

The SAILOR'S CHANTYS



By Fred R. Bechdolt

THE romance and the mystery and all the wild adventure of the sea leave their indelible marks on those places where sailormen loaf between voyages. As picturesque as the old waterside taverns in Treasure Island and other famous stories of fiction, are some saloons and boarding houses in San Francisco today. Like the old "Admiral Benbow," where the grizzled buccaneer used to roar out his pirate chanty:

"Fifteen men on a dead man's chest
"Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum—"
These barrooms often resound to bass voices that make the glasses shiver on the shelves. And the songs! They come from the forecastle and deck and from the rigging; they were made to sing on stormy nights, to compete with the howl of the wind and the bang of the waves on the vessel's side; they were composed with a meter and a music by which the sweating crews could time their toil. These are the chantys.

In these years of steam and hoisting machinery, when engines do much of the work that men used to do, the old things are going out. The deep sea sailor is becoming harder to find. And the chanty is not sung so often at the capstan bars as it used to be. In the old days they used to have wooden ships and iron men, and now we've got iron ships and wooden men. Is the way a gray haired seadog put it to me the other day. But, although there is a change, nevertheless you can still find squarersizers where the bronzed and tattered crew will roar "homeward bound," while they are at the pumps; and from whose lofty yards on a wild night will come the bellowing chorus: "Paddy Doyle's Boots."

No San Francisco sailor's saloon but has heard the whole string of these chantys, no East or Stewart street boarding house but knows every one of them. I have acquaintance with a parrot down on the city front that sings a half a dozen—frankly—and interlards the stanzas with forecastle profanity. This parrot has had its share in supplying material for a number of these quaint old songs; and as for chantymen, as they call the singers, it has turned out scores of them.

The chantys are the folk songs of the sailors; sailors made them and composed the music for them; and for 200 years sailors have sung them. They are a typical poetry and a typical music. Their words tell of all the corners of the earth and all the nooks in the seven seas. And the notes are in harmony with the rush of great winds and waters. Would you hear them, go down to the city front and wait in any one of the oldtime saloons for seafaring men to drop in. Sooner or later you'll be listening to as roaring a chorus as ever Long John Silver and Israel Hands and all the black hearted buccaneer crew of the Hispaniola shouted on that voyage of theirs. In fact, there are those who claim that Stevenson picked up his "Fifteen Men on a Dead Man's Chest" right here in this port. If he did not, he might have.

"Shanty" is the way the sailor men pronounce it. And the "shantyman" is the leader in these songs. In the old days every crew had a chantyman. And now most of the windjammers possess one or two. According to seafaring men—and that is all the authority I have for any of the facts here—they started in the British navy, in fact, how many years ago. Anyway, it was back in the days of kpees breeches and eelskin queues and those peculiar short skirts which seamen used to wear. In that time they used to put a fiddler on the capstan head and the crew would sing to his leadership.

"Why?" you ask. It is this way. Singing helps a man to work. If you have ever watched a gang of laborers lifting at a tremendous weight you will have seen the foreman let them settle down to readiness and then start out: "Yo, ho, ho."

Always the foreman rather sings than shouts it, and always the men

bend their backs until the muscles crack to that music. That's the idea of the chanty. It consists, essentially, of choruses sandwiched between many verses. The verses are sung by the chanty man to let the crew gather breath for the spurt of work and the chorus.

For instance, there is a heavy pull on the topsail halyards. The crew take hold along the rope. "Lively there, lively!" yells the mate; and then hands out a string of impersonal profanity. The sailormen grasp hold and settle down. The chanty man pipes up: "W-a-a-a down in Anjou county."

The bronzed faces tighten along the line, the big chests expand, and then, at the end, all together, "Ranzoi boys, Ranzoi!"

That chorus rises in full throated bass notes right heartily. And right heartily the whole crowd gives a mighty pull on the halyards together. Far overhead the yard mounts upward answering the tug. They pause, gasping; and the chanty man sings slowly: "There lived one Reuben Ranzoi."

And then again comes the chorus: "Ranzoi boys, Ranzoi!"

