CHAPTER II

SAILOR AND PRINTER

In the eighteen-fifties, American shipping was at its zenith.

> "Shipbuilding," wrote George thirty years later, "had reached such a pitch of excellence in this country that we built not only for ourselves but for other nations. American ships were the fastest sailers, the largest carriers, and everywhere got the quickest dispatch and the highest freights. The registered tonnage of the United States almost equalled that of Great Britain, and a few years promised to give us the unquestionable supremacy of the ocean." [1]

There was a dark side to this story of progress. The prosperity of American shipping was built up on the cruel exploitation of the common seaman. For years, shipowners had beaten down wages and filled their forecastles with aliens. The respectable American sailor was driven out of the service. Those who remained had to submit to the brutal tyranny of savage captains and mates. The ferocious discipline of the Yankee "hell ships" became a legend of the seas. Something of the purgatory of the forecastle had been revealed in two great classics of the sea, Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* and Melville's *Moby Dick*, but these exposures had produced little improvement in the sailor's lot. Flogging, it is true, was legally abolished, but in practice physical assault remained the recognized method of maintaining discipline among seamen. In the hands of a vicious ship's officer a belaying pin or a marline spike was an effective substitute for a rope's end.

Unwittingly, George had chosen one of the grimmest

[1] *Protection or Free Trade*, p. 186. Those were still the days of wooden sailing ships, and America's rich supplies of timber gave her an advantage. The advent of iron and steel steamships enabled Britain to retain her maritime supremacy.

and most heart-breaking of callings. Yet his choice was not so eccentric as it might appear to-day. The call of the sea has always been strong, and in sailing ship days it was so insistent that wealthy sons of good families often shipped before the mast and worked their way up to the quarter-deck. Even when destined for business or professional pursuits, middle-class youths sometimes preferred a spell at sea to a course at college or university. Dana and Melville are only two examples of brilliant Americans to whom the rough forecastle of a sailing ship was their Harvard or their Yale.

The *Hindoo* began her voyage about a week after George joined her. On 10th April she weighed anchor and made for the open sea. As she glided down the Narrows George was on the deck picking oakum. If he had glanced over the bulwarks he might have picked out on the left bank a white house with which he was one day to have close associations. It was his home during the last years of his life, and from it his body was carried for burial to the cemetery on the hill crest above.

George was soon broken in to the life of a merchant seaman. He overcame his aversion to grease and tar, and after the first few days' sea-sickness was kept busy at the thousand and one jobs to be done on a windjammer—"tarring, greasing, oiling, varnishing, painting, scrubbing, scraping, steering, reefing, furling, loosing, making and setting sail, pulling, hauling and climbing in every direction" (Dana). It was the unwritten law of a sailing ship that the crew must never be for a moment idle. As the old sailor's catechism put it :

"Six days shalt thou labour and do all thou art able,
And on the seventh—holystone the decks and scrape the cable."

This is how the crew of the *Hindoo* spent the great American national holiday, as recorded in the diary which George kept throughout the voyage :

"Wed. July 4. At 12 o'clock last night the day was ushered in by three discharges from a small swivel which made a great

deal of noise, rousing up all who were asleep. As soon as the smoke cleared away and the dead and wounded were mustered, it was found that it had not been without execution, all the glass on one side of the house being shattered (a loss not easily repaired), a port blown out, and the waddings (made of rope yarn and very hard) had passed, one through the head of the new water cask, and another through the new foretopsail, which had not been bent a week. The wind which had been strong from aft the day before, during the middle watch died away and was succeeded by a calm until 8 a.m. when a stiff breeze from the south sprang up, accompanied by showers of rain. At 12 M. all hands were called to reef. While reefing the foretopsail, the parrel of the yard gave way, causing a great deal of trouble and keeping all hands from dinner. It was 2.30 p.m. before our watch got below to their plum-duff which had been allowed in honour of the day. The rest of the day was raining, with wind constantly varying, keeping us hauling on the braces. Thus closed the most miserable 4th of July that I have ever yet spent."

