

Chapter V.

From first to last the seaman's thoughts are very much concerned with his anchors. It is not so much that the anchor is a symbol of hope as that it is the heaviest object that he has to handle on board his ship at sea in the usual routine of his duties. The beginning and the end of every passage are marked distinctly by work about the ship's anchors. A vessel in the Channel has her anchors always ready, her cables shackled on, and the land almost always in sight. The anchor and the land are indissolubly connected in a sailor's thoughts. But directly she is clear of the narrow seas, heading out into the world with nothing solid to speak of between her and the South Pole, the anchors are got in and the cables disappear from the deck. But the anchors do not disappear. Technically speaking, they are "secured in-board"; and, on the fore-castle head, lashed down to ring-bolts with ropes and chains, under the straining sheets of the head-sails, they look very idle and as if asleep. Thus bound, but carefully looked after, inert and powerful, those emblems of hope make company for the look-out man in the night watches; and so the days glide by, with a long rest for those characteristically shaped pieces of iron, reposing forward, visible from almost every part of the ship's deck, waiting for their work on the other side of the world somewhere, while the ship carries them on with a great rush and splutter of foam underneath, and the sprays of the open sea rust their heavy limbs.

The first approach to the land, as yet invisible to the crew's eyes, is announced by the brisk order of the chief mate to the boatswain: "We will get the anchors over this afternoon" or "first thing to-morrow morning," as the case may be. For the chief mate is the keeper of the ship's anchors and the guardian of her cable. There are good ships and bad ships, comfortable ships and ships where, from first day to last of the voyage, there is no rest for a chief mate's body and soul. And ships are what men make them: this is a pronouncement of sailor wisdom, and, no doubt, in the main it is true.

However, there are ships where, as an old grizzled mate once told me, "nothing ever seems to go right!" And, looking from the poop where we both stood (I had paid him a neighbourly call in dock), he added: "She's one of them." He glanced up at my face, which expressed a proper professional sympathy, and set me right in my natural surmise: "Oh no; the old man's right enough. He never interferes. Anything that's done in a seamanlike way is good enough for him. And yet, somehow, nothing ever seems to go right in this ship. I tell you what: she is naturally unhandy."

The "old man," of course, was his captain, who just then came on deck in a silk hat and brown overcoat, and, with a civil nod to us, went ashore. He was certainly not more than thirty, and the elderly mate, with a murmur to me of "That's my old man," proceeded to give instances of the natural unhandiness of the ship in a sort of deprecatory tone, as if to say, "You mustn't think I bear a grudge against her for that."

The instances do not matter. The point is that there are ships where things DO go wrong; but whatever the ship--good or bad, lucky or unlucky--it is in the forepart of her that her chief mate feels most at home. It is emphatically HIS end of the ship, though, of course, he is the executive supervisor of the whole. There are HIS anchors, HIS headgear, his foremast, his station for manoeuvring when the captain is in charge. And there, too, live the men, the ship's hands, whom it is his duty to keep employed, fair weather or foul, for the ship's welfare. It is the chief mate, the only figure of the ship's afterguard, who comes bustling forward at the cry of "All hands on deck!" He is the satrap of that province in the autocratic realm of the ship, and more personally responsible for anything that may happen there.

There, too, on the approach to the land, assisted by the boatswain and the carpenter, he "gets the anchors over" with the men of his own watch, whom he knows better than the others. There he sees the cable ranged, the windlass disconnected, the compressors opened; and there, after giving his own last order, "Stand clear of the cable!" he waits attentive, in a silent ship that forges slowly ahead towards her picked-out berth, for the sharp shout from aft, "Let go!" Instantly bending over, he sees the trusty iron fall with a heavy plunge under his eyes, which watch and note whether it has gone clear.

