THE STRANGEST MILLIONAIRE IN THE WORLD.

Crazy Doings of Mr. Bayard Brown, of New York, Who Lives a Hermit's Life on a Rusty Old Steam Yacht in England and Amuses Himself by Playing Tricks on His Crew.

LONDON, Sept. 10.—The most remarkable hermit in the world is a millionaire New Yorker, who hides in sumptuous, lonely luxury on a great yacht, for seven years anchored in a remote harbor on the Essex coast of England.

His name is Bayard Brown; his family one of the most distinguished in America; his fortune stupendous; his whim (or mania) unique. Midst all the list of strange stories of strange men the story of Bayard Brown must take the lead. He told a part of it to me yesterday in the pure accent of a cultivated New York gentleman. The rest of it was eagerly poured out to me in the quaint jargon of the Essex coast by the rough fisher folk before whose doors he has decided that his splendid hermitage, the Valfreia, shall float until solitude and eccentricity kill him or barnacles and old age sink his ship.

Down at the mouth of the little Colne, a river which would make not more than a good-sized American creek at low tide, but which is more than a mile wide in places where the flood tide swells its volume with a fifteen-foot rise, squats the queer little fishing village of Brightlingsea.

The Essex County Directory says it has 3,000 inhabitants, but not more than 2,000 of its people are ever there at one time. One meets only old men—grizzled and gnarled by the tempests and exposure of years afloat—on the streets of Brightlingsea.

When a young man, ashore for a visit, walks through the clean, narrow roadways, he is surrounded or followed by a group of the superannuated seadogs, who, perhaps, envy his youth, or, perhaps, are eager to hear his tales of the life of which they used themselves to tell when they were strong like him. The women of Brightlingsea are dressed in print gowns. Folded shawls form the almost universal substitute for hats, and the faces under the folded shawls are deeply lined, as is natural to faces whose owners are ever mourning for some loved one lost at sea, or worrying in the fear that news of a storm-surrounded death may be brought at any moment by the red-nosed old postman, who twice a day makes his energetic rounds.

One woman in Brightlingsea has had seven sons and her husband swallowed up by cold and cruel Northern waters. Another wanders, demented, by the waterside, waiting for her whole family of five boys to come home from Boston Harbor, where they sank with a cattle ship fifteen years ago.

The men of Brightlingsea wear blue shirts and long cotton caps, with an occasional old sou'wester. Their great sea boots clogger along the hard flint roads, rolling like yawls in a heavy sea. The houses are built flush with the street line, and the ground floors are all below the road level. The place is as primitive as an English village built before America was discovered can be. And it is in the river at the doors of Brightlingsea that Bayard Brown, American millionaire and once celebrated New York society man, has decided to permanently float.

Ten years ago Bayard Brown was a leader in Gotham's most exclusively fashionable set. He was thirty-seven years old then and a very handsome man. His father was the late Alexander Speers Brown, his grandfather the late Robert Bayard. His cousins are Robert Fulton Cutting and W. Bayard Cutting, who have done so much to provide model tenements for the poor of New York City; who are even now at the head of that magnificent enterprise, the Improved Housing Council, which is devoting a million dollars to supplying sanitary living places for the poor in the crowded wards and in the suburbs.

Bayard Brown—McEvers Bayard Brown is his full name—left New York City nine years ago. Before that time he had been deeply interested in most sports other than yachting, but had not devoted much time or money to things afloat. If he had then developed any eccentricities they had not been marked enough to be noticed by his society friends.

Suddenly, however, he showed a desire for yachting. He bought a splendid boat and started on a two years' cruise in the most out-of-the-way waters on the earth. While on this cruise the strange fancies which have since so unfortunately wound his life about with chains, unquestionably as galling to himself as to his relatives, began.

There is little doubt that Bayard Brown was the first to discover his own insanity. It may be that queer things had happened before he realized his unfortunate condition but they told the tale of madness to no one but himself. It is believed that the very first sign was one which has often since occasioned remark. He became possessed of an uncontrollable desire to wet his fellowmen. One night, when he was cruising in his first yacht, off the coast of Norway, he yielded to this desire, and poured bucket after bucket of ice-cold water from the sea into the bunks of the sailors on his yacht.

