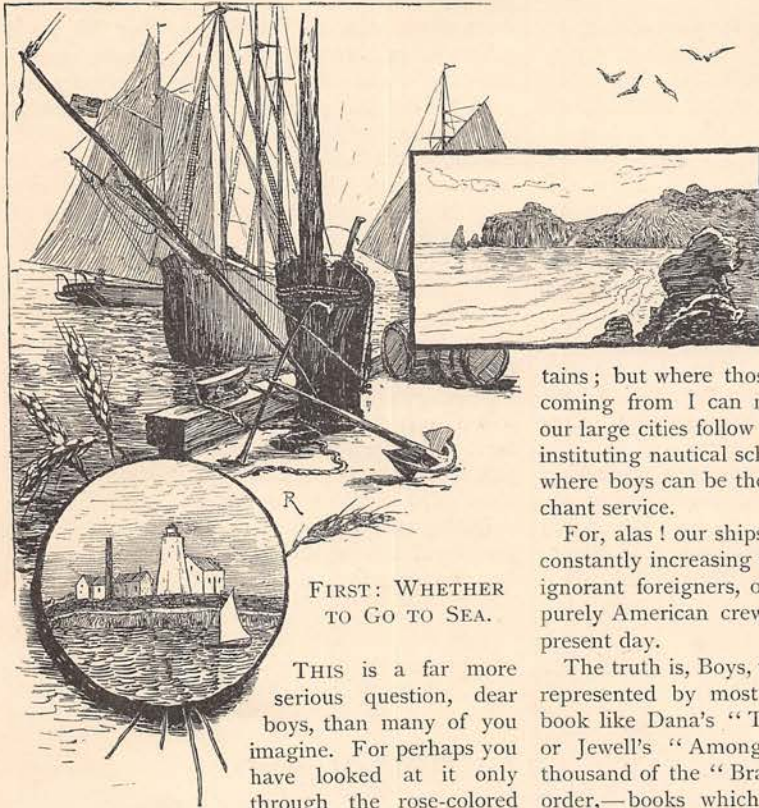


GOING TO SEA—A TALK WITH BOYS.

BY FRANK H. CONVERSE.



FIRST: WHETHER
TO GO TO SEA.

THIS is a far more serious question, dear boys, than many of you imagine. For perhaps you have looked at it only through the rose-colored spectacles of Mr. Cooper or Mr. Marryatt, and it may be that some have even used the more glaring ones furnished gratis by the sensational-story writer of to-day. And thus fancying that a sailor must be a sort of combined Jack Easy and Ralph Rackstraw, I know from experience how eager becomes the desire for "a life on the ocean wave." But both Cooper and Marryatt wrote of sea life as it was connected with the naval service of their day, giving only the very brightest side of the picture at that. And the naval service of then or now is as unlike the merchant service as can possibly be imagined.

The time has been when a boy with a natural aptitude for sea life could ship on board some of our American vessels, and the discipline be good for him, whether he ultimately followed the sea or not. This was when crews were made up of some, from our own sea-board towns, whose purpose in going to sea was to fit themselves for the quarter-

deck, as rapidly as good habits, energy, and application would do it. They were, as a rule, intelligent, clean-lived young men, respecting themselves, and respected by their officers, who were too wise and too upright to use toward them the language and abuse so common at the present day. From such as these sprang many of our best American cap-

tains; but where those of the next generation are coming from I can not imagine, unless more of our large cities follow the example of New York in instituting nautical school-ships like "St. Mary's," where boys can be thoroughly trained for the merchant service.

For, alas! our ships' forecastles are filled with a constantly increasing throng of vicious and grossly ignorant foreigners, of many nationalities, while a purely American crew is very seldom seen at the present day.

The truth is, Boys, that sea-going is terribly misrepresented by most nautical writers. For one book like Dana's "Two Years before the Mast," or Jewell's "Among our Sailors," there are a thousand of the "Brave Bill, the Boy Buccaneer" order,—books which represent sea-going as an adventurous, romantic, jolly sort of life, abounding in marvelous incidents by sea and land. Nothing is said of the wearying round of unpleasant tasks, of hardships most terrible, sufferings almost incredible, dangers without number, shipwreck—death. I do not wonder that boys who read these books get false views of sea life, as well as false views of life in general.

"Ah," I hear you say, "we know that there are hardships and dangers to be met with in a sailor's life; we expect them."

But bless you, Boys, while I don't mean to be impolite, I must flatly contradict you, and say that you don't know anything about it, excepting in the vaguest sort of way—excepting as you imagine yourself, on your return, saying to some of your admiring school-mates: "I tell you, fellows, it was lively times the night we lost our to'gallant-masts, and I had four fingers frost-bitten reefing topsails off Cape Horn, last December," or, "I say, my

lads, how would you like to have been in my shoes a year ago to-day, when the old 'Susan' went ashore in a living gale, and only three of us were saved out of the whole ship's company?" You may fancy such incidents interesting to recount, but their actual suffering and terror you can not begin to realize in advance.

