

CHAPTER I



Navigation and Sea Voyages of the Ancient World

IN THAT STANZA from *The Scholar-Gipsy* which has just been quoted and in the one preceding it, Matthew Arnold made poetic reference to a development in maritime history which occurred between the time of Solomon and the earliest years of the Christian era. The preeminence upon the seas of the Phoenicians was not to endure forever. The Greek sailors, "The young light-hearted Masters of the waves" were next to have their turn as the explorers, colonizers, traders, and freighters of the ancient world. We know little in detail of their voyages; little of their ships; and less of their navigational aids. But the results of certain of their voyages have a place in the record of the world's enlargement.

In the fourth century B.C., Pytheas, a Greek of Marseilles, led from that city an expedition which passed Gibraltar and, sailing northward along the European coast, made the earliest effectual discovery of the British Isles. It may be that the Phoenician traders of Spain had been there before him, but whatever knowledge these far-sailing adventurers may have acquired of those northern coasts and the tin-bearing isles had not been shared with their rivals of the Mediterranean world. In the course of his exploration of the eastern coasts of England and Scotland, Pytheas went so far to the North that he encountered a cold and misty ocean wherein, by sight or hearsay, he learned of the land of Thule which has been variously identified in later ages as the Shetland Isles, Norway, or Iceland. As "Ultima Thule," that island has become in romantic metaphor the symbol of far places, the distant but not inaccessible goals of the physical and spiritual worlds. The voyage of Pytheas is recorded chiefly in the works of Strabo, who, drawing upon

Polybius, spoke of it briefly in several connections for the single purpose of refutation, labeling its leader "charlatan" and "juggler," and characterizing his reports as ridiculous. But greater men than he, of his own and later worlds, have accepted the Pytheas narrative as substantially true. What misfortune for us that with so many dull texts preserved through the centuries the log of the voyage of Pytheas, *The Circuit of the Earth*, should have been lost!

It was not only in the West that the Greeks measured themselves against the sea. A better documented voyage than that of Pytheas was the expedition made by Nearchus, Alexander's admiral, down the Indus and from its mouth westward and northwestward along the Asiatic shore of the Indian Ocean to the head of the Persian Gulf. And in the first century of the Christian era one Hippaelus, a Greek Mariner, boldly eschewing the traditional voyage of the traders, allowed the Southwest monsoon to carry him directly from the Arabian coast across the upper part of the Arabian Gulf to the rich ports of the Indian peninsula, the culmination, perhaps, of efforts to this end which has been in process of trial for more than a century.

Those extensive voyages of Pytheas, Nearchus, and Hippaelus, along undescribed coasts or across open waters beyond the loom of the land, stand high upon the list of achievements of the Greek spirit. We turn from them to a Mediterranean voyage of the early Christian period, not an exploration, but a workaday journey in the interests of trade and passenger transportation.

Once at Caesarea in Asia Minor it became necessary for a Roman centurion in charge of a few prisoners of state to make his way into Italy. The central figure of the group, whom we recognize as the Apostle Paul, had appealed to Caesar and to Caesar must go, however weary the road. The little company of travellers found at hand a ship of Adramyttium, and in it set forth northward, hugging the coast as was the custom of the time. After a few days' rest at Sidon, they sailed again to the north, but contrary winds drove them westward to Cyprus whence with difficulty they struggled back to

the southern coast of Asia Minor. After many days they attained Myra, a city of Lycia, just in time for the centurion to transship his prisoners and their guard to a vessel of Alexandria, then clearing for Italy. Prevented by baffling winds from passing Cnidos, the southwestern point of Asia Minor, they sailed southward to Crete instead of crossing the Aegean Sea. On making "the fair Havens," a port on the southern coast of Crete, they became uneasy to find the winter approaching and themselves so little advanced on their journey. The blessed Paul, who ceased not to prophesy throughout the voyage, counseled them to make that harbor their winter quarters, but by attempting to reach Phenice, a more commodious port westward of Fair Haven, they sailed straight into disaster. It is sad to record that when the event turned out as he had predicted the Apostle reminded the ship folk of his prescience by a particularly irritating version of "I told you so." A favorable breeze had started them on their way, but soon Euroclydon, the dreaded northeast wind, came down upon them. The ship was not able to bear up into its force and they "let her drive." She scudded before the tempest with bare masts for two weeks, and finally was driven ashore on the Island of Malta. After three months of enforced hibernation there, the company set out in another ship of Alexandria, whose sign was "Castor and Pollux." Thereafter, the itinerary was Syracuse, Rhegium, Puteoli, and so overland to Rome.

