

Chapter XIV.

The sailing-ship, when I knew her in her days of perfection, was a sensible creature. When I say her days of perfection, I mean perfection of build, gear, seaworthy qualities and ease of handling, not the perfection of speed. That quality has departed with the change of building material. No iron ship of yesterday ever attained the marvels of speed which the seamanship of men famous in their time had obtained from their wooden, copper-sheeted predecessors. Everything had been done to make the iron ship perfect, but no wit of man had managed to devise an efficient coating composition to keep her bottom clean with the smooth cleanness of yellow metal sheeting. After a spell of a few weeks at sea, an iron ship begins to lag as if she had grown tired too soon. It is only her bottom that is getting foul. A very little affects the speed of an iron ship which is not driven on by a merciless propeller. Often it is impossible to tell what inconsiderate trifle puts her off her stride. A certain mysteriousness hangs around the quality of speed as it was displayed by the old sailing-ships commanded by a competent seaman. In those days the speed depended upon the seaman; therefore, apart from the laws, rules, and regulations for the good preservation of his cargo, he was careful of his loading,--or what is technically called the trim of his ship. Some ships sailed fast on an even keel, others had to be trimmed quite one foot by the stern, and I have heard of a ship that gave her best speed on a wind when so loaded as to float a couple of inches by the head.

I call to mind a winter landscape in Amsterdam--a flat foreground of waste land, with here and there stacks of timber, like the huts of a camp of some very miserable tribe; the long stretch of the Handelskade; cold, stone-faced quays, with the snow-sprinkled ground and the hard, frozen water of the canal, in which were set ships one behind another with their frosty mooring-ropes hanging slack and their decks idle and deserted, because, as the master stevedore (a gentle, pale person, with a few golden hairs on his chin and a reddened nose) informed me, their cargoes were frozen-in up-country on barges and schuyts. In the distance, beyond the waste ground, and running parallel with the line of ships, a line of brown, warm-toned houses seemed bowed under snow-laden roofs. From afar at the end of Tsar Peter Straat, issued in the frosty air the tinkle of bells of the horse tramcars, appearing and disappearing in the opening between the buildings, like little toy carriages harnessed with toy horses and played with by people that appeared no bigger than children.

I was, as the French say, biting my fists with impatience for that cargo frozen up-

country; with rage at that canal set fast, at the wintry and deserted aspect of all those ships that seemed to decay in grim depression for want of the open water. I was chief mate, and very much alone. Directly I had joined I received from my owners instructions to send all the ship's apprentices away on leave together, because in such weather there was nothing for anybody to do, unless to keep up a fire in the cabin stove. That was attended to by a snuffy and mop-headed, inconceivably dirty, and weirdly toothless Dutch ship-keeper, who could hardly speak three words of English, but who must have had some considerable knowledge of the language, since he managed invariably to interpret in the contrary sense everything that was said to him.

Notwithstanding the little iron stove, the ink froze on the swing-table in the cabin, and I found it more convenient to go ashore stumbling over the arctic waste-land and shivering in glazed tramcars in order to write my evening letter to my owners in a gorgeous cafe in the centre of the town. It was an immense place, lofty and gilt, upholstered in red plush, full of electric lights and so thoroughly warmed that even the marble tables felt tepid to the touch. The waiter who brought me my cup of coffee bore, by comparison with my utter isolation, the dear aspect of an intimate friend. There, alone in a noisy crowd, I would write slowly a letter addressed to Glasgow, of which the gist would be: There is no cargo, and no prospect of any coming till late spring apparently. And all the time I sat there the necessity of getting back to the ship bore heavily on my already half-congealed spirits- -the shivering in glazed tramcars, the stumbling over the snow-sprinkled waste ground, the vision of ships frozen in a row, appearing vaguely like corpses of black vessels in a white world, so silent, so lifeless, so soulless they seemed to be.

With precaution I would go up the side of my own particular corpse, and would feel her as cold as ice itself and as slippery under my feet. My cold berth would swallow up like a chilly burial niche my bodily shivers and my mental excitement. It was a cruel winter. The very air seemed as hard and trenchant as steel; but it would have taken much more than this to extinguish my sacred fire for the exercise of my craft. No young man of twenty-four appointed chief mate for the first time in his life would have let that Dutch tenacious winter penetrate into his heart. I think that in those days I never forgot the fact of my elevation for five consecutive minutes. I fancy it kept me warm, even in my slumbers, better than the high pile of blankets, which positively crackled with frost as I threw them off in the morning. And I would get up early for no reason whatever except that I was in sole charge. The new captain had not been appointed yet.

Almost each morning a letter from my owners would arrive, directing me to go to the charterers and clamour for the ship's cargo; to threaten them with the heaviest penalties of demurrage; to demand that this assortment of varied

merchandise, set fast in a landscape of ice and windmills somewhere up-country, should be put on rail instantly, and fed up to the ship in regular quantities every day. After drinking some hot coffee, like an Arctic explorer setting off on a sledge journey towards the North Pole, I would go ashore and roll shivering in a tramcar into the very heart of the town, past clean-faced houses, past thousands of brass knockers upon a thousand painted doors glimmering behind rows of trees of the pavement species, leafless, gaunt, seemingly dead for ever.

That part of the expedition was easy enough, though the horses were painfully glistening with icicles, and the aspect of the tram-conductors' faces presented a repulsive blending of crimson and purple. But as to frightening or bullying, or even wheedling some sort of answer out of Mr. Hudig, that was another matter altogether. He was a big, swarthy Netherlander, with black moustaches and a bold glance. He always began by shoving me into a chair before I had time to open my mouth, gave me cordially a large cigar, and in excellent English would start to talk everlastingly about the phenomenal severity of the weather. It was impossible to threaten a man who, though he possessed the language perfectly, seemed incapable of understanding any phrase pronounced in a tone of remonstrance or discontent. As to quarrelling with him, it would have been stupid. The weather was too bitter for that. His office was so warm, his fire so bright, his sides shook so heartily with laughter, that I experienced always a great difficulty in making up my mind to reach for my hat.

At last the cargo did come. At first it came dribbling in by rail in trucks, till the thaw set in; and then fast, in a multitude of barges, with a great rush of unbound waters. The gentle master stevedore had his hands very full at last; and the chief mate became worried in his mind as to the proper distribution of the weight of his first cargo in a ship he did not personally know before.

Ships do want humouring. They want humouring in handling; and if you mean to handle them well, they must have been humoured in the distribution of the weight which you ask them to carry through the good and evil fortune of a passage. Your ship is a tender creature, whose idiosyncrasies must be attended to if you mean her to come with credit to herself and you through the rough-and-tumble of her life.