

Chapter X.

From the main truck of the average tall ship the horizon describes a circle of many miles, in which you can see another ship right down to her water-line; and these very eyes which follow this writing have counted in their time over a hundred sail becalmed, as if within a magic ring, not very far from the Azores--ships more or less tall. There were hardly two of them heading exactly the same way, as if each had meditated breaking out of the enchanted circle at a different point of the compass. But the spell of the calm is a strong magic. The following day still saw them scattered within sight of each other and heading different ways; but when, at last, the breeze came with the darkling ripple that ran very blue on a pale sea, they all went in the same direction together. For this was the homeward-bound fleet from the far-off ends of the earth, and a Falmouth fruit-schooner, the smallest of them all, was heading the flight. One could have imagined her very fair, if not divinely tall, leaving a scent of lemons and oranges in her wake.

The next day there were very few ships in sight from our mast-heads--seven at most, perhaps, with a few more distant specks, hull down, beyond the magic ring of the horizon. The spell of the fair wind has a subtle power to scatter a white-winged company of ships looking all the same way, each with its white fillet of tumbling foam under the bow. It is the calm that brings ships mysteriously together; it is your wind that is the great separator.

The taller the ship, the further she can be seen; and her white tallness breathed upon by the wind first proclaims her size. The tall masts holding aloft the white canvas, spread out like a snare for catching the invisible power of the air, emerge gradually from the water, sail after sail, yard after yard, growing big, till, under the towering structure of her machinery, you perceive the insignificant, tiny speck of her hull.

The tall masts are the pillars supporting the balanced planes that, motionless and silent, catch from the air the ship's motive-power, as it were a gift from Heaven vouchsafed to the audacity of man; and it is the ship's tall spars, stripped and shorn of their white glory, that incline themselves before the anger of the clouded heaven.

When they yield to a squall in a gaunt and naked submission, their tallness is brought best home even to the mind of a seaman. The man who has looked upon his ship going over too far is made aware of the preposterous tallness of a ship's

spars. It seems impossible but that those gilt trucks which one had to tilt one's head back to see, now falling into the lower plane of vision, must perforce hit the very edge of the horizon. Such an experience gives you a better impression of the loftiness of your spars than any amount of running aloft could do. And yet in my time the royal yards of an average profitable ship were a good way up above her decks.

No doubt a fair amount of climbing up iron ladders can be achieved by an active man in a ship's engine-room, but I remember moments when even to my supple limbs and pride of nimbleness the sailing- ship's machinery seemed to reach up to the very stars.

For machinery it is, doing its work in perfect silence and with a motionless grace, that seems to hide a capricious and not always governable power, taking nothing away from the material stores of the earth. Not for it the unerring precision of steel moved by white steam and living by red fire and fed with black coal. The other seems to draw its strength from the very soul of the world, its formidable ally, held to obedience by the frailest bonds, like a fierce ghost captured in a snare of something even finer than spun silk. For what is the array of the strongest ropes, the tallest spars and the stoutest canvas against the mighty breath of the infinite, but thistle stalks, cobwebs and gossamer?