

RICHARD HENRY DANA

TWO YEARS Before THE MAST

Introduction by C. L. Bennett



COMPLETE
AND UNABRIDGED

TWO YEARS

Before

THE MAST



RICHARD HENRY DANA



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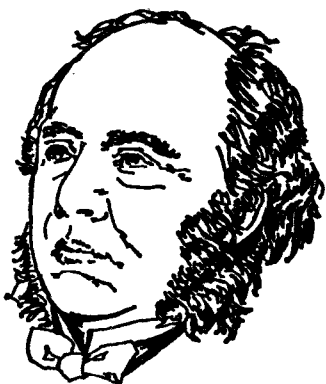
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CONTENTS

1. DEPARTURE	11
2. FIRST IMPRESSIONS	12
3. SHIP'S DUTIES	17
4. SUNDAYS AT SEA	22
5. CAPE HORN	27
6. LOSS OF A MAN	34
7. JUAN FERNANDEZ	38
8. DAILY LIFE	44
9. SANTA BARBARA	48
10. A SOUTH-EASTER	54
11. PASSAGE UP THE COAST	58
12. MONTEREY	62
13. TRADING AT MONTEREY	64
14. DISCONTENT	72
15. FLOGGING	81
16. LIBERTY-DAY ON SHORE	92
17. SAN DIEGO	98
18. EASTER SUNDAY	103
19. SANDWICH-ISLANDERS	114
20. NEW-COMERS	126
21. CALIFORNIA AND ITS INHABITANTS	132
22. THE "ALERT"	137
23. NEW SHIP AND SHIPMATES	142
24. SAN DIEGO AGAIN	156
25. RUMORS OF WAR	162
26. SAN FRANCISCO	175
27. A FANDANGO	182
28. NEWS FROM HOME	190

29. LOADING FOR HOME	201
30. HOMEWARD BOUND	218
31. BAD PROSPECTS	228
32. DOUBLING CAPE HORN	245
33. NORTHWARD HO!	254
34. NEARING HOME	262
35. MORE STIRRING INCIDENTS	268
36. HURRAH FOR YANKEE LAND!	275
TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AFTER	282
ORIGINAL CONCLUDING CHAPTER	307

TWO YEARS Before THE MAST



RICHARD HENRY DANA

Introduction

As a classic of the sea, *Two Years Before the Mast* can be challenged only by Melville's *Moby Dick*. Melville was himself the first to acknowledge the influence of his "sea-brother" and his superiority in factual description of the real life of a seaman under sail and before the mast. It was Dana who suggested that Melville should write *Moby Dick* to probe the mysteries of the ocean, and Dana again who advised him to write *White Jacket* as the counterpart, for life in the Navy, of Dana's "two years" in merchant ships.

By background and inheritance, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., does not appear at first glance to have been destined to sign on for a return passage around Cape Horn for hides from California, in a brig no larger than a yacht. But this he did, and he wrote a story of the voyage, and of his months ashore, that is perennially readable for its keen and penetrating observation, for its direct and workmanlike writing, and for its sympathy with the hard lot of the ordinary seaman and its respect for his skill and courage in facing it. But the physical, intellectual, and moral qualities were there to produce the unique combination of practical experience and sympathetic understanding, of detailed knowledge and selective imagination, in a book about the life and work of ordinary seamen that no ordinary seaman could have written, and the like of which can never be written again.

Too often the book is dismissed, for want of a more convenient pigeonhole, as a boys' adventure story. *The Cambridge History of American Literature* gives it brief mention among

"Books for Children," although the more perceptive author of another chapter refers to it in passing as "that incomparable classic of the sea." Van Wyck Brooks among recent writers has best caught the spirit for which the book has been popular, in many languages, for more than a century: as he read it, the story, like the ship, "leaped over the seas, trembling to the keel, while the spars and masts snapped and creaked; and one felt oneself in a wholesome and bracing climate, with spray and the smell of tar and salt, scrubbed wood, glistening brass, the sunlight glancing on the bright blue waves." Emerson said that the book was "all true," and praised it as "a voice from the fore-castle" valuable not only as a story but as a work that could "hasten the day of reckoning between society and the sailor."

