

## A CLASSIC OF THE SEA

Introduction to "Two Years before the Mast."

Once in a hundred years is a book written that lives not alone for its own century but which becomes a document for the future centuries. Such a book is Dana's. When Marryat's and Cooper's sea novels are gone to dust, stimulating and joyful as they have been to generations of men, still will remain "Two Years Before the Mast."

Paradoxical as it may seem, Dana's book is the classic of the sea, not because there was anything extraordinary about Dana, but for the precise contrary reason that he was just an ordinary, normal man, clear-seeing, hard-headed, controlled, fitted with adequate education to go about the work. He brought a trained mind to put down with untroubled vision what he saw of a certain phase of work-a-day life. There was nothing brilliant nor fly-away about him. He was not a genius. His heart never rode his head. He was neither overlorded by sentiment nor hag-ridden by imagination. Otherwise he might have been guilty of the beautiful exaggerations in Melville's "Typee" or the imaginative orgies in the latter's "Moby Dick." It was Dana's cool poise that saved him from being spread-eagled and flogged when two of his mates were so treated; it was his lack of abandon that prevented him from taking up permanently with the sea, that prevented him from seeing more than one poetical spot, and more than one romantic spot on all the coast of Old California. Yet

these apparent defects were his strength. They enabled him magnificently to write, and for all time, the picture of the sea-life of his time.

Written close to the middle of the last century, such has been the revolution worked in man's method of trafficking with the sea, that the life and conditions described in Dana's book have passed utterly away. Gone are the crack clippers, the driving captains, the hard-bitten but efficient foremast hands. Remain only crawling cargo tanks, dirty tramps, greyhound liners, and a sombre, sordid type of sailing ship. The only records broken to-day by sailing vessels are those for slowness. They are no longer built for speed, nor are they manned before the mast by as sturdy a sailor stock, nor aft the mast are they officered by sail-carrying captains and driving mates.

Speed is left to the liners, who run the silk, and tea, and spices. Admiralty courts, boards of trade, and underwriters frown upon driving and sail-carrying. No more are the free-and-easy, dare-devil days, when fortunes were made in fast runs and lucky ventures, not alone for owners, but for captains as well. Nothing is ventured now. The risks of swift passages cannot be abided. Freights are calculated to the last least fraction of per cent. The captains do no speculating, no bargain-making for the owners. The latter attend to all this, and by wire and cable rake the ports of the seven seas in quest of cargoes, and through their agents make all business arrangements.

It has been learned that small crews only, and large carriers only, can

return a decent interest on the investment. The inevitable corollary is that speed and spirit are at a discount. There is no discussion of the fact that in the sailing merchant marine the seamen, as a class, have sadly deteriorated. Men no longer sell farms to go to sea. But the time of which Dana writes was the heyday of fortune-making and adventure on the sea--with the full connotation of hardship and peril always attendant.

It was Dana's fortune, for the sake of the picture, that the Pilgrim was an average ship, with an average crew and officers, and managed with average discipline. Even the hazing that took place after the California coast was reached, was of the average sort. The Pilgrim savoured not in any way of a hell-ship. The captain, while not the sweetest-natured man in the world, was only an average down-east driver, neither brilliant nor slovenly in his seamanship, neither cruel nor sentimental in the treatment of his men. While, on the one hand, there were no extra liberty days, no delicacies added to the meagre fore-castle fare, nor grog or hot coffee on double watches, on the other hand the crew were not chronically crippled by the continual play of knuckle-dusters and belaying pins. Once, and once only, were men flogged or ironed--a very fair average for the year 1834, for at that time flogging on board merchant vessels was already well on the decline.

The difference between the sea-life then and now can be no better epitomised than in Dana's description of the dress of the sailor of his day:

"The trousers tight around the hips, and thence hanging long and loose around the feet, a superabundance of checked shirt, a low-crowned, well-varnished black hat, worn on the back of the head, with half a fathom of black ribbon hanging over the left eye, and a peculiar tie to the black silk neckerchief."