For the anchor "to go clear" means to go clear of its own chain. Your anchor must drop from the bow of your ship with no turn of cable on any of its limbs, else you would be riding to a foul anchor. Unless the pull of the cable is fair on the ring, no anchor can be trusted even on the best of holding ground. In time of stress it is bound to drag, for implements and men must be treated fairly to give you the "virtue" which is in them. The anchor is an emblem of hope, but a foul anchor is worse than the most fallacious of false hopes that ever lured men or nations into a sense of security. And the sense of security, even the most warranted, is a bad councillor. It is the sense which, like that exaggerated feeling of well-being ominous of the coming on of madness, precedes the swift fall of disaster. A seaman labouring under an undue sense of security becomes at once worth hardly half his salt. Therefore, of all my chief officers, the one I trusted most was a man called B-. He had a red moustache, a lean face, also red, and an uneasy eye. He was worth all his salt.

On examining now, after many years, the residue of the feeling which was the outcome of the contact of our personalities, I discover, without much surprise, a certain flavour of dislike. Upon the whole, I think he was one of the most uncomfortable shipmates possible for a young commander. If it is permissible to criticise the absent, I should say he had a little too much of the sense of insecurity which is so invaluable in a seaman. He had an extremely disturbing air of being everlastingly ready (even when seated at table at my right hand before a plate of salt beef) to grapple with some impending calamity. I must hasten to add that he had also the other qualification necessary to make a trustworthy seaman--that of an absolute confidence in himself. What was really wrong with him was that he had these qualities in an unrestful degree. His eternally watchful demeanour, his jerky, nervous talk, even his, as it were, determined silences, seemed to imply--and, I believe, they did imply--that to his mind the ship was never safe in my hands. Such was the man who looked after the anchors of a less than five-hundred-ton barque, my first command, now gone from the face of the earth, but sure of a tenderly remembered existence as long as I live. No anchor could have gone down foul under Mr. B-'s piercing eye. It was good for one to be sure of that when, in an open roadstead, one heard in the cabin the wind pipe up; but still, there were moments when I detested Mr. B--exceedingly. From the way he used to glare sometimes, I fancy that more than once he paid me back with interest. It so happened that we both loved the little barque very much. And it was just the defect of Mr. B-'s inestimable qualities that he would never persuade himself to believe that the ship was safe in my hands. To begin with, he was more than five years older than myself at a time of life when five years really do count, I being twenty-nine and he thirty-four; then, on our first leaving port (I don't see why I should make a secret of the fact that it was Bangkok), a bit of manoeuvring of mine amongst the islands of the Gulf of Siam had given him an unforgettable scare. Ever since then he had nursed in secret a bitter idea of my utter recklessness. But upon the whole, and unless the grip of a man's hand at parting means nothing whatever, I conclude that we did like each other at the end of two years and three months well enough.

The bond between us was the ship; and therein a ship, though she has female attributes and is loved very unreasonably, is different from a woman. That I should have been tremendously smitten with my first command is nothing to wonder at, but I suppose I must admit that Mr. B-'s sentiment was of a higher order. Each of us, of course, was extremely anxious about the good appearance of the beloved object; and, though I was the one to glean compliments ashore, B--had the more intimate pride of feeling, resembling that of a devoted handmaiden. And that sort of faithful and proud devotion went so far as to make him go about flicking the dust off the varnished teak-wood rail of the little craft with a silk pocket-handkerchief--a present from Mrs. B-, I believe.

That was the effect of his love for the barque. The effect of his admirable lack of the sense of security once went so far as to make him remark to me: "Well, sir, you ARE a lucky man!"

It was said in a tone full of significance, but not exactly offensive, and it was, I suppose, my innate tact that prevented my asking, "What on earth do you mean by that?"

Later on his meaning was illustrated more fully on a dark night in a tight corner during a dead on-shore gale. I had called him up on deck to help me consider our extremely unpleasant situation. There was not much time for deep thinking, and his summing-up was: "It looks pretty bad, whichever we try; but, then, sir, you always do get out of a mess somehow."