The men to whom he did it did not mind it much—a good sailor should not object to a wetting—but it broke the heart and broke the spirit of the man who did it. He had yielded to his queer desire, and he knew that he would yield again. And he also knew that the fact that he had yielded meant that he was mad.

Straightway he had his yacht steered to the quiet little harbor of Brightlingsea, where she had once been laid up for repairs. It was probably at this time that he conceived the half crazy, half cunning scheme which he has since carried out. The yacht which he then owned was not large enough for his purpose, so he placed her on the lists of Pettitt & Dufree, the well-known London yachting agents, and eventually sold her to a brother of the Russian Emperor. Then he purchased of Sir William Fearce, a famous Scotch shipbuilder, the Lady Tolfrida, one of the most splendid craft afloat.

She is of 735 tons register, and is almost one-third as long as the great Cunard steamship Lucania. Her hull is of the finest shipbuilding steel; her decks are of Indian teakwood, her masts are slender iron tubes, her fittings are superb.

Before he moved his belongings into the Lady Tolfrida he had her moored beside his old yacht. When he gave up possession of his old yacht he gave up the name of his new one. The Lady Tolfrida became the Valfreia, and it is in the Valfreia that he hides to-day. No one knows where he found the name. It means nothing in mythology—it is one of Bayard Brown's strange fancies.

Since that moment when the anchor of the rechristened yacht was first dropped at the mouth of the ebbing and swelling Colne it has not been raised. Storms may come and go, the tide may rise and fall, seasons pass and come again, but the Valfreia swings lazily by the same double chain which rattled splashing and pulling into the tide water mud seven years ago. The only voyages which the splendid yacht has made have been her slow swingings with the tide. At ebb she points up stream; at flood she points down stream. Her engines have rusted and gone wrong. Tons of sea filth have gathered on her bottom. Her sails have mildewed on her spars. Her propeller is probably as firmly fixed in the place where it was wont to whirl as are the trees which are rooted in New York's City Hall Park fixed in the shadow of Aldermanic glory.

Bayard Brown's first act after he had settled himself in solitary luxury on the Valfreiya was to engage a new crew on such terms as no crew was ever asked to agree to before. He apparently gave up to his mania without reservation. He first made the usual stipulations as to the duties of the men. Although it was unquestionably his intention even then to keep his ship tightly anchored at Brightlingsea, he was as careful in his requirements of sea-going abilities in his men as he would have been had he been about to start on a voyage around the world. Indeed he still insists that his men shall have every qualification necessary to work aloft in heavy weather.

His first crew consisted of forty-three men—a tremendous number even for so big a boat as the Valfreia. Each man had to agree to "submit cheerfully to any penalties for bad work or insubordination" which the owner might choose to inflict. The men did not understand this clause at first. Every sailor who has ever talked with a man from Brightlingsea now knows what it means.

Captain Fellgate, a mysterious sort of man, who kept completely out of the way while I was on board the Valfreia, and who is the only person whom Bayard Brown has permitted to stay with him for the whole of the time since he left New York nine years ago, was the man who called the first unfortunate seaman into the owner's saloon for the infliction of a "penalty."

"Captain," said Mr. Brown, "this man wet my pillow last night before I went to bed."

"I think you must be mistaken, sir," said the Captain.

"No, I am not mistaken," shouted the owner. Captain Fellgate discreetly withdrew. The seaman protested that he was innocent; that he not only had not wet the pillow, but that, as he had never been aft or below, except into the fo'c's'le, he had no idea where the owner's stateroom and therefore his pillow was. But Mr. Brown insisted.

"You agreed to submit to my penalties, didn't you?" he demanded.

"Well, yes, sir," replied the sailor.

"You must have a whipping," declared Mr. Brown, with emphasis.

With that he brought out a long, slender, supple hickory whip-stock, like those to which Essex teamsters are wont to attach a long lash, and laid on with it right lustily. The seaman howled with pain, as well he might, for each blow left a long, red welt, calculated to remain in evidence for weeks.

"There," said Mr. Brown, after he had finished, and in nigh good nature. "That wasn't bad, was it? Now you may go; and don't wet my pillow again." He gave the man a sovereign.