Though Dana sailed from Boston only three-quarters of a century ago, much that is at present obsolete was then in full sway. For instance, the old word larboard was still in use. He was a member of the larboard watch. The vessel was on the larboard tack. It was only the other day, because of its similarity in sound to starboard, that larboard was changed to port. Try to imagine "All larboard bowlines on deck!" being shouted down into the forecabin of a present day ship. Yet that was the call used on the Pilgrim to fetch Dana and the rest of his watch on deck.

The chronometer, which is merely the least imperfect time-piece man has devised, makes possible the surest and easiest method by far of ascertaining longitude. Yet the Pilgrim sailed in a day when the chronometer was just coming into general use. So little was it depended upon that the Pilgrim carried only one, and that one, going wrong at the outset, was never used again. A navigator of the present would be aghast if asked to voyage for two years, from Boston, around the Horn to California, and back again, without a chronometer. In those days such a proceeding was a matter of course, for those were the days when dead

reckoning was indeed something to reckon on, when running down the latitude was a common way of finding a place, and when lunar observations were direly necessary. It may be fairly asserted that very few merchant officers of to-day ever make a lunar observation, and that a large percentage are unable to do it.

"Sept. 22nd., upon coming on deck at seven bells in the morning we found the other watch aloft throwing water upon the sails, and looking astern we saw a small, clipper-built brig with a black hull heading directly after us. We went to work immediately, and put all the canvas upon the brig which we could get upon her, rigging out oars for studding-sail yards; and contined wetting down the sails by buckets of water whipped up to the mast-head . . . She was armed, and full of men, and showed no colours."

The foregoing sounds like a paragraph from "Midshipman Easy" or the "Water Witch," rather than a paragraph from the soberest, faithfulest, and most literal chronicle of the sea ever written. And yet the chase by a pirate occurred, on board the brig Pilgrim, on September 22nd, 1834--something like only two generations ago.

Dana was the thorough-going type of man, not overbalanced and erratic, without quirk or quibble of temperament. He was efficient, but not brilliant. His was a general all-round efficiency. He was efficient at the law; he was efficient at college; he was efficient as a sailor; he was efficient in the matter of pride, when that pride was no more than

the pride of a fore-castle hand, at twelve dollars a month, in his seaman's task well done, in the smart sailing of his captain, in the clearness and trimness of his ship.

There is no sailor whose cockles of the heart will not warm to Dana's description of the first time he sent down a royal yard. Once or twice he had seen it done. He got an old hand in the crew to coach him. And then, the first anchorage at Monterey, being pretty thick with the second mate, he got him to ask the mate to be sent up the first time the royal yards were struck. "Fortunately," as Dana describes it, "I got through without any word from the officer; and heard the 'well done' of the mate, when the yard reached the deck, with as much satisfaction as I ever felt at Cambridge on seeing a 'bene' at the foot of a Latin exercise."

"This was the first time I had taken a weather ear-ring, and I felt not a little proud to sit astride of the weather yard-arm, past the ear-ring, and sing out 'Haul out to leeward!'" He had been over a year at sea before he essayed this able seaman's task, but he did it, and he did it with pride. And with pride, he went down a four-hundred foot cliff, on a pair of top-gallant studding-sail halyards bent together, to dislodge several dollars worth of stranded bullock hides, though all the acclaim he got from his mates was: "What a d-d fool you were to risk your life for half a dozen hides!"

In brief, it was just this efficiency in pride, as well as work, that

enabled Dana to set down, not merely the photograph detail of life before the mast and hide-droghing on the coast of California, but of the untarnished simple psychology and ethics of the forecastle hands who droghed the hides, stood at the wheel, made and took in sail, tarred down the rigging, holystoned the decks, turned in all-standing, grumbled as they cut about the kid, criticised the seamanship of their officers, and estimated the duration of their exile from the cubic space of the hide-house.

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