Up comes the yard another peg. And so on it rises through the adventures of the Portuguese lad, Lorenzo by his full name, who shipped on a whaler from New Bedford and for his awkwardness got triced up to the grating and flogged until the captain has taken pity on Reuben and Reuben has learned navigation to become a skipper himself. By that time the yard is in place and.

"Belay there!" the mate bellows. No command in the whole list of seafaring orders gets prompter obedience than that. As the sailorman said in telling about it, "You can lay to it, they're ready for it when it does come."

Maybe it doesn't sound picturesque on paper, but were you to hear the music of those booming voices and see those rough faces, then it would be different. In the old days the fine ladies used to walk down to the docks in London and Liverpool and listen to the British crews sing as they raised the anchor. And it was not so many years ago when men and women used to consider it a privilege to visit the Seamen's Institute and hear these chantys sung by sailors who pulled away on a rope, hoisting bags of sand to the ceiling. But that's all gone by now. You have to get aboard a windjammer when she's putting out to sea, or hang about one of the dingy, picturesque saloons to get this sort of thing; and even then you may have to wait a long time before you are rewarded. You can read the words and an admirable history concerning them in the Coast Seaman's Journal, where "El Tuerto" has written an article. Or you can get a sailorman to tell you about them if you hunt far enough.

Black Scotty and Windy Davis are sponsors for this story about the chantys. What I tell you is what they told me, supplemented by information from Walter Macarthur, who used to sail before the mast before he came to be a labor leader and editor. Black Scotty and Windy Davis are still living in the forecastle and willing away their leisure moments between voyages on East and Stewart streets. When I ran across them they were singing "Blow, Boys, Blow." And they took enough time between the verses to get acquainted. That was in front of a battered bar.

"They hadn't seen each other since the two of them had left Aberdeen, Wash., on different lumber schooners last year; and their acquaintance dated from the afternoon back in the nineties when they happened to meet somewhere in the Bermudas. There was a lot of reminiscence to inter-change and much to tell that had happened between times. But in spite of these things they were able to sing some chantys and to give a great deal of information. I will try and retail it, as it came from them; and give you some idea of these strangest of folk songs."

Of chantys there are three kinds, named from the work which they



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were meant to spur along. They differ radically in the nature of their music and the meter in their verses; those differences accord with the varying demands of the toll. There are windlass chantys, topsail halyard chantys and foresheet chantys. The windlass chanty goes slowly; its chorus rolls along like the current of a mighty river or one of those wide swells that move over the surface of the ocean after a big storm has died. The vowels are broad; the notes are deep. The song goes along steadily. This chanty is the finest melody and has the biggest music of any of them. Now and then you find one that makes you think of a hymn. The thing is made to go with the seesaw motion

of the brakes or the steady grind of the capstan. This is the chanty the sailors sing at the pumps. And many is the lurching deck that has thumped to the tread of booted feet, while the water is gathering in the hold and the wind is shrieking through the rigging, and the skipper is figuring on whether he is going to lose his ship; and the crew, strung out along the crank are turning the pump to keep the vessel afloat a while longer, when such a chanty has helped to keep up heart. The windlass chanty has been sung often in the very teeth of death, and often the singers have ended their chorus to take to the boats. It is in some ways the bravest of music.

Of these windlass chantys there are many. And they come from many places. The negro roustabouts on the Mississippi river invented one, to sing while they were carrying cotton from the levees to the steamers. This was taken up by deep sea sailors and now is sung on every sea. "Shenadoah" is its name. It goes this way:

"Shenadoah, I love your waters,
First chorus: "I love your waters,
I love your clear and rushing waters."
Second chorus: "Ah! ah! ah! We're bound away
across the western ocean."

[In the negro roustabout version, Western Ocean," was "Wide Missouri." The stanzas follow without choruses which are always the same.]

"The ship sails true, a gale is blowing,
Her braces taut and sheet a-drawing.
Black eyed Sue is sure a beauty
Give me a good old Yankee clipper
A bully crew and a swearing skipper.
Shenadoah, my heart is longing
To see again your rolling waters."

