

Chapter XIII.

There has been a time when a ship's chief mate, pocket-book in hand and pencil behind his ear, kept one eye aloft upon his riggers and the other down the hatchway on the stevedores, and watched the disposition of his ship's cargo, knowing that even before she started he was already doing his best to secure for her an easy and quick passage.

The hurry of the times, the loading and discharging organization of the docks, the use of hoisting machinery which works quickly and will not wait, the cry for prompt despatch, the very size of his ship, stand nowadays between the modern seaman and the thorough knowledge of his craft.

There are profitable ships and unprofitable ships. The profitable ship will carry a large load through all the hazards of the weather, and, when at rest, will stand up in dock and shift from berth to berth without ballast. There is a point of perfection in a ship as a worker when she is spoken of as being able to SAIL without ballast. I have never met that sort of paragon myself, but I have seen these paragons advertised amongst ships for sale. Such excess of virtue and good-nature on the part of a ship always provoked my mistrust. It is open to any man to say that his ship will sail without ballast; and he will say it, too, with every mark of profound conviction, especially if he is not going to sail in her himself. The risk of advertising her as able to sail without ballast is not great, since the statement does not imply a warranty of her arriving anywhere. Moreover, it is strictly true that most ships will sail without ballast for some little time before they turn turtle upon the crew.

A shipowner loves a profitable ship; the seaman is proud of her; a doubt of her good looks seldom exists in his mind; but if he can boast of her more useful qualities it is an added satisfaction for his self-love.

The loading of ships was once a matter of skill, judgment, and knowledge. Thick books have been written about it. "Stevens on Stowage" is a portly volume with the renown and weight (in its own world) of Coke on Littleton. Stevens is an agreeable writer, and, as is the case with men of talent, his gifts adorn his sterling soundness. He gives you the official teaching on the whole subject, is precise as to rules, mentions illustrative events, quotes law cases where verdicts turned upon a point of stowage. He is never pedantic, and, for all his close adherence to broad principles, he is ready to admit that no two ships can be treated exactly alike.

Stevedoring, which had been a skilled labour, is fast becoming a labour without the skill. The modern steamship with her many holds is not loaded within the sailor-like meaning of the word. She is filled up. Her cargo is not stowed in any sense; it is simply dumped into her through six hatchways, more or less, by twelve winches or so, with clatter and hurry and racket and heat, in a cloud of steam and a mess of coal-dust. As long as you keep her propeller under water and take care, say, not to fling down barrels of oil on top of bales of silk, or deposit an iron bridge-girder of five ton or so upon a bed of coffee-bags, you have done about all in the way of duty that the cry for prompt despatch will allow you to do.