

Chapter II.

Some commanders of ships take their Departure from the home coast sadly, in a spirit of grief and discontent. They have a wife, children perhaps, some affection at any rate, or perhaps only some pet vice, that must be left behind for a year or more. I remember only one man who walked his deck with a springy step, and gave the first course of the passage in an elated voice. But he, as I learned afterwards, was leaving nothing behind him, except a welter of debts and threats of legal proceedings.

On the other hand, I have known many captains who, directly their ship had left the narrow waters of the Channel, would disappear from the sight of their ship's company altogether for some three days or more. They would take a long dive, as it were, into their state-room, only to emerge a few days afterwards with a more or less serene brow. Those were the men easy to get on with. Besides, such a complete retirement seemed to imply a satisfactory amount of trust in their officers, and to be trusted displeases no seaman worthy of the name.

On my first voyage as chief mate with good Captain MacW- I remember that I felt quite flattered, and went blithely about my duties, myself a commander for all practical purposes. Still, whatever the greatness of my illusion, the fact remained that the real commander was there, backing up my self-confidence, though invisible to my eyes behind a maple-wood veneered cabin-door with a white china handle.

That is the time, after your Departure is taken, when the spirit of your commander communes with you in a muffled voice, as if from the sanctum sanctorum of a temple; because, call her a temple or a "hell afloat"--as some ships have been called--the captain's state- room is surely the august place in every vessel.

The good MacW- would not even come out to his meals, and fed solitarily in his holy of holies from a tray covered with a white napkin. Our steward used to bend an ironic glance at the perfectly empty plates he was bringing out from there. This grief for his home, which overcomes so many married seamen, did not deprive Captain MacW- of his legitimate appetite. In fact, the steward would almost invariably come up to me, sitting in the captain's chair at the head of the table, to say in a grave murmur, "The captain asks for one more slice of meat and two potatoes." We, his officers, could hear him moving about in his berth, or lightly snoring, or fetching deep sighs, or splashing and blowing in his bath-room;

and we made our reports to him through the keyhole, as it were. It was the crowning achievement of his amiable character that the answers we got were given in a quite mild and friendly tone. Some commanders in their periods of seclusion are constantly grumpy, and seem to resent the mere sound of your voice as an injury and an insult.

But a grumpy recluse cannot worry his subordinates: whereas the man in whom the sense of duty is strong (or, perhaps, only the sense of self-importance), and who persists in airing on deck his moroseness all day--and perhaps half the night--becomes a grievous infliction. He walks the poop darting gloomy glances, as though he wished to poison the sea, and snaps your head off savagely whenever you happen to blunder within earshot. And these vagaries are the harder to bear patiently, as becomes a man and an officer, because no sailor is really good-tempered during the first few days of a voyage. There are regrets, memories, the instinctive longing for the departed idleness, the instinctive hate of all work. Besides, things have a knack of going wrong at the start, especially in the matter of irritating trifles. And there is the abiding thought of a whole year of more or less hard life before one, because there was hardly a southern-going voyage in the yesterday of the sea which meant anything less than a twelvemonth. Yes; it needed a few days after the taking of your departure for a ship's company to shake down into their places, and for the soothing deep-water ship routine to establish its beneficent sway.

It is a great doctor for sore hearts and sore heads, too, your ship's routine, which I have seen soothe--at least for a time--the most turbulent of spirits. There is health in it, and peace, and satisfaction of the accomplished round; for each day of the ship's life seems to close a circle within the wide ring of the sea horizon. It borrows a certain dignity of sameness from the majestic monotony of the sea. He who loves the sea loves also the ship's routine.

Nowhere else than upon the sea do the days, weeks and months fall away quicker into the past. They seem to be left astern as easily as the light air-bubbles in the swirls of the ship's wake, and vanish into a great silence in which your ship moves on with a sort of magical effect. They pass away, the days, the weeks, the months. Nothing but a gale can disturb the orderly life of the ship; and the spell of unshaken monotony that seems to have fallen upon the very voices of her men is broken only by the near prospect of a Landfall.

Then is the spirit of the ship's commander stirred strongly again. But it is not moved to seek seclusion, and to remain, hidden and inert, shut up in a small cabin with the solace of a good bodily appetite. When about to make the land, the spirit of the ship's commander is tormented by an unconquerable restlessness. It seems unable to abide for many seconds together in the holy of

holies of the captain's state-room; it will out on deck and gaze ahead, through straining eyes, as the appointed moment comes nearer. It is kept vigorously upon the stretch of excessive vigilance. Meantime the body of the ship's commander is being enfeebled by want of appetite; at least, such is my experience, though "enfeebled" is perhaps not exactly the word. I might say, rather, that it is spiritualized by a disregard for food, sleep, and all the ordinary comforts, such as they are, of sea life. In one or two cases I have known that detachment from the grosser needs of existence remain regrettably incomplete in the matter of drink.

But these two cases were, properly speaking, pathological cases, and the only two in all my sea experience. In one of these two instances of a craving for stimulants, developed from sheer anxiety, I cannot assert that the man's seaman-like qualities were impaired in the least. It was a very anxious case, too, the land being made suddenly, close-to, on a wrong bearing, in thick weather, and during a fresh onshore gale. Going below to speak to him soon after, I was unlucky enough to catch my captain in the very act of hasty cork-drawing. The sight, I may say, gave me an awful scare. I was well aware of the morbidly sensitive nature of the man. Fortunately, I managed to draw back unseen, and, taking care to stamp heavily with my sea-boots at the foot of the cabin stairs, I made my second entry. But for this unexpected glimpse, no act of his during the next twenty-four hours could have given me the slightest suspicion that all was not well with his nerve.