

The Storyteller

THE CALL OF THE SEA.

The only memory of his father that Franklin Thompson had was the photograph of a young naval officer in uniform which his mother, with tears in her eyes, often showed him. She died when Franklin was six, leaving him, her only cause for living longer, to the care of his father's brother. When he realised how unwelcome he was in his new home the only solace he had in the world was the photograph. He would look at it for an hour at a time, and read again and again the inscription on the back.

Before he was quite alone in the world he had heard the sea a-calling. On his holidays he would walk to the shore and watch the ships go and come. Each was a speaking individuality, which he would recognise should he see it again. The salt breath was ever in his nostrils, the tang of salt spray in his veins.

When he was eleven his cousin Edward, five years his senior, received the appointment to Annapolis. If Franklin felt any envy he stifled it. The inscription on the photograph in his father's own hand forbade that.

'Be honest; envy nobody; strive hard,' it ran. Two years later Franklin knew that his school days were at an end.

'I'll look for a place for you to learn some business,' said his uncle, as if the boy's preferences for an occupation did not count.

Early the next morning Franklin went to the great bay near his home, as he always did when he was heavy of heart. Three men-of-war—one a new battleship—their white sides gleaming, rested their enormous weights on the water as gently as swans. On the battleship it was visiting day. From her side the monster reached down her big gangway, with holystoned steps and immaculate rope, as a gallant officer offers his hand to a lady.

At the threshold of the deck Franklin paused, as one who suddenly sees his dreams materialise in broad daylight. No one of the knots of sightseers, going here and there with the spectators' 'Ahs!' and occasional questions, noticed the boy, who stood immovable, noting every detail of the leviathan. Each gun seemed to him a living thing.

He saw some jackies going about their appointed duties, and others under the shade of the awnings mending their clothes. The officer of the deck must be the happiest man in the world, Franklin thought. He imagined how his father must have looked, pacing back and forth in the same way. Oh, if his father were only alive, then, perhaps, he, too, might go to Annapolis. He looked up at the bridge and imagined himself in a great storm, with the spray stinging his face and blinding his eyes, and the mountain of steel as obedient to his commands as a bicycle to the turn of the handle-bar.

'Wouldn't you like to look around a bit?' asked a voice at his elbow.

Its owner, Franklin saw, was a boy of about his own age, dressed like the jackies in summer white.

'Would I? Would I?' the way Franklin asked the question was answer enough from one boy to another.

'I guess you'll do,' said his new friend, laughing. 'My names' Harry Grumm. I'm a 'prentice'.

Harry showed how the ammunition was hoisted for a 13-inch gun by touching a button: he slipped a dummy shell into the breach of one of the 3-inch rapid firers; but he was quite unable to answer all of his guest's questions.

Franklin did not leave the man-of-war until the last boat was going ashore. That night he told his uncle of his desire to join the navy as an apprentice.

Uncle William was in unusually bad temper. He thought for a moment and then said:

'I don't believe you'll ever be any use in business. Probably you'd run away to sea if I got you a place. I'll take you to the navy yard to-morrow.'

At any rate, Uncle William thought, he would be free from any further responsibility or care for the boy. Nevertheless, he knew what Franklin's proud father or his proud mother, were either of them alive, would say. That thought stung him a little.

While his cousin was at the school where officers are made, Franklin was to be trained for a seaman. Edward would begin his career with rank and position just beyond the highest grade Franklin could ever attain. Franklin must be ever on the fore-castle side of the dividing line between officer and man. He might rise to be a chief gunner, while Edward might be an admiral.

But Franklin did not understand this. He was in the period of lighthearted youth when the responsibility for his future rested on his guardian's shoulders. He was entirely under the spell of the call of the sea.

A year later found him bound for South America on a small cruiser, which continued around the Horn and on to Hong Kong to join the Asiatic Squadron which was even then preparing for the conflict with Spain. In all that long voyage he had never once been seasick and he had grown to love the sea from familiarity as much as he had loved it in anticipation.

On that great morning when the American men-of-war ran into Manila Bay the executive officer set him to look for torpedo boats. The story of how he reported, with his hand to his cap in salute, 'Torpedo boat on our starboard bow, sir; she's sinking by the bow, sir; she's sunk,' went the round of the messes. After the battle came that long period of waiting until the army

took the city. When the sun was not as hot as an oven the clouds poured torrents that rose from the hot awnings in steam.

