
THE LEAGUE OF ANCIENT MARINERS

CAPTAINS ALL

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Published in the Australian Town and Country Journal
Wednesday, February 14, 1906

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Picnic of the League of Ancient Mariners

"I remember when I was in 'Frisco, in 1866, mate o' the old —"

"Last time I saw her was in the south-east trades. We were bound to —"

"Forty-five years at sea is about a fair thing for —"

Such were the snatches of conversation one heard at the unique gathering of the League of Ancient Mariners, which recently assembled on board the good ship Commodore on the occasion of what it was hoped would prove an annual outing. Some forty odd seafarers accepted the invitation, the great majority of them well on in years—grey, grizzled, and white of hair and head; cheeks tanned by the wind and sea in every quarter of the globe; eyes still keen and weatherly, and hearts still young with the youth and vigour of the great ocean they had used so long. Some among them had turned to dry land for a living, and were now professional men, men of affairs, prominent citizens brought together by the fellow-feeling that never dies in the souls of those who have once known the sea life—its hardships, its miseries, its perils—and its rare pleasures.

Others there were present still connected with salt water in some fashion or other; but for the most part the "Ancient Mariners" had ceased from earning a livelihood on that "rolling deep," a home upon which, as these years close up in quick succession, when the "grasshopper shall be a burden," is not, despite the dictum of all the poets that ever sung of the sea, one of the most comfortable. There can be no possible mistake made when addressing anybody on the Commodore; they are "captains all." Cheerful and breezy captains, too; mainly of the old school, men who have served under canvas long before turning their thoughts to steam, and some who have never been shipmates with anything in the shape of engines and propellers. And from more than one quarter is heard a lament that the days of the speedy clippers are numbered with the past. At Watson's Bay lunch is served, and a few toasts are honoured—"The King," "Absent Friends," "Sweethearts and Wives." There are, too, a few speeches made, brief and to the point, each one a capital model for politicians to emulate in those respects. Captains Green and Pearse are highly commended for their happy notion in thus making such a pleasant meeting possible; and then the Commodore, turning on her tail, steers for the open sea.

It may be pure imagination, but when clear of the Heads, all the "Ancient Mariners," appear to gain in vitality and energy, to walk the deck with a firmer step, to cast a keener eye to windward, to, in fine, assimilate to themselves some of that strong and subtle essence of the sea which at one time was their normal atmosphere. A few of the brethren put out lines, and a few of them also, to their own patent astonishment, pulled fish up attached thereto. But their companions for the most part contented themselves with applauding the successful sportsmen and proffering advice. Reminiscences, as might be imagined, were plentiful; talk there was of bygone ships and of the bygone men who sailed them, the like of whom these latter days never saw, and never would see. Talk of quick passages, and of abnormally slow ones; of the modern sailor-man and the passing to extinction of the old-fashioned type—every finger a marlinspike, every hair of his head a ropeyarn, and his blood Stockholm tar. There were men afloat that day who could, an' they had chosen, have told yarns that would have made the romances of Russell and of Conrad pale their ineffectual fires for force and vigour. But they didn't choose, worth mentioning. Their speech was more inclined towards the eminent absurdity of carrying lower mast and a topmast in one; of how poor Jack Webster, master mariner, lost his "ticket" through no fault of his own, but by the neglect of his second, mate, who was a worthless Dutchman. Also of (tell it not in Gath) the price of suburban allotments in various suburbs.

The names of many of these brethren of the deep sea, were they published, would, without doubt, stir a responsive echo in thousands of hearts throughout Australia. Prosperous settlers, merchants, men in every walk of life, would recognise one or other of the "Ancient Mariners" as the shipmaster, who commanded the vessel which brought them to the new country, where they were to make a home for themselves and their children's children. Among the company on the Commodore were Nestors of the sea, who had traded to Sydney when it was comparatively only a small settlement, and when its shipping was altogether insignificant—men like those who could tell you

what Port Jackson looked like a good deal over half a century ago. And how, as they sat and placidly watched the long wash of the Pacific breakers whitening the bases of the great cliffs of the land which they had chosen as their resting place—the land to the building up of whose present prosperity and welfare they had contributed in no little measure—doubtless thoughts of those rugged and turbulent early days passed athwart their minds.

But the sun is getting low, the most persistent of the "Ancient Mariners" has lost his line and sinker. Many of us are not as young as we were, and being "farmers all" as well as "captains all" it is deemed advisable to steer for home. The Bay is called at again, en route, another speech or two made, "Auld Lang Syne" is sung with an earnest vigour that leaves nothing to be desired; except, perhaps, a propensity to scamp the high notes—and the first gathering of the League of Ancient Mariners is over until, as Captain Pearse's resolution, put and carried unanimously, has it, "the nearest Saturday to St. Valentine's Day in each year." And so, home and to rest, for to many of that goodly company of sea-worn men,

Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore.

Than labour in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar.

THE END