

*I hope the following short but true story will invite the reader to a glimpse into the formative period of my youth. Captain Noble opened a window of adventure at sea I found almost unreal or found hard to believe even existed. His artistic ability to paint a picture with words cast a spell over me I have as yet been unable to break.*

## *CAPTAIN CHAS. NOBLE*

As a lad of 13 or 14 growing up on the beach in the mid to late thirties at Las Flores, California, I was isolated from the normal activities that most youths of the big cities experienced. Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining, but it did make me seek out ways to entertain myself like surfing, tending my lobster pots, or one of my more enjoyable hobbies, surf fishing. Bait was always available from the rocks or in the sand at the surf line.

During the weekends and summer breaks I would fish in the early mornings and late afternoons at a spot just a few houses up the beach from our house, because some large rocks sat offshore and I believed that the bait on the rocks attracted the hungry fish. I kept the big fish but released the small ones.

When setting up to fish, I would always look up to a two-story house which had a very large bay window, and wave to an elderly, neatly trimmed bearded gent who always sat in the same spot at the window, and he would always wave back.

Word among the few boys around my age who lived along the beach was that this mysterious man was a ghost, and that his house was haunted. Nobody ever saw anyone enter or leave the house, and we never saw him except in the window.

Halloween came around and for something to do, we (the three teen age hellions) let the air out of tires and even jacked the wheels up on some of the cars parked along Pacific Coast Highway, or forced potatoes in their exhaust pipes.

Walking up PCH we saw some telephone logs laying in front of the so-called "haunted house", so we started rolling them over the side and down the ravine between the house and road. As they rolled down they made more noise than we expected so we ran for our lives. We knew then that we had gone too far.

A day or so later Mrs. Bainter, a movie actress and neighbor, knocked on our

door and informed me that Captain Noble would like to talk to me at his house.

I was certain I knew what he wanted to talk about and tried to dream up every excuse I could imagine getting out of going. Mrs. Bainter was waiting so I asked her when he wanted to meet with me, and she responded, "NOW"!

I walked up the road to his house and stopped at the mailbox with the name "CAPT. CHAS. NOBLE" stenciled on its side, and thought it odd that I had never noticed the name before. I then glanced at the logs which were still where they landed when we rolled them over the ledge on Halloween night. It appeared that one log had rolled over another and speared the side of the house. "Oh God," I thought. I took a deep breath and knocked on the front door.

"Come in," bellowed a booming voice and I knew that now I was in for it. I slowly opened the front door just enough to stick my head inside, and to my amazement I was peering into a room like I'd seen so often in the movies. It was like the Captain's quarters on a Clipper ship; beamed ceilings, and even had brass handrails in the overhead like they had to hold on to when the seas got rough. Light and dark wood panels everywhere.

"Don't dawdle, come over here and let me see what you look like," he commanded.

I couldn't answer; I just kept looking around the room. My eyes would focus on one thing after another, from the Tapa cloths and war clubs from the South Pacific on one wall, to all the many pictures and paintings of all sorts of ships, both sail and steam. My eyes went wild, darting all around the room without once falling on the man in the window. I guess he must have sensed my genuine interest in all the artifacts, so he let me gaze at my leisure as I drifted from one nautical object to another....that is, until my eyes finally met his....and then he smiled.

"Are you Ron, the lad that lives down the way?" he asked.

I nodded my head, expecting his next question to break the spell I was under.

"Speak up lad. I can't hear your head rattle."

"Yes sir, I'm Ron." I was studying the man sitting in his chair. Oh no! He's in a wheel chair. I noticed a pant leg neatly folded and pinned and one large slipper on the lonely foot. I suddenly felt sick to my stomach thinking of my part

in rolling those logs down into this poor man's house. I noticed a strange odor in the room which seemed to be a mixture of tobacco smoke and incense that I had never smelled before. He caught me sniffing at the air.

"Nothings burning, it's a special blend of pipe tobacco." It was one of the few pleasures he could allow himself, he explained.

"My name is Captain Noble. You can call me Cap'n. As you can see I'm stove up and could use some help around the house. Would you be interested in earning some extra spending money?" he asked.

My first reaction was that this was just a set-up to get me to work off the costs of any damages we did to the house. But before I could answer he continued by saying,

"I noticed you sifting sand in very neat patterns in front of several houses on the beach. Can you give me an estimate to sift the front of my house....say every other week? Also, did you notice the ice plants as you came from the road? They need trimming back."

Not answering his question but asking one of my own, I said, "What kind of Captain are you, Army or Navy?"

"Neither one lad. I'm a retired Master Mariner, licensed to command any ship, any tonnage, any power, and on any sea. See that large certificate in that frame over there?" he pointed towards the wall where the logs where resting on the other side. "Are you interested in the job? If not I'll have to look for someone else."

"I'll take the job Mr. Noble when do you want me to start?"

