

KNOT



NEWS

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Om Knutar and the Thor Lundberg Letter

by Des Pawson

I think it was about 1969 when I visited the National Maritime Museum Library for the first time. I had decided to start putting together notes on knots and the tools used by the rope and canvas trades. I had made an appointment to visit this very special place. I arrived, coat and bag left with the attendant outside the library, only note book and pencil being allowed in to the library itself. Once inside the library itself I filled in the relevant forms to obtain a reader's ticket and explained what I wanted to see: all they had on knots, seamanship rigging and sail making.

Now, you must remember this was before computer records, so no search could be made by key word, just a card index system of titles. You needed to know the title to ask to see it. How could I begin to see the books that were relevant? Many of the books were kept in locked glass fronted bookcases called "presses", in the reading room itself. Rare and obscure works were kept in an archive and were called for by filling in a form for each book, which was then brought up from the basement by a porter. However, the librarian was very helpful and showed me the press that contained the knot books, opened it

and allowed me to select those books I wished to study.

I looked at many books that day, books that in years to come would be very familiar to me. One book I picked out was particularly special, *Om Knutar* by Hjalmar Öhrvall. I was familiar with the name from odd quotes in Ashley and Day. There were two very special things about the copy in the library. The first extraordinary thing was that the pages were uncut; it had never been looked at! The second thing was the letter slipped inside it. The letter was from a Thor Lundberg to a Dr. Gosse begging him to forward the book to the Seafarer's Education Service so it could be translated and issued as part of ship's libraries.

I went to the librarian and asked what I should do as I wished to look through this book but most of the pages were sealed, having never been cut. I was told that I should cut open those pages I wished to see. I explained that I wished to see the entire book and was given permission to slice open every page, which I did with my pocketknife. I was the first person to look right through this book. What a special treat! But what about the letter? I could have easily slipped the letter amongst my papers, as there was no record of its existence but my conscience would not allow me to steal it. I wanted to show it to others and to celebrate its existence. When I had finished reading the book and the letter I put the letter back in the book and put

the book back in the press. I finished my visit to the library and returned home.

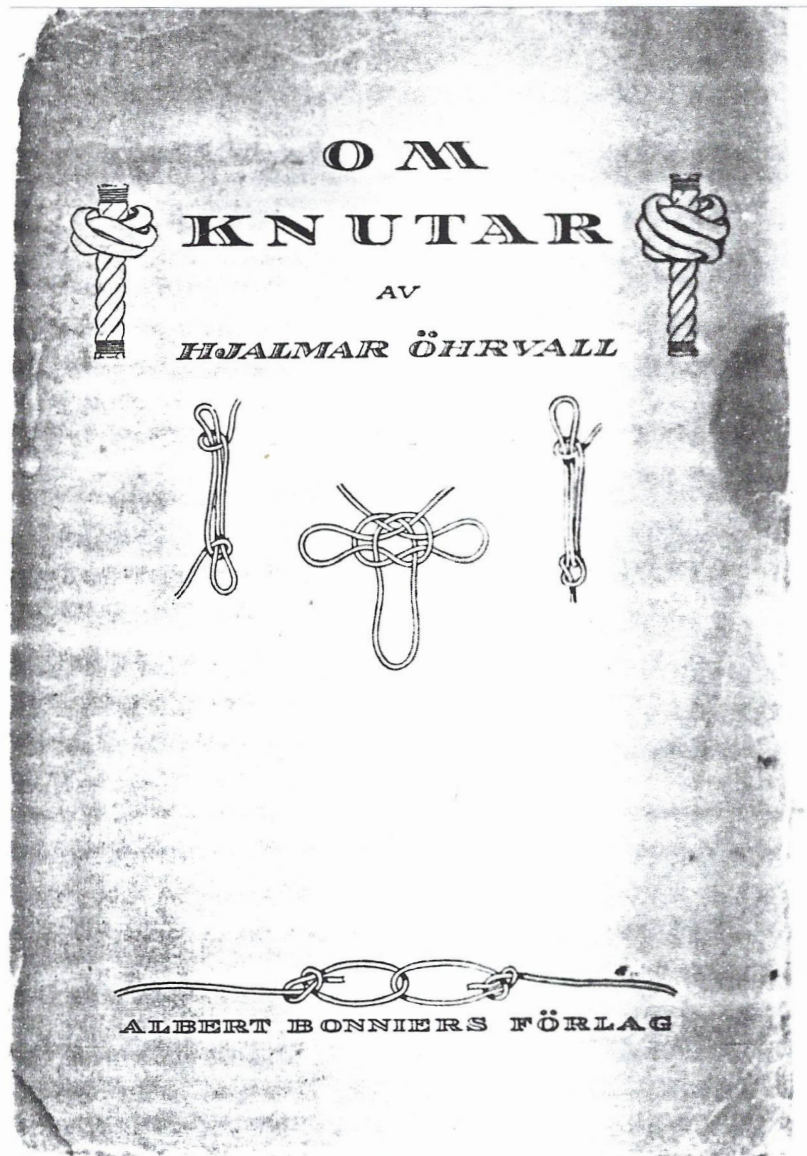
I visited the library on a number of other occasions and had a glance at the book and letter from time to time. I coveted a copy of *Om Knutar* and the letter it contained.