The Dana family has had a long and distinguished record in New England history. Recurrent interests in our author's branch, beginning with Richard Dana in 1640, have been law, public service, literature, philanthropy, and a close connection with Cambridge and Harvard. Richard Henry Dana, Jr., born on August 1, 1815, grew up under the best literary and scholarly influences of his time and place. His home, Dana House, was in a corner of the Harvard Yard; James Russell Lowell and Oliver Wendell Holmes were his schoolfellows, and Emerson was one of his teachers. As a cheerful, friendly, and plucky boy who hated and resisted cruelty and tyranny, he sailed boats in the Winthrop Duck-Pond, and learned to swim in the Charles River, where he dreamed of a sailor's life as he watch the college sloop *Harvard* on its way to Maine for timber. The sight of shipping in Boston Harbour, seen through a telescope in his uncle's house on Milton Hill, "opened up a new world" to his young eyes.

In 1831 he entered Harvard, was sent home for six months for taking part in a student protest against the faculty, and in his second vacation sharpened his appetite for the sea by a brief sailing trip. His dream was unexpectedly made real when weakened sight, following measles, interrupted his studies and brought the standard prescription, for those who could afford it, of a long sea voyage. The work before the mast that Dana elected was by no means unusual in those days, and he found a kindred spirit in his watch-mate, Stimson. Before him, James Fenimore Cooper had obtained his material for *The Pilot* from experience as a merchant seaman in preparation for his service in the Navy. Just after his nineteenth birthday, Dana sailed from Boston in the *Pilgrim*, a small brig of only 180 tons. Two years and one month later, bronzed and fit, he returned to Cambridge, where he resumed his studies and graduated the following June at the head of his class. In 1840, he was admitted to the Bar, and published, from notes taken during his voyage and for a lump sum of \$250, his unassuming and anonymous little book.

Once aboard the *Pilgrim*, Dana soon became adjusted to the duties, the hardships, and the discipline—both official and self-imposed—of a sailor's life. His early impressions are penetrating and memorable, but few events are recorded until the fifth chapter brings him to his first rounding of the Horn, which must, wrote Melville in *White Jacket*, "have been written with an icicle." In the fourth chapter, six sentences suffice to cover Dana's first experience of a gale at sea, by which time he could say: "I was of some service on a yard, and could knot my reef-point as well as anybody." Thus early, Dana shows his knowledge and understanding of the arts and crafts of seaman-ship. "Having called all hands, we close-reefed the topsails and trysail, furled the courses and jib, set the fore-topmast staysail, and brought her up nearly to her course, with the weather braces hauled in a little, to ease her." A sailor knows at once that Dana was a sailor, and a landsman is convinced without the pedantry of a note on every detail. Rounding the Horn, Dana—who on his first night out had made "wild vomits into the black night" while reefing topsails—was the man who went out in the storm on the jib-boom and furled the jib as the pitching vessel plunged him in and out of the freezing waves. In the Pacific, after the loss of a man overboard and a visit to Robinson Crusoe's island of Juan Fernandez, "nothing of interest occurred except our own doings aboard." Probably the loss of his sea-chest with an earlier manuscript account based on his diary caused no loss to the unflagging pace of the printed narrative.

The middle part of the book—about half of both the "two years" and their story—is concerned with the purchase and stowing of hides along the coast of California, and of visits to little Spanish towns from Yerba Buena (the pre-gold-rush San Francisco) to Guayamas. These chapters have the same qualities as those describing life at sea, and the book might have had the added or substituted title of "A Year in California." Dana's vivid and accurate reporting make him a more reliable historian than Parkman of *California and Oregon Trail*, who never reached either Oregon or California.

The return voyage, with a second rounding of the Horn, was made in the *Alert*, a ship (in the proper sense of the term) about twice the size of the little *Pilgrim*, but still small enough and hard enough by modern standards. Also transferred to the *Alert* was the sadistic Captain Thomson, whose flogging of two sailors aroused Dana's humane instincts and heightened his sympathy for undefended sailors.

His book, published in 1840, had an immediate success which was exceeded, both financially and in general appeal, in England. Two thousand sailors in Liverpool are said to have bought copies in a single day; it was placed in the library of every ship in the British Navy; it was praised by humanitarians and novelists;

it was quoted in Parliament; it was used as evidence for the need for reform; and for years it supplied the text for charts by which oculists tested their patients' eyes.

Dana, who was distinguished in admiralty law, neglected his practice to give aid to seamen. *The Seaman's Friend* (1841), reprinted in England as *The Seaman's Manual*, became a standard work of maritime law. Dana also became an authority on international law, was deeply involved in the anti-slavery movement, and pleaded important cases in both of these fields; but being somewhat dignified and aloof in his bearing—except to sailors—he was not successful in public life. He retained to the end his interest in the sea, although future voyages—including one around the world in 1859-60—were made as a passenger. His only other book of travel, *To Cuba and Back*, published in 1859, had comparatively little success. The last four years of his life were spent in Europe for the sake of pleasure, rest, and the continued study of International Law. In 1878, he died suddenly of pneumonia and was buried—near Keats and Shelley—in the Protestant cemetery in Rome.