Truly this was a tedious journey which Paul was compelled to make as the result of his "Appello Caesarem," but except for the mischance of the shipwreck, one may doubt whether it differed much in kind from other long voyages of the day. There is testimony in plenty, indeed, that because of similar misadventures the sea was dreaded by the ancients. "Ye heroes," cried Teucer, "who have often suffered woes with me in the past, now banish care with wine. Tomorrow set out again upon the wide, wide sea." "Heart of oak and triple bronze had lie who first committed his frail craft to the savage sea." Thus Horace speaks in two of several expressions of fear and dread that the sea evoked from him. Sophocles has his

word: "Wonderful things there are many, and yet none more wonderful than man. This marvelous creature, driven by the stormy south wind, crosseth even the gray sea, passing half buried through the wave that would engulf him." Sappho, as interpreted by Bliss Carman, has poured into one small cup of verse the tedium and the heartsickness of the wanderer who "weary of the foreign cities ... sea travel and the stranger peoples" laments in rich metaphor:

So a mariner, I long for landfall,
When a darker purple on the sea-rim,
O'er the prow uplifted, shall be Lesbos
and the gleaming towers of Mitylene.

In the Greek *Anthology* the sea is a shining symbol of destruction of golden youth. As a background in poetry, as a picture to be looked at comfortably from the shore, the elder races rejoiced in the sea, but to be compelled to go upon it in a ship was for them misfortune.

That clear call ringing in our ears as though uttered yesterday, the "Thalassa, Thalassa" of Xenophon's young Greeks, sprang from the throats of those weary men not through a romantic concept of the sea, but because the blue water meant escape, a pathway home, and surcease of labor. Poets have a disconcerting habit of summing up in a few lines the whole philosophy of a matter, and I conclude this excursus into the sea psychology of the ancients with a reflection from that mellow world in which men were content simply to be. Moschus tells us through Shelley's golden mouth:

When winds that move not its calm surface sweep
The azure sea, I love the land no more;
The smiles of the serene and tranquil deep
Tempt my unquiet mind. —But when the roar
Of Ocean's gray abyss resounds, and foam
Gathers upon the sea, and vast waves burst,
I turn from the drear aspect to the home
Of Earth and its deep woods, where, interspersed,

When winds blow loud, pines make sweet melody.
Whose house is some lone bark, whose toll the sea,
Whose prey the wandering fish, an evil lot
Has chosen—But I my languid limbs will fling
Beneath the plane, where the brook's murmuring
Moves the calm spirit, but disturbs it not.

These folk, it seems, knew no joy in the sea: not for them "the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking," not for them salt on the lips nor "the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying." Sea fever, we may believe, was not endemic along the coasts of the Mediterranean and the Aegean Seas.

There are three things essential to the comfortable navigation of the open sea: a chart to determine the course, a compass to steer by, and an instrument of astronomical observation by the use of which may be learned the latitude of the ship at fixed points of time. The equipment of a modern vessel is more infinitely complex and varied than this in the character of its aids, but except that the chronometer and radio communication from shore for the determination of positions have now become indispensable to the seaman's happiness, these three remain the basic instruments of his craft. The captain of Saint Paul's ship, whom we may consider as typical of the mariners of the later classical period, possessed no compass and, in all likelihood, no instrument for sighting the sun, moon, and stars. Centuries before his time men had devised instruments of celestial observation for use upon land, and, doubtless these would early have been adapted for use at sea if the need for their functions had been felt. Latitude, however, could not have been a matter of great concern to the pilot of a coasting vessel in the narrow Mediterranean. He went without the quadrant or the gnomon, therefore, for the good reason that he did not need them, and he contrived to get along without the compass because that instrument had not yet been conceived in the mind of man. But the chart was another matter: in coasting voyages a chart is of the