Time passed, by now I was a father of two children, money was tight, but I had started to earn extra cash by selling a few bell ropes and rope mats. Finally, I managed to get my own copy of the book by mail from a bookshop in Stockholm; it was at the time the most expensive book I had ever purchased.

Time moved on and I moved to Ipswich and one day I found myself passing through Greenwich with a couple of hours to spare and thought that I would revisit the library and look at the letter, perhaps get it photocopied to go in my own copy. What a performance! My library ticket had run out so I was told that I would have to make an appointment to visit the library. But I was there, could I not speak to the librarian? No, I must make an appointment. How was that to be done? By phone or letter. So I finished up having to use the public telephone in the entrance to the Museum to phone the librarian to gain access to the library to look at the letter they did not know they had and that I could have walked out with years before. I did manage to get into the library, arranged for a copy of the letter to be made, and subsequently wrote a letter of complaint, to which I got a bland reply about it not being possible for people walking off the streets to look at the books in a casual manner.

Time passed and Geoffrey Budworth and I met. On planning the inaugural meeting of the IGKT, we thought it would be a nice thing to give everyone who attended the meeting a copy of the Thor Lundberg letter. Despite Geoffrey's good connections with the Museum, they would not allow us to purchase a number of photocopies to give away. Our solution was to type out the text and give this typescript to each person that attended the meeting and it continued to be issued for a short while to all those who joined the IGKT.

I have not visited the Library to check that the book still contains the letter but I trust that it does.



And for to festne his hood under his chyn
He hadde of gold ywroght a curious pyn;
A love-knotte in the gretter ende ther was.

Geoffrey Chaucer
The Canterbury Tales

"....THE USEFUL AND BEAUTIFUL SCIENCE OF KNOTS...."

This phrase, from a letter written by a Swede named Lundberg over 50 years ago, sums up what many knotting enthusiasts feel. The Lundberg letter was discovered by my good friend and knot craftsman, Des Pawson of Ipswich, between the pages of 'Om Knutar' (On Knots) by Hjalmar Öhrvall, published in 1908, on the shelves of the Reading Room in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich: and we think that everyone attending this unique gathering of knot tyers aboard R.R.S. 'Discovery' berthed in St. Katherine's Dock, London E.1, on Saturday, April 17, 1982, will appreciate a transcript of the letter.

Upsala
Ö. Ågat. 49B
April 25th 1929

Dear Doctor Gosse,

I have much pleasure in sending you one of the most interesting books which ever have been written in Swedish, only regretting that you do not master this useful language. But you have told me that you know a person who is able to translate for you. Knots in fact are a very good hobby. The late Professor Öhrvall who is the author of the book had this hobby. A friend of mine got it too. As yet I have not got the worst of it. But it will come sooner or later. It will now be seen whether you are able to avoid it or not

Please excuse me for suspecting you of going to be entangled in knots, or rather the useful and beautiful science of knots. I beg you kindly to receive one of the copies whether you are going to read it or not. As to the other, allow me to beg you kindly to send it to Seafarer's Education Service, London. The address is unknown to me. I have tried to get it but in vain. They are issuing "Courses of reading in connection with the crews' libraries provided on ships". No. 1-3 have been issued (in 1927?). I would be very grateful if you would add a few lines asking them if a translation of the book would be of service for their series. If so, they had better to write to Mr. Allen Almkvist, who is a relative of the late Professor Öhrvall. His address is Wahrendorffsgatan 1, Stockholm, Sweden.

I hope this will be very easily done thanks to your good relations to many London booksellers who are able easily to get the address that I have not been able to find out. I beg to say that I shall always be glad to return you the service and I remain, Dear Sir,

Yours very sincerely,
Thor Lundberg

I beg to say that I
shall always be glad to
return you the service and
remain, dear Sir,...

Yours very sincerely,

Wm. A. Wundberg

Windsor,
O. Sept. 19th,
April 25th, 1929.

Dear Doctor Foster,

I have much pleasure in
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He is a relative of the
Professor at Hull. The address is
Walsworthsgate, 1, Hockley
London.

I hope this will be very
easily done thanks to your
good relations to many ex-
traordinary, who are able
easily to get the address that
I have not been able to
find out.

