

# A Tall, Tall, Tale about the *Merry Dun of Dover*



by John Townley, Historical Music Interpreter

"Ayuh," nodded Barney Buntline, eyeing the clipper ship *Sea Witch* gliding out of Boston harbor, "she be a pretty one, she. But on the small side — right small, I'd say. Not like the ships they built in the old days — they were bigger, and so's the men that sailed 'em."

"Like take old Cap'n Stormalong — there's hardly a sailor alive that don't know *that* name — even had a song wrote about him:

Stormalong he died long ago, *walk him  
along, John, carry him along!*  
He's gone where them stormy winds don't  
blow,  
*Carry him to bid buryin' ground!*  
I wish I was old Stormy's son,  
I'd build me a ship, ten thousan' ton,  
I'd load her down with island rum,  
And every shellback should have some.  
Oh, lower him down with a golden chain,  
On every link I'd carve his name.

"Stormy was a big man, eight feet tall if he was a foot, and the ship he captained, she was bigger than any ever built. The

*Merry Dun of Dover* was her name, and her deck was so long they had to use horses in relays to carry the orders from Stormy to the fo'c'sle. A horse was stationed at each mast, Pony Express-like, so the messenger could change along the way 'cause no one horse could make the distance. Took her seven years just to come about.

"Sailors went skipping by the masts into the clouds, and by the time they came down, they were gray-haired old men. Those masts were so tall, they had hinges on them, just to let the moon and stars go by. But bein' a topman aboard the *Merry Dun* weren't a bad life, as they had taverns in the blocks to sustain a man when he was off watch.

"One time she was makin' her way up the Channel she scraped a regiment of soldiers off Dover with her hand-booms while her spanker-boom was still above the forts in Calais. That Channel passage was a tight squeeze — the Channel bein' twenty-two miles wide and the *Merry Dun's* beam bein' twenty-one miles, five thousand two hundred and seventy-five

foot. On account of it bein' low tide, she got plumb stuck headed north, so Stormy come up with a plan. He greased the port side up with white soap and slipped her right on through — you can still see the soap there on the cliffs of Dover today, white as chalk they are.

"On her last trip to the Indian Ocean, she met a typhoon the likes of which no man had ever seen before, but she just took up the courses, flushed the whales washed aboard out of her scuppers, and made on for Ceylon. And there it was she went down to Davey Jones — it was the Lodestone Mountain that did it. 'Round the Indian Ocean, sailors stitch their boats together with thread and wooden pegs, because of Lodestone Mountain. I reckon Stormy didn't know that — or if he did, he didn't care — 'cause all the nails was pulled straight out of the *Merry Dun* in the twinkling of an eye, and she fell to pieces and sank like a stone, and Stormy with her.

"Hope. There's never been another sailor like old Stormalong John," opined Barney, "nor no ship like the *Merry Dun*. And that's the truth."