

*Two Years Before
The Mast*



Richard Henry Dana

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Two Years Before the Mast
Richard H. Dana, Jr.

INTRODUCTION

In 1869, my father, the late Richard Henry Dana, Jr., prepared a new edition of his "Two Years Before the Mast" with this preface:

"After twenty-eight years, the copyright of this book has reverted to me. In presenting the first 'author's edition' to the public, I have been encouraged to add an account of a visit to the old scenes, made twenty-four years after, together with notices of the subsequent story and fate of the vessels, and of some of the persons with whom the reader is made acquainted."

The popularity of this book has been so great and continued that it is now proposed to make an illustrated edition with new material. I have prepared a concluding chapter to continue my father's "Twenty-four Years After." This will give all that we have since learned of the fate of crew and vessels, and a brief account of Mr. Dana himself and his important lifework, which appears more fully in his published biography^[1] and printed speeches and letters.^[2] This concluding chapter will take the place of the biographic sketch prefixed to the last authorized edition. There is also added an appendix with a list of the crews of the two vessels in which Mr. Dana sailed, extracts from a log, and also plates of spars, rigging and sails, with names, to aid the reader.

In the winter of 1879-80 I sailed round Cape Horn in a full-rigged ship from New York to California. At the latter place I visited the scenes of "Two Years Before the Mast." At the old town of San Diego I met Jack Stewart, my father's old shipmate, and as we were looking at the dreary landscape and the forlorn adobe houses and talking of California of the thirties, he burst out into an encomium of the accuracy and fidelity to details of my father's book. He said, "I have read it again and again. It all comes back to me, everything just as it happened. The seamanship is perfect." And then as if to emphasize it all, with the exception that proves the rule, he detailed one slight case where he thought my father was at fault,--a detail so slight that I now forget what it is. In reading the Log kept by the discharged mate, Amerzeen, on the return trip in the *Alert*, I find that every incident there recorded, from running aground at the start at San Diego Harbor, through the perilous icebergs round the Horn, the St. Elmo's fire, the scurvy of the crew and the small matters like the painting of the vessel, to the final sail up Boston Harbor, confirms my father's record. His former shipmate, the late B. G. Stimson, a distinguished citizen of Detroit, said the account of the flogging was far from an exaggeration, and Captain Faucon of the *Alert* also during his lifetime frequently confirmed all that came under his observation. Such truth in the author demands truth in illustration, and I have cooperated with the publishers in securing a painting of the *Alert* under full sail and other illustrations, both colored and in pen and ink, faithful to the text in every detail.

Accuracy, however, is not the secret of the success of this book.

Its flowing style, the use of short Anglo-Saxon words,[3] its picturesqueness, the power of description, the philosophic arrangement all contribute to it, but chiefly, I believe, the enthusiasm of the young Dana, his sympathy for his fellows and interest in new scenes and strange peoples, and with it all, the real poetry that runs through the whole. As to its poetry, I will quote from Mrs. Bancroft's "Letters from England," giving the opinion of the poet Samuel Rogers:

"London, June 20, 1847.

"The 19th, Sat. we breakfasted with Lady Byron and my friend Miss Murray, at Mr. Rogers'. . . After breakfast he had been repeating some lines of poetry which he thought fine, when he suddenly exclaimed, 'But there is a bit of American prose, which, I think, has more poetry in it, than almost any modern verse.' He then repeated, I should think, more than a page from Dana's 'Two Years Before the Mast' describing the falling overboard of one of the crew, and the effect it produced, not only at the moment, but for some time afterward. I wondered at his memory, which enabled him to recite so beautifully a long prose passage, so much more difficult than verse. Several of those present, with whom the book was a favorite, were so glad to hear from me that it was as true as interesting, for they had regarded it as partly a work of imagination."

In writing the book Mr. Dana had a motive which inspired him to put into it his very best. The night after the flogging of his two fellow-sailors off San Pedro, California, Mr. Dana, lying in his berth, "vowed that, if God should ever give me the means, I would do something to redress the grievances and relieve the sufferings of that class of beings with whom my lot has been so long cast." This vow he carried out in no visionary scheme of mutiny or foolish "paying back" to the captain, but by awakening a "strong sympathy" for the sailors "by a voice from the fore-castle," in his "Two Years Before the Mast."