He went. He went ashore, and he did not go back. C 1896

Within a month nearly every one of the forty of the Valfreia's crew had suffered some like penalty, and nearly all had left the ship. Some few stayed, content to submit to the "penalties" of the eccentric owner, for he was as generous with money as he was with lashings. Captain Fellgate was the only man against whom Bayard Brown never raised his hand. He evidently feels much respect for that sturdy seaman, for he has never offered to strike him during all of the years they have been together.

When the crew of the Valfreia had dwindled to four men, the owner set about getting together a new lot. This he accomplished with difficulty, for the stories of his "penalties" had gone abroad, and since that time he has never succeeded in inducing more than eighteen men at once to work for him on the yacht. Often he reduces the number of his men so that there are actually not enough to keep him comfortable.

When I boarded the Valfreia, he had only one man besides the captain in his employ. The steward, a handsome, sturdy, good-tempered Essex coastman, named Martin, said to me:

"He sent me ashore to get a whipping Soonda week. That do be the way he allus punish me. He never strikes me. He knows I do be the kind of mon who doon't like ut."

One glance at Martin would convince the most sceptical of that fact.

"Who did he think would give you the whipping on shore, Mr. Martin?" I asked.

"My woman. 'Have your wife whip you good,' he says to me, 'and then coom back to see me.' I came ashore and stayed two days. Then I went back on board.

"There were no fire in the galley, and Mr. Brown had had not a bit to eat except cold stuff since I had gone. 'Well, Martin,' says he, 'did you get your whipping?' 'Yes,' says I. 'Was it a good one, Martin?' 'Yes,' says I. 'Can I stay with you now, sir, again?' I likes the mon, you know, an' he pays big wages. 'I don't know, Martin. You can cook my breakfast.'

"Well, I cooked his breakfast, and I cooked his dinner. Then I went on shore, for Mr. Brown likes to have his men sleep on shore. That went on for a week, Mr. Brown never engaging me, nor saying anything about it.

"Then, one morning he come to me an' he says, 'Martin, you've melted spoilt tar up, an' mixed it with bilge water, an' you've put it in my food.'

"Of course, nothing of that sort had happened, but there was no use of denying it. He told me to go ashore and have my wife give me another good whipping. He does that with all the men, when he don't feel like whipping them himself, and he do be getting pretty fat. He seems to feel, no doubt, that they will do quite as he says, and find some one who will lash them hard.

"I went back again the next morning, but he made me go ashore right after I had cooked his breakfast. He said I had knocked him about—which, of course, I hadn't. He told me not to come back until he sent for me, and said that I must write him a letter telling him just what I would do, and just what I wouldn't do. I wrote him a bit of a letter, but I haven't heerd from him."

"Would you like to go back?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I like Mr. Brown. He's a very fine man when he isn't queer, and he's very liberal."

Bayard Brown's original eccentricity—the desire to wet down his fellow-creatures—is still a part of his strange ideas. He is as likely now to rush into the fo'c'sle of the Valfreia at 2 o'clock in the morning and throw a pailful of ice water into the bunk of one of his sleeping sailors as ever. He is still in possession of one of his early instruments of torture—a great syringe such as are used in England for washing windows—and sometimes he foregoes the bucket in its favor.

This syringe will hold about two quarts of water, and he is so expert now in aiming it that he can deluge one of his employes at five yards' distance. He never uses this in the daytime, rarely throwing more than a glassful of water at anybody before nightfall.

His men do not object especially to his water mania, but he has certain little tricks which are less pleasant. Many times he has dashed up to the berth of a sleeping sailor in the middle of the night and given him a sound beating with a cudgel before he knew whether he was being beaten or having a nightmare. One of his sailors, who was particularly marked out for these nocturnal visitations, rigged a padded wooden rail over his berth so that the blows would fall on that instead of on his head and body. When his gentle employer discovered the ruse he declared himself to have been greatly injured and swindled, and told the man to go ashore, get a sound whipping from his wife and never come back. But the man was unmarried.