However, my object in writing this paper is not to throw cold water on any projected sea-going, if it is honestly, knowingly, and properly entered into. But it is always a good plan to look squarely at both sides of so important a question as whether to go to sea or not.

If a boy has not some natural aptitude for a sea life he would better by far stay at home. He may be strong, active, and courageous, and yet be entirely unfit for a sailor. And one trouble is, that boys who are attacked with "ship-fever" often mistake for aptitude what is merely inclination. Out of one hundred and forty-eight boys admitted to the "St. Mary's" nautical school, seventy-eight were discharged before the end of the year,—cured. Yet in the code of regulations for admittance to membership, it is specially stated that boys who make application "must evince some aptitude or inclination for a sea life." And I can not help thinking that if such boys could not accustom themselves to the gentle discipline and admirable routine of that most excellent nautical school, what would they have done on board the average merchant-vessel, where they certainly could not leave at the first, nor the twentieth, touch of hardship?

But beyond all this, the would-be sailor must be strong and resolute, for the system of "four hours off that you're never sure of, and four hours on, that you're always sure of" (to use Jack Tar's expression), is a most exhausting one in itself. Through day and night, storm or calm, heat or cold, at the end of the alternate four hours' sleep which the sailor may be lucky enough to get in the foul atmosphere of a dirty fore-castle, a vigorous pounding on the door summons him from his slumbers. And on shipboard one can not say in answer, "I don't feel very well—I guess I won't get up yet awhile." No, indeed. Then follow two hours at the wheel, or on the lookout, where he must attend strictly to business, though drenched, it may be, to the skin, or shivering in the most piercing of midwinter blasts. And, leaving this task, he may be sent immediately aloft, where for an hour or two longer he balances himself on a slippery foot-rope, and, clinging by his elbows to a swaying yard, battles with the stiffened, slatting canvas, his fingers benumbed, and his ears and nose almost freezing.

Through it all, or while about his ordinary duties on deck, he must accustom himself to hear

his name coupled with harsh words or reproaches, according to the fancy of those in authority over him. And I do not mean by this the extraordinary personal abuse which has been, and is occasionally at the present day, carried to such terrible lengths. On shore, one may at least defend himself from word or blow. But remember that, on shipboard, to even look your resentment is almost to take your life in your hand.

A boy may be better born and better educated than the officers over him, but the great social gulf between fore-castle and quarter-deck will seldom be bridged by kindly, never by familiar, words. And however hungry he may become for congenial companionship, he must not expect to find it in the fore-castle. Many of the sailors whom he will meet there at the present day are worse than ignorant; they are foul-mouthed and profane.

Associated with a boy's dreams of sea life is almost always the delightful hope of sight-seeing in foreign lands. But if he stays by his ship in port—the only safe thing for him to do—he is kept continually at work, from early dawn till dark. And sight-seeing in a foreign city after dark has numberless disadvantages. If he is foolish enough to leave his ship when she arrives in port, he not only loses the chance of joining her again, but the thousand allurements on every hand are almost sure to lead a boy, thus separated from all restraint, into the downward path.

Such is a very small part of the unvarnished side of merchant-service sea life, of which more especially I have written because so few boys can take the navy as a medium for sea-going. And having thus shown you some of its actualities, and finding that, after all, you have elected for yourself to go to sea, let us now look at the other question:

HOW TO GO TO SEA.

HAVING made up your mind that you are of the right sort of sailor-material, both physically and morally, and that in fact Nature has designed you for a sailor, what are your actual plans as to your proposed sea life; or, in other words, why and how are you going?

Is it "to have a good time generally," as the expression is? You will be terribly disappointed if that is all; as, also, you will be, if you are going "to see the world," in the sense of "seeing life," as some phrase it. For such generally see only the worst of life, no matter what part of the world they may be in.

Of course, I expect better things of you than would justify my asking whether you only propose to learn seamanship enough to qualify you as an

able seaman, at eighteen or twenty dollars a month. Yet I have known boys of good parentage and education to stop right there, and remain stranded



in a ship's fore-castle the rest of their days, without energy or ambition to be anything higher than a common sailor.

But, proceeding now to the other extreme, I hope you do not go on board ship with the expectation of springing at one bound from the fore-castle to the quarter-deck, or think that, once there, nothing remains but to walk around with a spy-glass under one arm, giving orders. For, if so, again you are doomed to disappointment. The gradual advancement from fore-mast-hand to second mate, first mate, and finally captain, is only attained by the most laborious and painful exertion, while the life of the ship-master himself is one from which great care and responsibility are never absent.

Well, I hear you say that none of these guesses of mine is correct—that, purposing to make the sea your profession, you mean to shun its evils, as far as you can—God helping you—and learn its duties step by step, until you have reached a captaincy. Very good. Since you have this praiseworthy end in view, I will try to tell you, in part at least, how to go to sea.

And first, no sensible boy will go without his parents' consent—that is a matter of course. I will suppose, then, your father and mother have said that, when you are sixteen or seventeen, as the case may be, you may make your trial voyage. Now, if I were you, I should fill up all my spare time with such studies and profitable reading as I could

well manage. In addition to the study of navigation, I should perfect myself in mathematics and physical geography, and get a fair knowledge of French and Spanish. I should read carefully "Maury's Sailing Directions," and also see how much general information I could get as to the laws of commerce. Not that all these are absolutely essential, but if you are really to be a sailor, you will find them wonderfully helpful.