"Call me Cap'n, as everyone else does when in this house. It's my only command now. I had this room made up to remind me of my years aboard the ships. You can start anytime after you get home from school, and you can bring my old buddy "Pete" when you come."

So that's where my ever-loyal and faithful dog went after I fed him! I thought it strange that after eating his meal, Pete would always take off down the beach like a bat out of hell, and not come home until bedtime.

Not a word was said about the logs, and it tore me up inside. I was prepared to take any punishment assessed.

I had to ride thirteen miles on a Santa Monica public school bus to attend

Lincoln Jr. High. On the trip to school one morning after a week of raging storms, I saw a beautiful old dismasted sailing ship up on the beach by the snooty Bel Air Beach Club at PCH and Sunset Boulevard. I jumped off the bus and ditched school that day, spending the entire day watching all the people cannibalizing the defenseless ship as the huge waves drove her higher on to the beach. Finally, police and lifeguards arrived and chased everyone off the ship. To me the whole scene was very exciting and I will never forget that day.

I hitched a ride home and couldn't wait to get to the Captain's house to tell him what I had seen. I described in every detail everything that had caught my attention.



### *MINNY A. CAIN*

The Cap'n seemed interested in all I told him and at last he asked if I knew the name of the ship.

"Minsky A. Cain. Originally out of Halifax," I replied.

The Cap'n wheeled over to a large roll-top desk and brought out a large photograph album with a lot of loose pictures jammed into the pages. After a couple of minutes he blurted out, "Here's the one!" and then handed the picture to me. All I saw was a couple of men with their arms around each other's shoulders, standing in front of a deck house. "So, what's this?" I asked.

"Read the name on the name-board behind the men."

I could just barely make the name out; part of a "Y" and "A. CAIN".

"The bearded one is me. This picture was taken just after the Great War about 1919. The Minny was a West Coast built three masted Bark of sturdy Ironbark. Every new owner changed her name. I've seen her several times on the East coast, always with a different name. I'm glad someone restored her original name."

After several visits I noticed that the logs were gone and the house was repaired and painted. I felt so remorseful that I had to confess to the Captain of the Halloween prank that got out of hand. I offered to pay for any repairs out of my odd jobs, but he wouldn't hear of it. He did say that he had a whole lot more respect for me for telling him, and that he was glad we became friends.

For every object or item in that room there was a story. The articulate way he told those stories made me feel like I was hearing history being told by a person who had lived it. Geography, all of a sudden, took new meaning as he described far-away places with exotic names. My mind was set to become a seaman.

The Cap'n told me of all the kidding he took as a youngster because his name was Charles Noble. He was from a seafaring port on the East Coast and most everyone commonly called the galley smoke pipe a "Charlie Noble" (but it was really the name of just the pipe's hood). So he insisted that all his friends call him Chas, a name that rhymes with jazz.

I wound up spending many hours with the Cap'n. In fact my mother sat me down and questioned me one night after returning home later than I should have. "Is he doing anything improper? Is he touching you or suggesting bad things?" I guess all mothers are just protective that way.

"No Mother, he's just a very interesting person. He tells stories and shows me the papers or pictures to back his stories up," I reassured her.

Christmas was coming and I had no money for presents. About twice a week

I would go to the "Minny" and chisel out big bronze spikes that held her huge frames and planks together. They were 12" to 16" long, by one-and-a-half inches across. In a week's time I could dig out, with hammer and chisel and a crowbar, maybe six or seven spikes. They must have weighed four pounds each, and at fifty cents a pound I could have made a lot of spending money because I had thirty spikes stashed under the house. Unfortunately, there was no one that had the time to take me to the scrap dealer before Christmas.

I polished one of the spikes in the shop at school and presented it to Cap'n Noble for Christmas. A spike off a ship he once sailed on. I'd never seen a man cry before. It must have really touched him, and I became so ashamed because I had made him cry. I guess he felt that he should give something in return, so without hesitation presented me with a miniature cannon that could be fired with a charge of powder. I toyed with the cannon often while he told his stories.

Some years later that same cannon caused the loss of my eyesight for one year and the permanent loss of vision in my right eye, because of my own stupidity in tearing open shot-gun shells to get powder enough to fire the cannon. Today I can consider that accident a blessing, for it made me take on and conquer challenges that I wouldn't have otherwise tried.

Not long after Christmas Cap'n Noble had to go to the hospital, as he was in very bad health. The loss of his leg to diabetes and the after-effects of frost bite in his good foot had kept him a prisoner to that wheelchair. I pleaded with my parents to take me to the hospital to visit him, but they said that he was too sick to see anyone. I never found out if he passed away or was sent to a convalescent home, but his house was sold a short time later to an elderly couple and I never went into that house again.

Today as I reminisce about the many yarns Cap'n Noble spun, I now know that I should have been writing the tales down. It's a shame to lose stories with the flavor of the seaman's lot of that period as told by one who lived them.