Despite his small stature and slight build, George stood up well to the hardships of a seaman's life. His health kept good and the open air gave him an appetite for the hard biscuit, salt junk, and rare plum-duff which were the staple of the sailor's fare. Occasionally spasms of home-sickness swept over him. " Would have given anything to have been back to breakfast " is a recurring entry in the diary. And the memory of the family larder haunted him like a passion. " I wish I were at home," he would say to his shipmates, " to get a piece of pie." On the whole, it is pretty plain that he did not find the life congenial. But he kept up his spirits and took what came to him without snivelling. Though he abandoned the sea as a permanent career, he caught something of the affection which the sailing ships inspired in their crews. In his last book there is a loving description of the stately progress of an old windjammer :

" The noble vessel, bending gracefully to the breeze, under her cloud of canvass, comes driving along, cleaving white furrows at her bow and leaving a yeasty wake at her stern. . . . So harmonious are her movements, so seemingly instinct with life, that a savage who sees for the first time such a vessel

beating along the coast might take her for a great bird, changing its direction with the movement of its wings as do seagull and albatross." [1]

On the 97th day of the voyage the *Hindoo* reached the Cape of Good Hope, passing far to the south of it, as was the custom of the sailing ships in those days. Then, in the teeth of heavy gales, she clove her way across the Indian Ocean. Henry watched with admiration the battle of the elements. "It is impossible," he wrote in the diary, "to describe the wildly grand appearance of the sea and sky." Heavy seas broke over the decks, and rain and hail beat on the masts and rigging. But the *Hindoo* held gallantly on her course, until, on 24th August, the coast of Australia hove in sight. Next day the ship sailed into Hobson's Bay and berthed at Melbourne.

Henry visited the town, and recalled in after years "its busy streets, its seemingly continuous auctions, its crowds of men with flannel shirts and long high boots, its bay crowded with ships." The gold fever was at its height, and Melbourne was swarming with an adventurous population drawn from the four quarters of the globe. But the place does not seem to have stirred the boy's imagination. He was more interested in the domestic revolution which broke out on the *Hindoo*. The adult members of the crew wanted to try their luck at the diggings. They went in a body to the captain and demanded their discharge. The captain summoned the American consul on board, and the mutineers were sentenced to a month's hard labour. But this did not break their resolution. Captain Miller was obliged to let them have their way and sign on a fresh crew.

A month later the *Hindoo*, having discharged her cargo of timber, sailed for Calcutta in ballast. The weather was warm and pleasant, but the winds were contrary, and it was not till the end of November that the Hooghly was sighted. At Calcutta Henry had his first glimpse of the colourful East, but the experience was disappointing. It was the squalor not the glamour of the Orient that impressed him.

[1] *The Science of Political Economy*, pp. 302–3.

"One feature," he wrote home, "which is peculiar to Calcutta is the number of dead bodies floating down in all stages of decomposition, covered with crows who are actively engaged in picking them to pieces. The first one I saw filled me with horror and disgust, but like the natives you soon cease to pay any attention to them."

On January 15, 1856, the *Hindoo*, with a cargo of rice and seeds, turned its prow homewards. On 13th April the Cape of Good Hope was reached. On 12th May Henry crossed the equator for the fourth time since he left home, and four weeks later, after an absence of fourteen months, the *Hindoo* sailed into New York Bay.

One thing the voyage had done for Henry—it had cured him of his longing for the sea. He had tasted something of the misery of the forecastle. And he had discovered, as most sailors do, that the deck of a ship is not the best place from which to see the world. "Sailors," wrote Herman Melville, "don't see the world. They land only upon wharves and pierheads, and their reminiscences of travel are only a dim recollection of a chain of tap rooms surrounding the globe." Henry had verified this, and it made him all the readier to fall in with his parents' wishes and settle down to a career on shore. His father, through his old publishing connections, secured him a job as apprentice compositor, and thus George followed in the footsteps of distinguished Americans like Franklin, Greely, Bret Harte, and Mark Twain, all of whom began their careers at the compositor's case. The choice of a trade was not a bad one. The setting of printed matter gave the boy opportunities to extend his information, and the necessity of keeping close to his copy at last overcame a weakness in spelling which had troubled him since his schooldays.

At home the return of the sailor boy threatened for a time the peace of the domestic circle. Henry's experience of seafaring life had been sufficient to uproot old loyalties and teach him habits which offended the puritan susceptibilities of his parents. He smoked cigars, he drank whisky, he kept late hours. This behaviour produced some painful domestic scenes. The strain, however, never reached breaking-point. Richard George realized that his

high-spirited son must not be ridden with too tight a rein; and Henry, on his side, though ready to flare up at the slightest reproof, suffered genuine remorse when he knew he had wounded his parents. A policy of give-and-take kept the domestic atmosphere sweet. Henry was allowed more liberty than he enjoyed before he went to sea, and he in turn did his best not to abuse the privileges accorded him.