Among those who urged Dana to publish a record of his youthful voyage was Horace Mann, the New England educator, who offered to have it issued as a tract for the improvement of youth, if the descriptions gave way to statistics of exports and imports with "a moral lesson on every page." *The Sailor's Friend* did appear with charts and diagrams and figures—but they are of ships and sails and rigging, of knots, bends, reefs, and splices. The advice it gives is legal advice, from one of the foremost authorities of his day to his friends the sailors who crowded out profitable clients and made his office "smell like a forecastle." It was with the same obedience to conscience that this proper Bostonian could declare that in writing *Two Years Before the Mast* he had "adhered closely to fact in every particular, and endeavoured to give everything its true character." He has given the truth with such imaginative insight that it adds the interest of romantic fiction to the persuasive force of solid fact.

Dalhousie University

C. L. BENNET

PREFACE

I am unwilling to present this narrative to the public without a few words in explanation of my reasons for publishing it. Since Mr. Cooper's *Pilot* and *Red Rover*, there have been so many stories of sea life written, that I should really think it unjustifiable in me to add one to the number without being able to give reasons in some measure warranting me in so doing.

With the single exception, as I am quite confident, of Mr. Ames's entertaining, but hasty and desultory work, called *Mariner's Sketches*, all the books professing to give life at sea have been written by persons who have gained their experience as naval officers or passengers, and of these there are very few which are intended to be taken as narratives of facts.

Now, in the first place, the whole course of life and daily duties, the discipline, habits, and customs of a man-of-war are very different from those of the merchant service; and in the next place, however entertaining and well-written these books may be, and however accurately they may give sea life as it appears to their authors, it must still be plain to every one that a naval officer who goes to sea as a gentleman, "with his gloves on" (as the phrase is), and who associates only with his fellow-officers, and hardly speaks to a sailor except through a boat swain's mate, must take a very different view of the whole matter from that which would be taken by a common sailor.

Besides the interest which every one must feel in exhibitions of life in those forms in which he himself has never experienced it, there has been, of late years, a great deal of attention directed towards common seamen, and a strong sympathy awakened in their behalf. Yet I believe that, with the single exception which I have mentioned, there has not been a book written, professing to give their life and experiences, by one who has been of them, and can know what their life really is. *A voice from the fore-castle* has hardly yet been heard.

In the following pages I design to give an accurate and authentic narrative of a little more than two years spent as a common sailor before the mast, in the American merchant service. It is written out from a journal which I kept at the time, and from notes which I made of most of the events as they happened; and in it I have adhered closely to fact in every particular, and endeavoured to give each thing its true character. In

so doing, I have been obliged occasionally to use strong and coarse expressions, and in some instances to give scenes which may be painful to nice feelings; but I have very carefully avoided doing so whenever I have not felt them essential to giving the true character of a scene. My design is, and it is this which has induced me to publish the book, to present the life of a common sailor at sea as it really is—the light and the dark together.

There may be in some parts a good deal that is unintelligible to the general reader; but I have found from my own experience, and from what I have heard from others, that plain matters of fact in relation to customs and habits of life new to us, and descriptions of life under new aspects, act upon the inexperienced through the imagination, so that we are hardly aware of our want of technical knowledge. Thousands read the escape of the American frigate through the British Channel in *The Pilot*, and the chase and wreck of the British trader in *The Red Rover*, and follow the minute nautical manœuvres with breathless interest, who do not know the name of a rope in the ship; and perhaps with none the less admiration and enthusiasm for their want of acquaintance with the professional detail.

These reasons, and the advice of a few friends, have led me to give this narrative to the press. If it shall interest the general reader, and call more attention to the welfare of seamen, or give any information as to their real condition which may serve to raise them in the rank of beings, and to promote in any measure their religious and moral improvement, and diminish the hardships of their daily life, the end of its publication will be answered.

R. H. D., JR.

BOSTON, July 1840.