When the time for leaving home draws near, and the question of "outfit" comes up, by all means consult some sailor friend as to clothing, etc. You will find a difference of opinion between what you think advisable to take and what he thinks necessary, but you will be wise to abide by his decision.

Mother and father will give you much tender counsel. Treasure up just as much of it as possible. The most pithy advice I ever heard came from the father of a shipmate of mine, as he and I started away from home together, on our first voyage.

"Harry," he said, "remember your earthly mother and your Heavenly Father. Try to live so that you 'll not be ashamed at any moment to meet either of them. Good-bye, and God bless you!"

I might add that Harry not only heard the advice, but took it with him into the "Rochester's" fore-castle. And by sobriety, energy, hard study, and harder work, he rose in five years to be the smartest young ship-master sailing out of a "down East" port.

I presume that all boys who read this have an average share of common sense, and it is not to be supposed that any such would start off at hap-hazard to look up a ship for themselves. They will, of course, have had some friend who is interested in shipping matters, and acquainted with captains, to do this for them. Through his influence, the captain will probably promise to "keep an eye on them." But this must be taken in its most literal sense. Don't fancy for a moment—if you are one of these boys—that it suggests the remotest shadow of any favor to be shown to you. In one ship, my berth-mate, Joe, was the captain's only brother. And yet, Captain R—addressed a remark to Joe only once during an eighty days' passage; and then he told him that, if he could n't steer any straighter, he'd send another man to take his place at the wheel. We two boys thought, then, that this was pretty hard. I see now, though, that it is only a part of the wholesome discipline which helps to make the thorough seaman.

If you are fortunate in getting a good ship—and you 'll know at the end of your first voyage what I mean by this—stick to her. Staying in one ship, with one captain, is the surest possible step toward advancement, if there 's anything in you to advance.

But remember, besides ability you must have good, steady habits.

It may seem a small thing to run out of an evening in Liverpool or London for a glass of ale, or in Havre or Cadiz for a tumbler of red wine, but in this matter, if in no other, the captain will keep his eye on you. For no one knows better than he that the one rock on which sailor and officer alike too often make shipwreck is intemperance. And no one knows better than a captain how to appreciate the services of a thoroughly sober second or first mate—especially in port, when he himself is absent from the ship.

The boy, at his first going on board, looks with dismay at the maze of cordage above and around him. Each of the ropes, having its particular name and office, must be readily found in the darkest night. But spars, sails and rigging, braces, halliards, and running-gear, as well as learning "to knot, splice, hand, reef, and steer," are—so to speak—"object lessons," and, as such, are far more readily acquired by patient perseverance than you now imagine. I have no fear that the boy intended for a sailor will not readily learn these matters,—I am far more anxious about the things he ought not to learn.

For a ship's fore-castle will try a boy's moral worth to the very utmost. If one can carry what Mr. Hughes calls "the manliness of Christ" untarnished through his fore-castle life, I will trust him anywhere in the world. For I am sorry to say that, in almost every crew, there are some who seem to take a wicked delight in trying to make others as bad as themselves.

The only way to do is to show your colors at the very outset, and then nail them to the mast. Make up your mind that, come what will, Mother's teaching and Father's advice shall be your safeguard. When it is found that you can not be shaken in your stand against wrong doing and

wrong saying, you will not only be let severely alone, but you will secretly be respected. I remember a striking example of this in the case of a little Boston boy, who, though wholly unfitted by birth and natural tastes for a sailor's life, took it into his head that it would be a delightful thing to go to sea, and happened to ship in the same crew with myself. He was a delicate, pale-faced lad, with rather effeminate tastes, and as pure-minded a boy as I ever knew. But, although effeminate in some things, he was manly enough to stand out against the evil which beset him on every hand, and no coaxing, persuasion, or threats could shake his good resolutions.

"Why," said old Bolan,—a packet-sailor of thirty years,—as he spoke to me afterward on the subject, "blowed if that there little thread-paper cove 'ad n't more pluck in 'is little finger than I've got in the 'ole of this battered ol' 'ulk o' mine." It was roughly expressed, but true enough.

Don't try to ape the manners of the old sailor, especially as to his vices. It is not necessary even to learn to use tobacco in order to be a thorough seaman. But be respectful and obliging to all, so far as it is possible. And if in the crew you find some one—as is sometimes the case—who has much of good underlying his rough nature, cultivate his friendship. It will be of great value to yourself, while you may, without doubt, do him good—who shall say?

You will see, even from this imperfect showing, that not only should a sea life not be entered into lightly, but that it is well to know the wrong and the right way of entering. It is a noble profession for those who are fitted for it, and there is a strange fascination for such in its very hardships and dangers. But, truth to tell, unless I should be perfectly satisfied that a boy was well qualified for this profession, my advice to him would be that of Mr. Punch to those about to marry: "Don't."