Mr. Brown's little peculiarities are so well understood by this time that his men rarely complain to the officials ashore of his treatment; but still there have been many summonses issued against him. Not long ago a fireman was rowed ashore with a broken leg. He claimed that Mr. Brown had hit him with a heavy chair, and summoned him to appear in court in a damage suit. He settled his case for £15, or $75.

Mr. Brown never appears in court. His lawyer is one of the best known solicitors in Colchester, and no one knows but himself and his employer how many lacerated feelings and wounded bodies he has eased with the plentiful money of his wealthy patron.

It is doubtful, however, if complainants against the American millionaire—he is known as the "American billionaire" in Brightlingsea—would get much comfort from the county courts, for Mr. Brown has been very generous in his public gifts. He has given beautiful parks or "public recreation grounds" to both Colchester and Brightlingsea and has contributed very largely to the furnishing and support of the public libraries in both places. These and other munificent acts have, it is said, made the authorities round about the Valfreia—and the ancient "watch tower" of the Lord of the Manor stands gloomily on a point not five hundred yards from where the Valfreia is anchored—singularly lenient in their views of any little peccadillo on the part of Mr. Brown. An American who knows something about the case said the other day:

"His has been the strangest mixture of odd freaks and logical reasoning I have ever heard of. I have no doubt that the first thing that occurred to him when he became convinced that he was going mad was the fear that he would be locked up in some asylum and deprived of the control of his property, which amounts to almost $2,000,000. Straightway he decided that if prisoner he must be because of the trick hard Fate had played on him, he should be his own prisoner. Hence the Valfreia and her anchorage at obscure Brightlingsea.

"But still there remained the probability that some one—either some of his American relatives or some of his English employes—would make an effort to have him officially declared insane and placed in some safe retreat. Such proceedings, in England as in America, must be made through the local authorities. So Mr. Brown cleverly decided to make the local authorities, as well as the people of the surrounding country, his firm friends. He had not been at anchor in Colne a month before he gave his first gift to Brightlingsea, and it was such a gift as a prince might bestow. Others have followed often enough so that no one has had a chance to forget that almost any day Mr. Brown is likely to make Colchester or some other of the nearby places a present ranging in importance from a public drinking fountain to a new town hall or hospital. I do not believe that any of his family has ever tried to disturb him in his seclusion; but I am thoroughly convinced that an effort of that sort would result in direct failure.

"Bayard Brown has succeeded not only in isolating himself, so that he can by no possibility injure any one who does not voluntarily place himself in his way, but has secured freedom from interference by anybody. There is no reason to doubt that unless he gets much worse than he is at present he will live his queer life on undisturbed, until death robs the Valfreia at once of an owner, and an excuse for lying idly at the mouth of the River Colne."

But Mr. Brown's generosity is not all of that utilitarian order which is said to save him from official interference. In the wonderful old Church of All Saints—dating back to 1442—he has hung a splendid chime of ten tubular bells. Every Sunday they join in calling the good folk of Essex to worship with one of the ancient peal which was "generously gyvene" by the Lord of the Manor in 1450, while under them in a safe place is a small Sanctus bell, not now in use, but the very oldest in the country.

Nor does he often turn a deaf ear to any of hundreds of apeals for aid made by the poor people of the country round about. There is scarcely a day which does not see a dozen parties rowing out to the Valfreia to ask the "American Billionaire" for money help. When the Widow Parker loses a cow she pays the ferryman sixpence to take her out to Mr. Bzown. She states the case to him in her broad Essex speech, and the chances are more than even that when she goes back she will carry with her in sovereigns more than her old cow was ever worth. Many are the young fishermen of Brightlingsea who owe their boats and their nets to his generosity. The story of a wreck at sea and succeeding distress ashore never fails to appeal to him.

His life on board the yacht is probably the strangest that a rich man ever lived.

It was a cold, raw, rainy late afternoon when I rowed out to her. The tide was low and the water front of Brightlingsea, as I looked back at it, was made picturesque by the bristling masts of fifty fishing smacks left high and dry on shore by the ebbing tide. The masts and delicate steel rigging of the Valfreia were outlined as if in black ink against a stormy English sunset. Her regulation lights were burning, but otherwise she was in darkness.