Departure

THE fourteenth of August was the day fixed upon for the sailing of the brig *Pilgrim*, on her voyage from Boston, round Cape Horn, to the western coast of North America. As she was to get under way early in the afternoon, I made my appearance on board at twelve o'clock, in full sea-rig, with my chest containing an outfit for a two or three years' voyage, which I had undertaken from a determination to cure, if possible, by an entire change of life, and by a long absence from books, with plenty of hard work, plain food, and open air, a weakness of the eyes, which had obliged me to give up my studies, and which no medical aid seemed likely to remedy.

The change from the tight frock-coat, silk cap, and kid gloves of an undergraduate at Harvard, to the loose duck trousers, checked shirt, and tarpaulin hat of a sailor, though somewhat of a transformation, was soon made; and I supposed that I should pass very well for a jack-tar. But it is impossible to deceive the practised eye in these matters and while I thought myself to be looking as salt as Neptune himself, I was, no doubt, known for a landsman by every one on board as soon as I hove in sight. A sailor has a peculiar cut to his clothes, and a way of wearing them which a green hand can never get. The trousers, tight round the hips, and thence hanging long and loose round 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 slip-tie to the black silk neckerchief, with sundry other minutiae, are signs, the want of which betrays the beginner at once. Besides the points in my dress which were out of the way, doubtless my complexion and hands were quite enough to distinguish me from the regular *salt*, who, with a sunburnt cheek, wide step, and rolling gait, swings his bronzed and toughened hands athwartships, half opened, as though just ready to grasp a rope.

"With all my imperfections on my head," I joined the crew, and we hauled out into the stream, and came to anchor for the night. The next day we were employed in preparation for sea, reeving studding-sail gear, crossing royal yards, putting on chafing gear, and taking on board our powder. On the following night, I stood my first watch. I remained awake nearly all the first part of the night from fear that I might not hear when I was called; and when I went on deck, so great were my ideas of the importance of my trust, that I walked regularly fore and aft the whole length of the vessel, looking out over the bows and taffrail at each turn, and was not a little surprised at the cool-

ness of the old seaman whom I called to take my place, in stowing himself snugly away under the long-boat for a nap. That was a sufficient lookout, he thought, for a fine night, at anchor in a safe harbour.

The next morning was Saturday, and a breeze having sprung up from the southward, we took a pilot on board, hove up our anchor, and began beating down the bay. I took leave of those of my friends who came to see me off, and had barely opportunity for a last look at the city and well-known objects, as no time is allowed on board ship for sentiment. As we drew down into the lower harbour, we found the wind ahead in the bay, and were obliged to come to anchor in the roads. We remained there through the day and a part of the night. My watch began at eleven o'clock at night, and I received orders to call the captain if the wind came out from the westward. About midnight the wind became fair, and, having summoned the captain, I was ordered to call all hands. How I accomplished this, I do not know, but I am quite sure that I did not give the true hoarse boatswain call of "A-all ha-aa-nds! up anchor, a-ho-oy!" In a short time every one was in motion, the sails loosed, the yards braced, and we began to heave up the anchor, which was our last hold upon Yankee land. I could take but small part in these preparations. My little knowledge of a vessel was all at fault. Unintelligible orders were so rapidly given, and so immediately executed; there was such a hurrying about, and such an intermingling of strange cries and stranger actions, that I was completely bewildered. There is not so hopeless and pitiable an object in the world as a landsman beginning a sailor's life. At length those peculiar long-drawn sounds which denote that the crew are heaving at the windlass began, and in a few minutes we were under way. The noise of the water thrown from the bows was heard, the vessel leaned over from the damp night-breeze, and rolled with the heavy groundswell, and we had actually begun our long, long journey. This was literally bidding good-night to my native land.

2

First Impressions

THE first day we passed at sea was Sunday. As we were just from port, and there was a great deal to be done on board, we were kept at work all day, and at night the watches were set and everything was put into sea order. When we were called aft to be divided into watches, I had a good specimen of the manner of a sea-captain. After the division had been made, he gave a short characteristic speech, walking the quarter-deck

with a cigar in his mouth and dropping the words out between the puffs.

"Now, my men, we have begun a long voyage. If we get along well together, we shall have a comfortable time; if we don't, we shall have hell afloat. All you have got to do is to obey your orders, and do your duty like men—then you will fare well enough; if you don't, you will fare hard enough, I can tell you. If we pull together, you will find me a clever fellow; if we don't, you will find me a bloody rascal. That's all I've got to say. Go below, the larboard¹ watch!"

