, the ship, with her cargo of human misery, steered for the open sea. Land's End was passed the following evening, and George Loveless gazed at the receding coast of the country which had treated him so unjustly.

George  
Loveless sails  
in "William  
Metcalfe"



LAND'S END