

Chapter IV.

Before an anchor can ever be raised, it must be let go; and this perfectly obvious truism brings me at once to the subject of the degradation of the sea language in the daily press of this country.

Your journalist, whether he takes charge of a ship or a fleet, almost invariably "casts" his anchor. Now, an anchor is never cast, and to take a liberty with technical language is a crime against the clearness, precision, and beauty of perfected speech.

An anchor is a forged piece of iron, admirably adapted to its end, and technical language is an instrument wrought into perfection by ages of experience, a flawless thing for its purpose. An anchor of yesterday (because nowadays there are contrivances like mushrooms and things like claws, of no particular expression or shape--just hooks)--an anchor of yesterday is in its way a most efficient instrument. To its perfection its size bears witness, for there is no other appliance so small for the great work it has to do. Look at the anchors hanging from the cat-heads of a big ship! How tiny they are in proportion to the great size of the hull! Were they made of gold they would look like trinkets, like ornamental toys, no bigger in proportion than a jewelled drop in a woman's ear. And yet upon them will depend, more than once, the very life of the ship.

An anchor is forged and fashioned for faithfulness; give it ground that it can bite, and it will hold till the cable parts, and then, whatever may afterwards befall its ship, that anchor is "lost." The honest, rough piece of iron, so simple in appearance, has more parts than the human body has limbs: the ring, the stock, the crown, the flukes, the palms, the shank. All this, according to the journalist, is "cast" when a ship arriving at an anchorage is brought up.

This insistence in using the odious word arises from the fact that a particularly benighted landsman must imagine the act of anchoring as a process of throwing something overboard, whereas the anchor ready for its work is already overboard, and is not thrown over, but simply allowed to fall. It hangs from the ship's side at the end of a heavy, projecting timber called the cat-head, in the bight of a short, thick chain whose end link is suddenly released by a blow from a top-maul or the pull of a lever when the order is given. And the order is not "Heave over!" as the paragraphist seems to imagine, but "Let go!"

As a matter of fact, nothing is ever cast in that sense on board ship but the lead,

of which a cast is taken to search the depth of water on which she floats. A lashed boat, a spare spar, a cask or what not secured about the decks, is "cast adrift" when it is untied. Also the ship herself is "cast to port or starboard" when getting under way. She, however, never "casts" her anchor.

To speak with severe technicality, a ship or a fleet is "brought up"--the complementary words unpronounced and unwritten being, of course, "to an anchor." Less technically, but not less correctly, the word "anchored," with its characteristic appearance and resolute sound, ought to be good enough for the newspapers of the greatest maritime country in the world. "The fleet anchored at Spithead": can anyone want a better sentence for brevity and seamanlike ring? But the "cast-anchor" trick, with its affectation of being a sea-phrase--for why not write just as well "threw anchor," "flung anchor," or "shied anchor"?--is intolerably odious to a sailor's ear. I remember a coasting pilot of my early acquaintance (he used to read the papers assiduously) who, to define the utmost degree of lubberliness in a landsman, used to say, "He's one of them poor, miserable 'cast-anchor' devils."