Some readers of *Knot News* may have already read this article from the January 2004 issue of *Sail* magazine. Something this well said can always stand a second look.

It is reprinted here by the kind permission of the author.

End of the Line

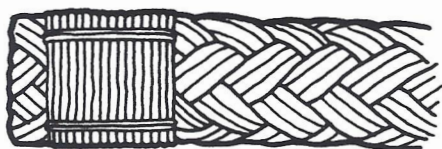
Time was when knowing how to take
care of ropes was an essential sailing skill
by Tom Cunliffe

I was recently checking through the latest curriculum issued by a well known sail-training authority when a nasty suspicion began to dawn on me. A number of the changes sensibly reflected recent developments, but not all were winners. I started out by applauding the decisions to add mastery of waypoints and cross-track error to the official song sheet, but something stuck in my throat when I realized that the timeless skill of whipping a rope's end had been expunged and that there was no requirement to execute even a simple eye splice. I reached for the telephone.

"Just how are you proposing that future generations prevent their lines from opening up like cauliflowers?" I inquired politely.

"Do as we do," they replied. "Either tape the ends or melt them with a hot knife. In any case, there isn't much three-strand rope on most boats nowadays, and whipping braided line requires a palm and needle..."

If I'd had any guts, I'd have protested. Instead, I blandly reminded the smooth voice of authority that many a salty sailboat could still feature a few good sailmaker's whippings. They remained adamant. The sailor of today, they implied, has more important things to do than fiddle with ropes.



I have always tried to encourage students to take pride in handling their string, lines and hawsers. After all, these are still our primary tools, and as such they deserve respect. A mainsheet neatly coiled and hung in perfect symmetry from the boom end delivers a strong message that the boat's skipper is one who cares. When this is augmented by a sennit bellrope, one or two wall-and-crown stoppers, and a knobbly Monkey's Fist on the heaving line, the impression is confirmed. Very fine they look, too - but before we get carried away, here's a word of warning about how the pastime of fancy knotting can backfire.

A few years back I sailed with a man old enough to be my father who had signed on as a teenager deckhand to deliver a creaky schooner in the early days after World War II. This hefty craft had recently been sold out of trading and was freshly rigged as a yacht. The rest of the crew were a hastily swept up crowd of tough professionals who had manned vessels like her in their glory days. As they slipped the lines, the new owner waved them off and prudently returned to his labors ashore to chip away at the mountain of debt his purchase was already accruing.

The passage was an overnigher, and the boy, being keen as all good teenagers are, offered to stand the middle watch alone from 0000 until 0400. His elders agreed with alacrity and tumbled below to their bunks, leaving the boat sailing close-hauled in moderate conditions. Padding quietly around the deck, my chum juggled the headsail and foresail sheets until the schooner was sailing herself with the helm lashed. Pleased with his efforts and searching for something to do, he perched himself on the taffrail and passed the remaining hours making a six-tuck ocean plat doormat out of a long length of rope he'd found lying on deck abaft the wheel.

He'd acquired the skill with help of a copy of the *Ashley Book of Knots*, a tome the size of a tombstone. This had been a parting gift from his mother, who must have imagined that such a comprehensive reference would be useful to her son. The mat was big, flat, tightly woven and hairy. In fact, considering it had been created mostly by feel, it was a work of art, so he left it proudly on display as the bleary-eyed old guard turned out to relieve him at first light.

Three hours later the bacon was sizzling in the pan and all hands looked forward to breakfast when the morning sun dimmed and fog crawled in to take its place. The wind held good and the boat kept up her steady 4 knots until the noise of

machinery somewhere out in the murk indicated that, although far from land, they were no longer alone. The boy came on deck just in time to see an oversized dragger hauling its nets a few boat lengths ahead. Farther to windward, another fishing vessel was filling the rest of the visible horizon. The schooner had only one option.

"Bear away!" bawled the skipper.

The helmsman spun the spokes, and the bowsprit began to sweep to leeward. All hands watched and held their breath, but it wasn't sweeping nearly enough. The mainboom would have done credit to a serious telegraph pole, and the huge gaff mainsail was holding her head obstinately up to the wind.

"Leggo your mainsheet!"