As we passed under her bows her graceful figurehead—the only part of the exterior of the craft which is always neatly painted—dipped and rose high above us in a constantly increasing sea. As the falling waves revealed portions of her red hull below the water-line, great masses of barnacles, as big as a man's head, gave mute, dripping testimony to the long years during which the Valfreia had lain at anchor with never a day on dry-dock to cleanse her incredibly foul bottom. Once she was easily a 16-knot boat. Now, even if her engines were in working order, she could not, hampered by the tons of barnacles and sea filth which have accumulated on her, travel more than five.

Bobbing about under the lea of the Valfreia was a small boat which the waterman was fending away from the great yacht's iron side with his hands. Over it was the wooden stairway which is let down for welcome guests. To it a man had pulled himself up, and was standing on the landing platform parleying with some one on the deck of the yacht.

"It's a young clerk from Colchester," said the ferryman who was rowing us. "He's trying to get Mr. Brown to pay some more of his gambling debts." A few moments later the young man climbed down, swung by his hands a moment from the supports of the landing stage and finally dropped into his boat as she bobbed up. "I guess he didn't get it this time," said our ferryman as the boat and its occupants vanished into the gathering darkness.

We hailed the Valfreia a dozen times before any response came. At last the head of the owner himself peered over the rail at us. A few moments later we stood on the deck of Bayard Brown's unique and splendid hermitage.

Bayard Brown is a man of about the average height, as elegantly dressed that night as he ever was for an Easter Sunday stroll on Fifth avenue. His figure is very well rounded, but his clothes fitted it perfectly. His iron-gray hair was brushed straight up from his broad, handsome forehead, and his iron-gray beard came to a round point beneath a chin well formed and determined. His eyes were the alert gray eyes of an up-to-date New York business man. His hands were white, soft and well cared for. It was hard to believe that it was of this self-possessed, handsome gentleman, whose face is almost the duplicate of R. Fulton Cutting's, that all the stories we had heard on shore, and of whose verity there could be no doubt, were told. When he spoke his voice was unusually pleasant, his accent that of a cultivated and polished New Yorker.

A tour of the yacht revealed two things—princely luxury of fittings, pitiful poverty of care. The great saloon, upholstered in maroon plush and fitted with superbly carved oak woodwork, has room at its table to dine forty people, all of whom could find sleeping accommodations in the commodious staterooms of the yacht. It is in this saloon that Bayard Brown, the hermit, eats his lonely meals. The best that the country affords is served to him. He lives sumptuously. The appearance of less than a ten-pound joint upon his table is certain to be the occasion for an outbreak, and a joint once cut must never be seen by him again.

His wines he orders himself in London on the infrequent occasions when business compels him to visit the metropolis. It is needless to say that these visits are as unostentatious as possible. He drinks very little—two or three times a week sipping a glass of sherry or Scotch whiskey. His table, when he eats, is set with the most magnificent solid silver. It is believed that there is plate worth many thousands of pounds on board the Valfreia. His hours for meals are as eccentric as his treatment of his men. Breakfast is served three-quarters of an hour after he rises—and he is as likely to rise at 6 o'clock in the morning as he is to rise at 4 in the afternoon.

Before he dresses he must have his hot salt-water bath in the beautiful little bathroom opening from his stateroom, and after being thoroughly dried he must be rubbed down in oil. It is during these rubbings down that he most frequently conceives the idea that he has been beaten, an idea which is certain to make trouble for whoever is acting at the moment as his valet. This may be anybody on board, from an able seaman to the steward. He never keeps a man servant in the proper sense of the term.

"You have poured cold water down the middle, the very middle of my back!" he may shout. Or, "You have drowned that oil with the essence of thyme, you know you have, you ruffian!" He selects the most unusual drugs and fluids as those with which he accuses his men of mixing with his oil. Then follows a battle.

