

Chapter XVII.

The unholy fascination of dread dwells in the thought of the last moments of a ship reported as "missing" in the columns of the Shipping Gazette. Nothing of her ever comes to light--no grating, no lifebuoy, no piece of boat or branded oar--to give a hint of the place and date of her sudden end. The Shipping Gazette does not even call her "lost with all hands." She remains simply "missing"; she has disappeared enigmatically into a mystery of fate as big as the world, where your imagination of a brother-sailor, of a fellow-servant and lover of ships, may range unchecked.

And yet sometimes one gets a hint of what the last scene may be like in the life of a ship and her crew, which resembles a drama in its struggle against a great force bearing it up, formless, ungraspable, chaotic and mysterious, as fate.

It was on a gray afternoon in the lull of a three days' gale that had left the Southern Ocean tumbling heavily upon our ship, under a sky hung with rags of clouds that seemed to have been cut and hacked by the keen edge of a sou'-west gale.

Our craft, a Clyde-built barque of 1,000 tons, rolled so heavily that something aloft had carried away. No matter what the damage was, but it was serious enough to induce me to go aloft myself with a couple of hands and the carpenter to see the temporary repairs properly done.

Sometimes we had to drop everything and cling with both hands to the swaying spars, holding our breath in fear of a terribly heavy roll. And, wallowing as if she meant to turn over with us, the barque, her decks full of water, her gear flying in bights, ran at some ten knots an hour. We had been driven far south--much farther that way than we had meant to go; and suddenly, up there in the slings of the foreyard, in the midst of our work, I felt my shoulder gripped with such force in the carpenter's powerful paw that I positively yelled with unexpected pain. The man's eyes stared close in my face, and he shouted, "Look, sir! look! What's this?" pointing ahead with his other hand.

At first I saw nothing. The sea was one empty wilderness of black and white hills. Suddenly, half-concealed in the tumult of the foaming rollers I made out awash, something enormous, rising and falling--something spread out like a burst of foam, but with a more bluish, more solid look.

It was a piece of an ice-floe melted down to a fragment, but still big enough to sink a ship, and floating lower than any raft, right in our way, as if ambushed among the waves with murderous intent. There was no time to get down on deck. I shouted from aloft till my head was ready to split. I was heard aft, and we managed to clear the sunken floe which had come all the way from the Southern ice-cap to have a try at our unsuspecting lives. Had it been an hour later, nothing could have saved the ship, for no eye could have made out in the dusk that pale piece of ice swept over by the white-crested waves.

And as we stood near the taffrail side by side, my captain and I, looking at it, hardly discernible already, but still quite close-to on our quarter, he remarked in a meditative tone:

"But for the turn of that wheel just in time, there would have been another case of a 'missing' ship."

Nobody ever comes back from a "missing" ship to tell how hard was the death of the craft, and how sudden and overwhelming the last anguish of her men. Nobody can say with what thoughts, with what regrets, with what words on their lips they died. But there is something fine in the sudden passing away of these hearts from the extremity of struggle and stress and tremendous uproar--from the vast, unrestful rage of the surface to the profound peace of the depths, sleeping untroubled since the beginning of ages.