I, being in the starboard or second mate's watch, had the opportunity of keeping the first watch at sea. Stimson, a young man, making, like myself, his first voyage, was in the same watch, and as he was the son of a professional man, and had been in a merchant's counting-room in Boston, we found that we had some acquaintances and topics in common. We talked these matters over—Boston, what our friends were probably doing, our voyage, etc.—until he went to take his turn at the lookout, and left me to myself. I had now a good opportunity for reflection. I felt for the first time the perfect silence of the sea. The officer was walking the quarter-deck, where I had no right to go, one or two men were talking on the fore-castle, whom I had little inclination to join, so that I was left open to the full impression of everything about me. However much I was affected by the beauty of the sea, the bright stars, and the clouds driven swiftly over them, I could not but remember that I was separating myself from all the social and intellectual enjoyments of life. Yet, strange as it may seem, I did then and afterwards take pleasure in these reflections, hoping by them to prevent my becoming insensible to the value of what I was losing.

But all my dreams were soon put to flight by an order from the officer to trim the yards, as the wind was getting ahead; and I could plainly see by the looks the sailors occasionally cast to windward, and by the dark clouds that were fast coming up, that we had bad weather to prepare for, and I had heard the captain say that he expected to be in the Gulf Stream by twelve o'clock. In a few minutes eight bells were struck, the watch called, and we went below. I now began to feel the first discomforts of a sailor's life. The steerage, in which I lived, was filled with coils of rigging, spare sails, old junk, and ship stores, which had not been stowed away. Moreover, there had been no berths put up for us to sleep in, and we were not allowed to drive nails to hang our clothes upon. The sea, too, had risen, the vessel was rolling heavily, and everything was pitched about in grand con-

¹ Of late years, the British and American marine, naval and mercantile, have adopted the word "port" instead of larboard, in all cases on board ship, to avoid mistake from similarity of sound. At this time "port" was only used at the helm.

fusion. There was a complete "hurrah's nest," as the sailors say—"everything on top, and nothing at hand." A large hawser had been coiled away on my chest; my hats, boots, mattress, and blankets had all fetched away and gone over to leeward, and were jammed and broken under the boxes and coils of rigging. To crown all, we were allowed no light to find anything with, and I was just beginning to feel strong symptoms of sea-sickness, and that listlessness and inactivity which accompany it. Giving up all attempts to collect my things together, I lay down on the sails, expecting every moment to hear the cry, "All hands ahoy!" which the approaching storm would make necessary. I shortly heard the raindrops falling on deck thick and fast, and the watch evidently had their hands full of work, for I could hear the loud and repeated orders of the mate, trampling of feet, creaking of the blocks, and all the accompaniments of a coming storm. In a few minutes the slide of the hatch was thrown back, which let down the noise and tumult of the deck still louder; the cry of "All hands ahoy! tumble up here and take in sail" saluted our ears, and the hatch was quickly shut again. When I got upon deck, a new scene and a new experience was before me.

The little brig was close-hauled upon the wind, and lying over, as it then seemed to me, nearly upon her beam ends. The heavy head sea was beating against her bows with the noise and force almost of a sledge-hammer, and flying over the deck, drenching us completely through. The topsail halyards had been let go, and the great sails were filling out and backing against the masts with a noise like thunder; the wind was whistling through the rigging; loose ropes flying about; loud and, to me, unintelligible orders constantly given, and rapidly executed; and the sailors "singing out" at the ropes in their hoarse and peculiar strains.

In addition to this, I had not got my "sea legs on," was dreadfully sea-sick, with hardly strength enough to hold on to anything, and it was "pitch dark." This was my condition when I was ordered aloft, for the first time, to reef topsails.

How I got along, I cannot now remember. I "laid out" on the yards, and held on with all my strength. I could not have been of much service, for I remember having been sick several times before I left the topsail yard, making wild vomits into the black night, to leeward. Soon all was snug aloft, and we were again allowed to go below. This I did not consider much of a favour, for the confusion of everything below, and that inexpressibly sickening smell, caused by the shaking up of bilge water in the hold, made the steerage but an indifferent refuge from the cold wet decks. I had often read of the nautical experiences of others, but I felt as though there could be none worse than mine; for, in addition to every other evil, I could not but remember that this was only the first night of a two years' voyage. When we were on deck we were not much better off, for

we were continually ordered about by the officer, who said that it was good for us to be in motion. Yet anything was better than the horrible state of things below. I remember very well going to the hatchway and putting my head down, when I was oppressed by *nausea*, and always being relieved immediately. It was an effectual emetic.

This state of things continued for two days.