"That from our inland river! And there is also "Rio Grande." It goes:
"In Rio Grande I'll take my stand."
First chorus: "Way, you Rio!"
"For Rio Grande's the place for me."
Second chorus: "Oh, Rio, Rio, Way you Rio."
Sing fare you well, my bonny young girl; we are bound for the Rio Grande."

The verses go on to tell the adventures of a sailor and the romance he had with a girl who was going a milk-maid. Eventually he left the young lady to go to the Rio Grande. In this as in all chantys, the leader or chantyman used to improvise verses when the task was unusually long. Many of these lines are the consequence of dreary nights at the pumps when they had to keep going hour after hour; and when music meant much to keep up the hearts of the crew. As a consequence of their being composed under such circumstances frequently on occasions when the chantyman was shivering and half frozen and close to death—the stanzas are not always in good English; and it must be admitted that the printing of some of them unexpurgated would cause blushes. But you can't expect too much from a post whose business is hauling on a wet rope on a supper of ship's biscuit and salt horse; and whose inspiration consists of a dozen worn out companions who need cheering up before they drown!

The topsail halyards chantys are shorter and livelier; and the choruses are meant to go with two pulls on a rope. They are used in all heavy purchases, such as the cat fall and fish tackle fall.
"Ranzoi, boys, Ranzoi!" is one of these. Another, and perhaps the most widely known, is "Blow, boys, blow!" It runs:
"And it's blow, my boys, for I love to hear 'em!"
Chorus: "Blow, boys, blow!"
I love to hear you roll it, bellies."
Chorus: "Blow, my bully boys, blow!"
"Then blow, my boys, for durr weather."
Chorus: "Blow, boys, blow!"
And for a fair wind, and blow together."
Chorus: "Blow, my bully boys, blow!"
"A Yankee ship came down the river."
Chorus: "Blow, boys, blow!"
And proudly saw her Irish pennants."
Chorus: "Blow, my bully boys, blow!"
"And who d'ye think was chief mate of her?"
Chorus: "Blow, boys, blow!"
We are the boys, all care and sorrow."
Chorus: "Blow, my bully boys, blow!"
"Then blow today and blow tomorrow."
Chorus: "Blow, boys, blow!"
And blow away all care and sorrow."
Chorus: "Blow, my bully boys, blow!"
"No matter what the wind or weather."
Chorus: "Blow, boys, blow!"
We are the boys, can blow together."
Chorus: "Blow, my bully boys, blow!"
This sort and many others like it, sung on deck while the crew is pulling

at the halyards and the yard is rising aloft. They have a livelier air than the windlass chanty, and from their words they seem to be in the main, older. There is the famous one, "Blow the Man Down," which has been sung as long as any one can remember hearing about it. It starts:
"Oh, blow the man down, bulles, blow the man down."
Chorus: "To me, weigh! Hey! Blow the man down!"
And blow the man down from Liverpool town."
Chorus: "Give me some time to blow the man down!"
"As I was a-walking down South Castle street"
Chorus: "To me, weigh! Hey! Blow the man down!"
A cheery polliceman I chanced for to meet."
Chorus: "Give me some time to blow the man down!"
After a series of adventures in which "Old Skirt Rigged Craft" knocks Jack down with her flats, it winds up:
There is one more chanty—although it's only two lines long, that comes under no head. This is "Paddy Doyle's Boots." The men are aloft at the sails. They are getting the "bunt" up—that is to say, they are bending down over the yard hauling away with all their strength on the stiff canvas to gather up the big slack in the middle of it. It takes a heavy pull to do it. The chantyman sings:
"Weigh! Hey! Ho!"
Then all hands:
"And we'll pay Paddy Doyle for his boots!"
When the word "boots" comes, the

pull has been accomplished. Paddy Doyle, be it known, was a Liverpool cobbler who, in his day, gave credit to many a sailor.
There have been times when the crew got sulky because of an abusive mate or a cranky skipper or unusually bad food or some other grievance. When this kept up, and the mate or skipper refused to right the trouble, the crew would refrain from singing chantys when they worked. By this they made the work slower. Invariably, when they had kept it up only a short time some one would say:
"Oh—it give us a song!" And the chanty would start. For the sailor has always loved his music and found in it a solace and a help toward heavy



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