

SONGS OF THE SEA.

THE men don't sing much except when on a long voyage, but when they really get settled down for a trip then you will hear them at it," said a naval officer to a "Tribune" reporter recently.

"What do they sing?" inquired the reporter.

"The songs of the sea are peculiar. They belong to a musical world of their own, as much as do the negro melodies of the South. What peculiarity there is in the music that sailors most love I am not enough of a musician to tell; but songs that one would at first suppose would be popular with 'Jack' he does not sing at all. What more beautiful sea songs have ever been written than those by Stephen Adams, such as 'Nancy Lee' and the 'Midshipmite,' and yet you never hear them sung by sailors."

"They sing Dibdin's songs, I suppose?"

"No, strange to say, they do not. 'Old Tom Bowlin' is the only one of Dibdin's songs I ever heard them sing. In that Dibdin struck the right chord, and everywhere that English-speaking sailors sail the ocean that song is loved and sung. How often from the decks of men-of-war or the fore-castle of merchant ships I have heard that song float out into the night—

Here a sheer hulk lies poor Tom Bowlin',
The darling of our crew;
No more he'll hear the tempest howlin',
For death has broached him to.

Many of the songs popular in the navy have never been given to the general public that I know of until the publication of that excellent little collection of sea-songs recently compiled and published by Commodore Luce. Some of the songs in this book have been almost forgotten even in the navy, and were taken down from the lips of old sailors who had sung them when they and life were new."

"What is the nature of these songs?"

"Most of them recount victories of the American Navy. There is one song very popular in the navy, called 'The Constitution and Guerriere.'" It tells how—

The Guerriere, a frigate bold,
On the tumbling ocean rolled,
Commanded by proud Dacres,
The Grandee, oh.

And it ends with the statement that

The Yankee boys for fighting are the dandy, oh.

"The tune has a rollicking swing to it well suited to the words."

"What are 'shanty' songs?"

"'Shanty' songs are working songs, and are sung in the merchant service. The word 'shanty' is probably from the French 'chanter,' to sing. These songs are in sets, each of which has a different cadence adapted for the work to which it is sung. There are songs for sheeting home top-sails, for weighing anchor and for all that sort of thing. One which is exceedingly popular goes—

I'm bound away this very day,
I'm bound for the Rio Grande,
Ho you, Rio;
Then fare you well my bonny blue bell,
I'm bound for the Rio Grande.

'Jack' sings this with all sorts of queer quavers in his voice, making the cadence by hauling on the ropes.

Blow the man down, oh, blow the man down,
Give me some time to blow the man down,

is also a popular 'shanty.' Then there are others in which the sailors improvise largely as they go along. A good 'shanty' singer is never at a loss for words."

"Is this singing a help to the men?"

"Oh, yes. They always work better on merchant ships when they sing. A good merchant officer sees to it that his men sing at their work. If they are silent he will sing out, 'Make a little music there!' " There is always a leader in the singing of these songs, some man with a good voice and a great stock of lungs. Such men are much in demand on merchant ships. There is a song I had almost forgotten to mention. It is one of the most popular of those sung in the navy, and it is called the 'Homeward bound song.' The scene is laid at Pensacola, and the song says—

It's off to the sign of the dog and bell,
It's there they do good whisky sell,
In comes the landlord with his usual smile,
Saying go it my boys it's worth your while,
For you know we are homeward bound,
For you know we are homeward bound.

These songs may seem musicless and thin to those who do not spend their lives on the ocean, but you know the story of the Count Amaldos, how that he heard an ancient helmsman sing a wonderful song of the sea, and prayed that the old man would teach it to him—

Wouldst' thou then, the helmsman answered
Learn the secrets of the sea?
Only those who share its dangers
Comprehend its mystery.