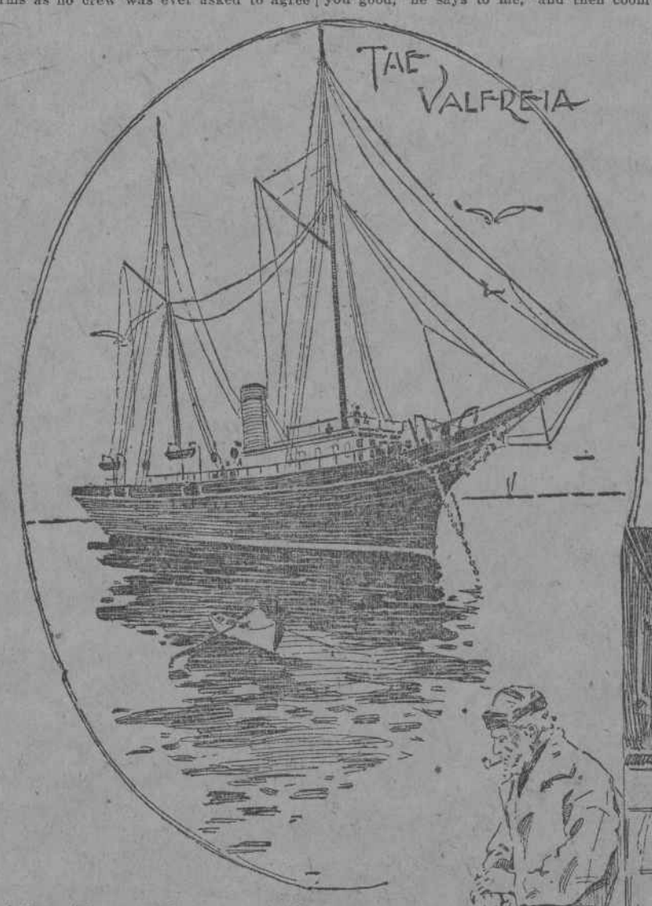
Luncheon he omits altogether. An hour before dinner his mail must be brought to him. This is generally voluminous. He keeps in constant correspondence with his relatives in America. He receives many business letters from London and begging letters innumerable.

Besides his letters three American newspapers are sent to him daily. Since the Journal changed management he has received it regularly. His men say that he is tremendously secretive about his mail. Such letters as it is necessary for him to preserve are filed behind locked doors; those which he can destroy he thrusts into the fire immediately after he has read them. He is equally careful to see to it that his men have no opportunity to read the New York papers. He reads them hastily and immediately afterward puts them into the galley stove with his own hands and waits until he has seen them reduced to ashes.

It is in writing replies to his letters, reading his newspapers, dipping into some of the 1,200 books which form the splendid library of the Valfreia, and receiving the many visitors who come a-begging to the yacht that this American of millions passes his long, long days. When he talks with his men his conversation is rarely coherent for any length of time. He mutters much about his father, but never mentions any other relative. No one has ever heard his mother's name pass his lips since he has been on the Valfreia. Rarely he speaks of the way things are "done on the other side," meaning in America. The only bit of American slang which has been recognized in his speech by his men he uses when he refuses applicants for aid. "I wont give you a red cent" is his invariable formula.

To us, during that call while the wind whistled and rattled the rain against the windows without, he was the soul of courtesy. Sometimes it was impossible to understand what he said—his words were low, thea, and mumbled—and we soon learned that it annoyed him to be asked to repeat. Almost all of the time his lips were slightly opened in a pleasant smile, and his hands were ever thrust deeply into his pockets—the trick of an American.

He said no word of apology for the neglected condition of his ship—dust and disorder were everywhere—but he expressed extreme annoyance at the fact that the one sailor on board had such imperfect knowledge of the dynamos that the electric lighting was most imperfect. He asked for no news from home, and immediately changed the subject whenever we spoke of America. He ordinarily expresses the keenest dislike of Americans, and has never but once before knowingly permitted either an American or a woman on board the Valfreia. That once was when his aunt, Mrs. Schuyler, of New York, visited the yacht. She was not welcomed on board, but she was permitted to remain over Sunday, although it is believed that she did not see the boat's owner during her stay. An absurd story was told about his having warned her off with a blunderbuss, but all Brightlingsea denies this.

Mr. Brown has many fire-arms on board and he is an expert marksman; but those who come in daily contact with him say that they are left lying about promiscuously and are never loaded, and that he has never pointed one or threatened to point one at a human being.

McEvers Bayard Brown, the unique hermit of Brightlingsea, is very strange, but not dangerous.