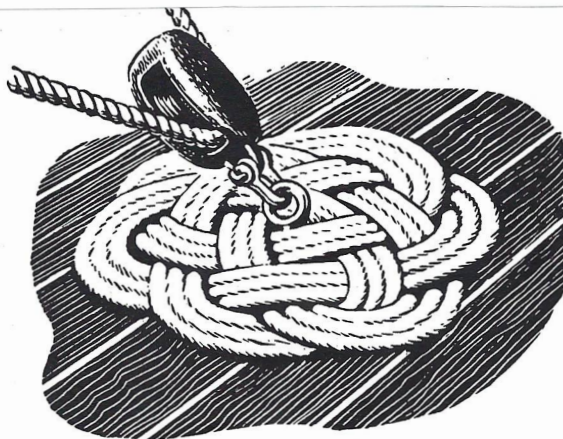
The mate jumped to the massive wooden cleat and threw off the turns. The first 20 feet of rope rattled out at lightening speed, but instead of the remainder running smoothly off the coil he had left there the previous evening, a large mat lifted off the deck and jammed itself solidly into the jaws of the heavy wooden quarter block. In the darkness of his solo night watch, the lad had unwittingly used the sheet for his ocean plat. The scene now jerked into a sort of slow-motion fantasy as the mate glowered first at the bowsprit, then at the gigantic knot in the block. The spar was nowhere near to clearing the trawler's gear, but the culprit had fingered himself unambiguously by flushing to the color of the port sidelight. The mate took a long second to consider the situation and was clearly torn between disemboweling my friend and sending him out onto the headgear as a fender to cushion the approaching collision.

After what seemed like an interminable hiatus, this man of action came to life. He whipped out a knife so sharp that he had been seen shaving with it and, flying in the face of a lifetime of thinking seriously before he cut any rope at all, sliced through that brand-new mainsheet as if it had been a length of string on a Christmas present. From all accounts he seemed about to burst into tears, but the schooner knew what she had to do. Eased of the press of her mailsail, she shot upright, bore away like a dinghy, and swept around the trawler's stern.

The main had now to be dropped so that the sheetless boom could be recovered, and my friend's next lesson was to go without his bacon while learning how to execute a long splice. For the uninitiated, this traditional technique enables two lengths of three-strand rope to be joined more or less seamlessly – or at least sufficiently cleanly

to pass through a block. There are many ways of achieving this happy state. None of them is easy, some succeed better than others, and, like simple whipping, today's sailing syllabi are largely innocent of them all.

Now I'm not saying that every sailor aboard a modern production sloop should be able to produce a masthead jury knot as rapidly as a good bartender can mix a martini, but I do believe we should be encouraged to delight in time-honored skills. I don't intend to go into the nitty-gritty of how to tuck a quick eye splice into the end of a mooring line or tie a carrick bend behind your back with one hand on a black night, because there are plenty of excellent books that can do this. Every boat should have at least one on board; my personal favorite is Hervey Garrett Smith's *The Arts of the Sailor*. This little volume gave my boat a new lease on life when it showed me how to work a fresh clew cringle into my staysail after the original had blown to blazes off Greenland. It also saved me from incipient bankruptcy with its lucid account on how to produce a thump mat out of a retired length of rope. These make great table coasters if you don't mind the ethnic touch, and, arriving one time in Barbados from South America with a locker full of ancient cordage and not a penny to my name, I turned the junk into profit by selling literally piles of them to the tourists.



Self-help is the sailor's watchword, and rope is our lifeline. Discovering even a few of the wonderful things that can be done with it makes more competent seaman and -woman of us all. A meaty Turk's Head marking the point on the wheel where the rudder is on centerline won't help you sail efficiently to windward, but each time your hand grasps it, it reminds you that you are bound to the past and that you owe future generations more than a twist of plastic tape.

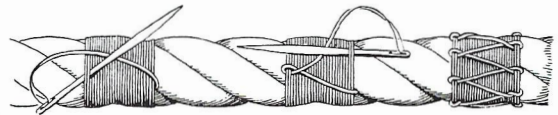
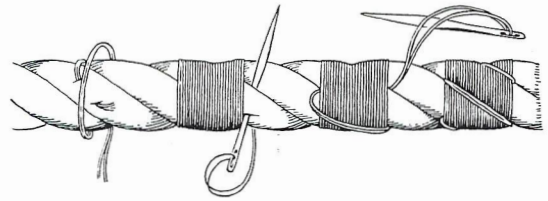
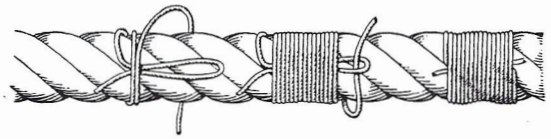
IGKT-PAB Meetings

Monthly Meetings are held at the Los Angeles Maritime Institute, which is right next door to the Los Angeles Maritime Museum, Berth 84, at the Foot of Sixth Street in San Pedro, California.

The meetings are on the second Tuesday of each month (except July and August) from 7:00 to 9:00 PM. Our gatherings are very informal and everyone is welcome to attend. Someone always brings a knotted work piece to show and it is great fun to see or share a new knot trick or technique.

The meetings schedule for 2004 are:

March 9th April 13th May 11th



Knot News

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