Despite his fondness for fun and amusement, the boy did not neglect the task of self-culture. He took lessons in penmanship and joined a lads' club for mutual improvement. The members met in a disused church building. Much of their time was frankly given over to boxing, fencing, and general skylarking, but there were occasional meetings for more serious purposes. Debates were held and papers read. To these intellectual proceedings Henry contributed two essays, one a hostile review of Mormonism, the other a flowery effusion on "The Poetry of Life." The boy seized every opportunity to enlarge his knowledge and sharpen his wits. At home and in the printing office he joined eagerly in the discussions of his elders. "Henry," commented one of his uncles, "is not tongue-tied." On the question of slavery, then bulking large in public discussion, he took a stand in opposition to his parents, who were Democrats and inclined to regard the Slave Power with indulgence. To his mother, who argued that few slave-owners were hard-hearted enough to treat their slaves cruelly, Henry retorted that this did not affect the question of principle. Slavery was wrong because it gave the planters the *power* to ill-treat their slaves if they chose. Already the intransigence of the abstract reasoner was beginning to show itself.

All this time bread and butter problems were pressing for attention. Henry had been fired from his job after a row with the foreman, whom he accused of tyranny. His own irascible temper was more likely to blame. All his life he found it difficult to submit to authority. Work was so scarce in the printing trade that Henry was driven to take a job on a schooner bound for Boston. When he applied for the berth the captain measured his inches contemptuously.

" What can you do ? " he demanded curtly.

" I can handle, reef, and steer," said George.

" You can't steer this schooner," retorted the captain; " but I'll try you."

Despite this inauspicious start, George gave such satisfaction that when he was discharged the captain paid him a man's wages.

Back in Philadelphia work was no easier to get. The financial crisis of 1857 had spread a desolating pall of unemployment over the American cities. In despair George began to think of migrating westward. This was the traditional American method of escaping economic pressure. The frontier was the safety-valve of the American economy. Every industrial depression sent a fresh wave of population over the Appalachians. Henry had connections in the Far West. A cousin was a book-keeper in San Francisco, and some former neighbours, the Currys, had settled in Oregon. Mrs. Curry's nephew was governor of the Oregon territory, and she wrote inviting the lad to come to the North-west. Henry was willing, but there were certain preliminary difficulties to be overcome. The journey to the Pacific coast was a formidable undertaking. Beyond the Mississippi lay an immense, sparsely watered region, more difficult to cross than a pathless ocean. Death by starvation or at the hands of marauding Indians lurked for the traveller within its depths. Henry had no stomach for these risks, and in any case he had no facilities for joining any of the caravans which heroically braved the perils of the great American desert. There remained the alternative routes, safer but longer, by the Isthmus of Panama or round Cape Horn. The raising of the passage money might have been an obstacle here, but George was able to overcome it, thanks to his nautical training. He managed to work his way round the Horn. In Philadelphia docks a government lighthouse steamer was lying, the *Shubrick*. It was intended for service on the Pacific coast. George secured a place on her as ship's steward at $40 a month. At the end of the year came a second parting from his family, all the more painful because this time the separation seemed likely to be a long one, and on December

22, 1857, the *Shubrick* steamed down the Delaware on the first stage of her long voyage to California.

On the *Shubrick* George had an exciting experience. He was very nearly shipwrecked. On Christmas Day the vessel ran into a violent squall near Cape Hatteras. Heavy seas stove in the bulwarks, and the captain began to fear that the ship would founder. He gave orders to lighten her, and George and a negro deck-hand were set to work pitching sacks of coal overboard, the captain feverishly exhorting them through his speaking trumpet. After thirty tons of coal had been got rid of in this way, the *Shubrick* was able to make her way to St. Thomas in the West Indies, where she put in to refuel and refit.

In the Straits of Magellan the ship met with more bad weather. The headwinds were so strong that the coal supply became exhausted and the crew had to land and cut wood for fuel.

> " We ran into a little harbour in the strait," George wrote home, " and came upon a schooner which belonged to English missionaries with whom we exchanged letters. The missionaries were praying and working with the native Terra del Fuegians. We saw a number of these natives and they were not at all attractive. I heard afterwards that the Patagonians killed and ate these missionaries."

From Magellan the *Shubrick* crept slowly up the coast of South America and reached its destination after a five month's voyage. On May 27, 1858, the vessel steamed through the Golden Gates, and George gazed, as a young Scotsman twenty years later was to gaze, on " the fine bulk of Talmapais looking down on San Francisco like Arthur's Seat on Edinburgh." [1]

[1] R. L. Stevenson, *Across the Plains* (Pentland Edition), p. 160.