By this time Franklin had come to comprehend the separation of officer and man as only actual service can reveal it. Sometimes, with cap in hand, he had to pass through the wardroom and the officers' quarters. These, which had been his father's portion, would be his cousin's, but could never be his.

His fellow-apprentices were quite content with the fore-castle. They felt more at home aft than they would forward. There was Charley, for example. Charley studied as little as he might; he was always getting into mischief, but withal a bright, good-hearted fellow, with the makings of a first-class seaman in him.

The boatswain, known as 'Pete' in the fore-castle and 'Deering' forward—and there you have his two names—used to fend off intrusion when Franklin was busy with his books. All his studies had the requirements for admission to Annapolis in view. Not that he expected ever to have his learning put to the test. He knew no one; he had no hope of knowing anyone who could secure for him the coveted appointment. It pleased him to be ready.

One day, as he was bending over the little box which is at once a seaman's work basket and wardrobe, the captain, who had strolled aft, stopped by his side, and, looking over his shoulder, saw a photograph.

'Why, that's Thompson!' he exclaimed. 'Is he any relation of yours?'

'My father, sir,' Franklin replied, as he sprang to his feet and saluted.

'I did not know that,' the captain repeated, thoughtfully.

He picked up the photograph and scanned the face of his old messmate. Afterwards he never passed Franklin without a smiling glance. But that glance, meant so kindly, had a sting. It seemed to say that he was in a position unworthy of his father's name.

When a visiting Congressman of the United States came aboard the cruiser as a guest Pete instantly sought out Franklin, and, taking him to one side where he could not be overheard, said:

'Now's your chance, my bully boy. A Congressman can do most anything, so they say. You go right up to this one and knock your cap smart as you can and tell him who your father was and that you want to go to Annapolis.'

Franklin had not the courage or the presumption, whichever you call it; Pete called it 'gall.'

'If you won't, sonny I will.'

And when he saw the Congressman sitting on the deck after general quarters he approached him with a eulogy as earnest as it was picturesque. The Congressman smiled and asked to see Franklin.

'Now, sonny,' said Peter, 'I've cleared the channel, go forward and do your evolutions.'

As Franklin stood before the elderly, dignified man sitting beside the captain on the captain's deck he felt himself to be quite the most insignificant apprentice in the world. The Congressman looked him over keenly from head to foot, as if he were examining the texture of the cloth on the back of his jacket.

'Do you want to go to Annapolis?'

'Did he want to? Does the tender shoot of spring want the sunlight? Franklin's voice trembled with hope.'

'Yes, sir. More than anything else in the world.'

'I'm not making any promises,' the Congressman said finally. 'Congressmen have not a pocketful of blanks to fill out whenever they see a bright boy. I'll see what I can do.'

When, by the rules of the navy, Franklin was supposed to be sound asleep that night he was wide awake, building air castles. How long would he have to wait before he heard from the Congressman? Would he ever hear?

The statesman did not appear again aboard the cruiser for many days. In the meantime a new cadet, with his stripe fresh on his arm, came to the cruiser. It was none other than Franklin's own cousin, Edward. When they met at dull there was no look of recognition in Edward's face. Later, in one of the intervals of the day which the fore-castle may call its own, the officer came aft and in a patronising manner asked the apprentice how he was getting on. When Franklin told him very well, Edward said it was awkward for an officer to have a cousin in the fore-castle, and walked away. Franklin flushed at the remark, and repeated under his breath his father's advice, as the soldier of the old days repeated his father's.

The next day Franklin had shore leave. On his way back to the quay he saw his fellow-apprentice Charley in bad company. He forgot all else except his friend's plight, and his horror over it. When finally he had separated Charley from the lounge who wanted to show the sailor boy the town, the cruiser's launch had gone. They had to hire a native to row them out in a banca, which crept at a snail's pace in the gathering darkness.

For the first time in his life Franklin was among the accused who stood at the mast the next morning to hear their sentences from the captain, who acts as judge, and with the captain was the Congressman. Franklin saw his look of surprise as their eyes met. The captain spoke of his own grief in delivering sentence of suspension from leave privilege for six months.

Franklin's head swam, and his cheeks were aflame. He could only reply with a hoarse 'Yes, sir.'

As he turned to go he heard the Congressman say sarcastically that he did not think 'that boy was so very anxious to go to Annapolis.'