Wednesday, August 20th. We had the watch on deck from four till eight, this morning. When we came on deck at four o'clock, we found things much changed for the better. The sea and wind had gone down, and the stars were out bright. I experienced a corresponding change in my feelings, yet continued extremely weak from my sickness. I stood in the waist on the weather side, watching the gradual breaking of the day, and the first streaks of the early light. Much has been said of the sunrise at sea, but it will not compare with the sunrise on shore. It wants the accompaniments of the songs of birds, the awakening hum of humanity, and the glancing of the first beams upon trees, hills, spires, and house-tops to give it life and spirit. There is no scenery. But, although the actual rise of the sun at sea is not so beautiful, yet nothing will compare for melancholy and dreariness with the early breaking of day upon "Old Ocean's grey and melancholy waste."

There is something in the first grey streaks stretching along the eastern horizon, and throwing an indistinct light upon the face of the deep, which combines with the boundlessness and unknown depths of the sea around, and gives one a feeling of loneliness, of dread, and of melancholy foreboding, which nothing else in nature can. This gradually passes away as the light grows brighter, and when the sun comes up the ordinary monotonous sea day begins.

From such reflections as these I was aroused by the order from the officer, "Forward there! rig the head pump!" I found that no time was allowed for day-dreaming, but that we must "turn to" at the first light. Having called up the "idlers," namely, carpenter, cook, and steward, and rigged the pump, we began washing down the decks. This operation, which is performed every morning at sea, takes nearly two hours; and I had hardly strength enough to get through it. After we had finished, swabbed down decks, and coiled up the rigging, I sat on the spars, waiting for seven bells, which was the signal for breakfast. The officer, seeing my lazy posture, ordered me to slush the mainmast from the royal mast-head down. The vessel was then rolling a little, and I had taken no food for three days, so that I felt tempted to tell him that I had rather wait till after breakfast; but I knew that I must "take the bull by the horns," and that if I showed any sign of want of spirit or backwardness, I should be ruined at once. So I took my bucket of grease, and climbed up to the royal mast-head. Here the rocking of the

vessel, which increases the higher you go from the foot of the mast, which is the fulcrum of the lever, and the smell of the grease, which offended my fastidious senses, upset my stomach again, and I was not a little rejoiced when I had finished my job and got upon the comparative *terra firma* of the deck. In a few minutes seven bells were struck, the log hove, the watch called, and we went to breakfast. Here I cannot but remember the advice of the cook, a simple-hearted African. "Now," says he, "my lad, you are well cleaned out; you haven't got a drop of your 'long-shore *swash* aboard of you. You must begin on a new tack—pitch all your sweetmeats overboard, and turn to upon good hearty salt beef and ship bread, and I'll promise you you'll have your ribs well sheathed, and be as hearty as any of 'em afore you are up to the Horn." This would be good advice to give to passengers, when they set their hearts on the little niceties which they have laid in in case of sea-sickness.

I cannot describe the change which half a pound of cold salt beef and a biscuit or two produced in me. I was a new being. Having a watch below until noon, so that I had some time to myself, I got a huge piece of strong cold salt beef from the cook, and kept gnawing upon it until twelve o'clock. When we went on deck, I felt somewhat like a man, and could begin to learn my sea duty with considerable spirit. At about two o'clock, we heard the loud cry of "Sail ho!" from aloft, and soon saw two sails to windward, going directly athwart our hawse. This was the first time that I had seen a sail at sea. I thought then, and have always since, that no sight exceeds it in interest, and few in beauty. They passed to leeward of us, and out of hailing distance; but the captain could read the names on their sterns with the glass. They were the ship *Helen Mar* of New York, and the brig *Mermaid* of Boston. They were both steering westward, and were bound in for our "dear native land."

Thursday, August 21st. This day the sun rose clear; we had a fine wind, and everything was bright and cheerful. I had now got my sea legs on, and was beginning to enter upon the regular duties of a sea life. About six bells, that is, three o'clock P.M., we saw a sail on our larboard bow. I was very desirous, like every new sailor, to speak her. She came down to us, backed her maintopsail, and the two vessels stood "head on," bowing and curveting at each other like a couple of war-horses reined in by their riders. It was the first vessel that I had seen near, and I was surprised to find how much she rolled and pitched in so quiet a sea. She plunged her head into the sea and then, her stern settling gradually down, her huge bows rose up, showing the bright copper, and her stem and breasthooks dripping, like old Neptune's locks, with the brine. Her decks were filled with passengers, who had come up at the cry of "Sail ho!" and who, by their dress and features, appeared to be Swiss and French emigrants. She hailed us at first in French, but receiving no