

Chapter XV.

So seemed to think the new captain, who arrived the day after we had finished loading, on the very eve of the day of sailing. I first beheld him on the quay, a complete stranger to me, obviously not a Hollander, in a black bowler and a short drab overcoat, ridiculously out of tone with the winter aspect of the waste-lands, bordered by the brown fronts of houses with their roofs dripping with melting snow.

This stranger was walking up and down absorbed in the marked contemplation of the ship's fore and aft trim; but when I saw him squat on his heels in the slush at the very edge of the quay to peer at the draught of water under her counter, I said to myself, "This is the captain." And presently I descried his luggage coming along--a real sailor's chest, carried by means of rope-beckets between two men, with a couple of leather portmanteaus and a roll of charts sheeted in canvas piled upon the lid. The sudden, spontaneous agility with which he bounded aboard right off the rail afforded me the first glimpse of his real character. Without further preliminaries than a friendly nod, he addressed me: "You have got her pretty well in her fore and aft trim. Now, what about your weights?"

I told him I had managed to keep the weight sufficiently well up, as I thought, one-third of the whole being in the upper part "above the beams," as the technical expression has it. He whistled "Phew!" scrutinizing me from head to foot. A sort of smiling vexation was visible on his ruddy face.

"Well, we shall have a lively time of it this passage, I bet," he said.

He knew. It turned out he had been chief mate of her for the two preceding voyages; and I was already familiar with his handwriting in the old log-books I had been perusing in my cabin with a natural curiosity, looking up the records of my new ship's luck, of her behaviour, of the good times she had had, and of the troubles she had escaped.

He was right in his prophecy. On our passage from Amsterdam to Samarang with a general cargo, of which, alas! only one-third in weight was stowed "above the beams," we had a lively time of it. It was lively, but not joyful. There was not even a single moment of comfort in it, because no seaman can feel comfortable in body or mind when he has made his ship uneasy.

To travel along with a cranky ship for ninety days or so is no doubt a nerve-trying

experience; but in this case what was wrong with our craft was this: that by my system of loading she had been made much too stable.

Neither before nor since have I felt a ship roll so abruptly, so violently, so heavily. Once she began, you felt that she would never stop, and this hopeless sensation, characterizing the motion of ships whose centre of gravity is brought down too low in loading, made everyone on board weary of keeping on his feet. I remember once over-hearing one of the hands say: "By Heavens, Jack! I feel as if I didn't mind how soon I let myself go, and let the blamed hooker knock my brains out if she likes." The captain used to remark frequently: "Ah, yes; I dare say one-third weight above beams would have been quite enough for most ships. But then, you see, there's no two of them alike on the seas, and she's an uncommonly ticklish jade to load."

Down south, running before the gales of high latitudes, she made our life a burden to us. There were days when nothing would keep even on the swing-ables, when there was no position where you could fix yourself so as not to feel a constant strain upon all the muscles of your body. She rolled and rolled with an awful dislodging jerk and that dizzily fast sweep of her masts on every swing. It was a wonder that the men sent aloft were not flung off the yards, the yards not flung off the masts, the masts not flung overboard. The captain in his armchair, holding on grimly at the head of the table, with the soup-tureen rolling on one side of the cabin and the steward sprawling on the other, would observe, looking at me: "That's your one-third above the beams. The only thing that surprises me is that the sticks have stuck to her all this time."

Ultimately some of the minor spars did go--nothing important: spanker-booms and such-like--because at times the frightful impetus of her rolling would part a fourfold tackle of new three-inch Manilla line as if it were weaker than pack-thread.

It was only poetic justice that the chief mate who had made a mistake--perhaps a half-excusable one--about the distribution of his ship's cargo should pay the penalty. A piece of one of the minor spars that did carry away flew against the chief mate's back, and sent him sliding on his face for quite a considerable distance along the main deck. Thereupon followed various and unpleasant consequences of a physical order--"queer symptoms," as the captain, who treated them, used to say; inexplicable periods of powerlessness, sudden accesses of mysterious pain; and the patient agreed fully with the regretful mutters of his very attentive captain wishing that it had been a straightforward broken leg. Even the Dutch doctor who took the case up in Samarang offered no scientific explanation. All he said was: "Ah, friend, you are young yet; it may be very serious for your whole life. You must leave your ship; you must quite silent be for

three months--quite silent."

Of course, he meant the chief mate to keep quiet--to lay up, as a matter of fact. His manner was impressive enough, if his English was childishly imperfect when compared with the fluency of Mr. Hudig, the figure at the other end of that passage, and memorable enough in its way. In a great airy ward of a Far Eastern hospital, lying on my back, I had plenty of leisure to remember the dreadful cold and snow of Amsterdam, while looking at the fronds of the palm-trees tossing and rustling at the height of the window. I could remember the elated feeling and the soul-gripping cold of those tramway journeys taken into town to put what in diplomatic language is called pressure upon the good Hudig, with his warm fire, his armchair, his big cigar, and the never-failing suggestion in his good-natured voice: "I suppose in the end it is you they will appoint captain before the ship sails?" It may have been his extreme good-nature, the serious, unsmiling good-nature of a fat, swarthy man with coal-black moustache and steady eyes; but he might have been a bit of a diplomatist, too. His enticing suggestions I used to repel modestly by the assurance that it was extremely unlikely, as I had not enough experience. "You know very well how to go about business matters," he used to say, with a sort of affected moodiness clouding his serene round face. I wonder whether he ever laughed to himself after I had left the office. I dare say he never did, because I understand that diplomatists, in and out of the career, take themselves and their tricks with an exemplary seriousness.

But he had nearly persuaded me that I was fit in every way to be trusted with a command. There came three months of mental worry, hard rolling, remorse, and physical pain to drive home the lesson of insufficient experience.

Yes, your ship wants to be humoured with knowledge. You must treat with an understanding consideration the mysteries of her feminine nature, and then she will stand by you faithfully in the unceasing struggle with forces wherein defeat is no shame. It is a serious relation, that in which a man stands to his ship. She has her rights as though she could breathe and speak; and, indeed, there are ships that, for the right man, will do anything but speak, as the saying goes.

A ship is not a slave. You must make her easy in a seaway, you must never forget that you owe her the fullest share of your thought, of your skill, of your self-love. If you remember that obligation, naturally and without effort, as if it were an instinctive feeling of your inner life, she will sail, stay, run for you as long as she is able, or, like a sea-bird going to rest upon the angry waves, she will lay out the heaviest gale that ever made you doubt living long enough to see another sunrise.