

Chapter XII.

So sail did get shortened more or less in time even in that ship, and her tall spars never went overboard while I served in her. However, all the time I was with them, Captain S- and Mr. P- did not get on very well together. If P- carried on "like the very devil" because he was too deaf to know how much wind there was, Captain S- (who, as I have said, seemed constitutionally incapable of ordering one of his officers to shorten sail) resented the necessity forced upon him by Mr. P-'s desperate goings on. It was in Captain S-'s tradition rather to reprove his officers for not carrying on quite enough--in his phrase "for not taking every ounce of advantage of a fair wind." But there was also a psychological motive that made him extremely difficult to deal with on board that iron clipper. He had just come out of the marvellous Tweed, a ship, I have heard, heavy to look at but of phenomenal speed. In the middle sixties she had beaten by a day and a half the steam mail-boat from Hong Kong to Singapore. There was something peculiarly lucky, perhaps, in the placing of her masts--who knows? Officers of men-of-war used to come on board to take the exact dimensions of her sail-plan. Perhaps there had been a touch of genius or the finger of good fortune in the fashioning of her lines at bow and stern. It is impossible to say. She was built in the East Indies somewhere, of teak-wood throughout, except the deck. She had a great sheer, high bows, and a clumsy stern. The men who had seen her described her to me as "nothing much to look at." But in the great Indian famine of the seventies that ship, already old then, made some wonderful dashes across the Gulf of Bengal with cargoes of rice from Rangoon to Madras.

She took the secret of her speed with her, and, unsightly as she was, her image surely has its glorious place in the mirror of the old sea.

The point, however, is that Captain S-, who used to say frequently, "She never made a decent passage after I left her," seemed to think that the secret of her speed lay in her famous commander. No doubt the secret of many a ship's excellence does lie with the man on board, but it was hopeless for Captain S- to try to make his new iron clipper equal the feats which made the old Tweed a name of praise upon the lips of English-speaking seamen. There was something pathetic in it, as in the endeavour of an artist in his old age to equal the masterpieces of his youth--for the Tweed's famous passages were Captain S-'s masterpieces. It was pathetic, and perhaps just the least bit dangerous. At any rate, I am glad that, what between Captain S-'s yearning for old triumphs and Mr. P-'s deafness, I have seen some memorable carrying on to make a passage. And I have carried on myself upon the tall spars of that Clyde shipbuilder's masterpiece

as I have never carried on in a ship before or since.

The second mate falling ill during the passage, I was promoted to officer of the watch, alone in charge of the deck. Thus the immense leverage of the ship's tall masts became a matter very near my own heart. I suppose it was something of a compliment for a young fellow to be trusted, apparently without any supervision, by such a commander as Captain S-; though, as far as I can remember, neither the tone, nor the manner, nor yet the drift of Captain S-'s remarks addressed to myself did ever, by the most strained interpretation, imply a favourable opinion of my abilities. And he was, I must say, a most uncomfortable commander to get your orders from at night. If I had the watch from eight till midnight, he would leave the deck about nine with the words, "Don't take any sail off her." Then, on the point of disappearing down the companion-way, he would add curtly: "Don't carry anything away." I am glad to say that I never did; one night, however, I was caught, not quite prepared, by a sudden shift of wind.

There was, of course, a good deal of noise--running about, the, shouts of the sailors, the thrashing of the sails--enough, in fact, to wake the dead. But S-never came on deck. When I was relieved by the chief mate an hour afterwards, he sent for me. I went into his stateroom; he was lying on his couch wrapped up in a rug, with a pillow under his head.

"What was the matter with you up there just now?" he asked.

"Wind flew round on the lee quarter, sir," I said.

"Couldn't you see the shift coming?"

"Yes, sir, I thought it wasn't very far off."

"Why didn't you have your courses hauled up at once, then?" he asked in a tone that ought to have made my blood run cold.

But this was my chance, and I did not let it slip.

"Well, sir," I said in an apologetic tone, "she was going eleven knots very nicely, and I thought she would do for another half-hour or so."

He gazed at me darkly out of his head, lying very still on the white pillow, for a time.

"Ah, yes, another half-hour. That's the way ships get dismasted."

And that was all I got in the way of a wiggling. I waited a little while and then went out, shutting carefully the door of the state- room after me.

Well, I have loved, lived with, and left the sea without ever seeing a ship's tall fabric of sticks, cobwebs and gossamer go by the board. Sheer good luck, no doubt. But as to poor P-, I am sure that he would not have got off scot-free like this but for the god of gales, who called him away early from this earth, which is three parts ocean, and therefore a fit abode for sailors. A few years afterwards I met in an Indian port a man who had served in the ships of the same company. Names came up in our talk, names of our colleagues in the same employ, and, naturally enough, I asked after P-. Had he got a command yet? And the other man answered carelessly:

"No; but he's provided for, anyhow. A heavy sea took him off the poop in the run between New Zealand and the Horn."

Thus P- passed away from amongst the tall spars of ships that he had tried to their utmost in many a spell of boisterous weather. He had shown me what carrying on meant, but he was not a man to learn discretion from. He could not help his deafness. One can only remember his cheery temper, his admiration for the jokes in Punch, his little oddities--like his strange passion for borrowing looking-glasses, for instance. Each of our cabins had its own looking-glass screwed to the bulkhead, and what he wanted with more of them we never could fathom. He asked for the loan in confidential tones. Why? Mystery. We made various surmises. No one will ever know now. At any rate, it was a harmless eccentricity, and may the god of gales, who took him away so abruptly between New Zealand and the Horn, let his soul rest in some Paradise of true seamen, where no amount of carrying on will ever dismast a ship!