While at sea he made entries almost daily in a pocket notebook and at leisure hours wrote these out fully. This full account of his voyage was lost with his trunk containing sailors' clothes and all souvenirs and presents for family and friends by the carelessness of a relative who took charge of his things at the wharf when he landed in Boston in 1836. Later, while in the Law School, Mr. Dana re-wrote this account from the notebook, which, fortunately, he had not entrusted to the lost trunk. This account he read to his father and Washington Allston, artist and poet, his uncle by marriage. Both advised its publication and the manuscript was sent to William Cullen Bryant, who had then moved to New York. Mr. Bryant, after looking it over, took it to a prominent publisher of his city, as the publishers at that time most able to give the book a large sale. They offered to buy the book outright but refused the author any share in the profits. The firm had submitted the manuscript to Alonzo Potter, afterwards Bishop of Pennsylvania, then acting as one of their readers. Bishop Potter, meeting Dana in England years later, told him most emphatically that he had advised the purchase at any price necessary to secure

it. The most, however, that the elder Dana and Bryant were able to get from the publishers was \$250, so that modest sum with two dozen printed copies was all the author received at that time for this most successful book. Incidentally, however, the publication brought Mr. Dana law practice, especially among sailors, and was an introduction to him not only in this country but in England. Editions were published in Great Britain and France. Moxon, the London publisher, sent Mr. Dana not only presentation copies but as a voluntary honorarium, there being no international copyright law at that time, a sum of money larger than the publisher gave him for the manuscript. He also received kindly words of appreciation from Rogers, Brougham, Moore, Bulwer, Dickens and others, and fifteen years later his reputation secured him a large social and literary reception in England in 1856. At last, in 1868, the original copyright expired and my father brought out the "author's edition" thoroughly revised and with many important additions to the text including the "Twenty-four Years After" under a fair arrangement for percentage of sales with Fields, Osgood and Co., the predecessors of the present publishers.

In reading the story of this Harvard College undergraduate's experience, one should bear in mind, to appreciate the dangers of his rounding the Cape, that the brig Pilgrim was only one hundred and eighty tons burden and eighty-six feet and six inches long, shorter on the water line than many of our summer-sailing sloop and schooner yachts.

Richard Henry Dana.

[1] "Richard Henry Dana, Jr." A Biography. By Charles Francis Adams. In two volumes. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

[2] "Speeches in Stirring Times and Letters to a Son." Richard Henry Dana, Jr., with introduction and notes by Richard Henry Dana, 3rd. In one volume. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

[3] Extracts from this book were chosen by the oculists of the United States for use in testing eyes on account of its clearness in style and freedom from long words.

CHAPTER I

The fourteenth of August[1] 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 a 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 athwart-ships, 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 coolness 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 harbor.

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 harbor, 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-a-ll ha-a-a-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 helpless 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.

[1] [In the year 1834.]

CHAPTER II

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 rescal. That's all I've got to say. Go below, the larboard[1] 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, &c.-- 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 confusion. There was a complete ``hurrah's nest," as the sailors say,

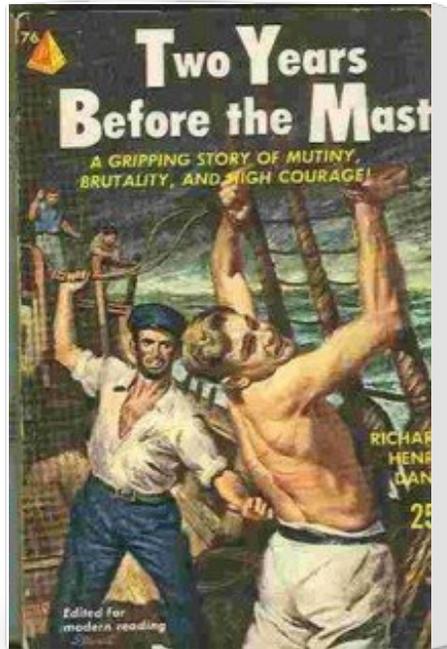
“everything on top and nothing at hand.” A large hawser had been coiled away on my chest; my hats, boots, mattress, and blankets had all fetched away and gone over to leeward, and were jammed and broken under the boxes and coils of rigging. To crown all, we were allowed no light to find anything with, 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 sledgehammer, 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 were 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 all 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 favor, for the confusion of everything below, and that inexpressible 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.

Two years before the Mast eBook By Richard, Henry, Dana



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