

Chapter XIX.

The efficiency of a steamship consists not so much in her courage as in the power she carries within herself. It beats and throbs like a pulsating heart within her iron ribs, and when it stops, the steamer, whose life is not so much a contest as the disdainful ignoring of the sea, sickens and dies upon the waves. The sailing-ship, with her unthrobbing body, seemed to lead mysteriously a sort of unearthly existence, bordering upon the magic of the invisible forces, sustained by the inspiration of life-giving and death-dealing winds.

So that big steamer, dying by a sudden stroke, drifted, an unwieldy corpse, away from the track of other ships. And she would have been posted really as "overdue," or maybe as "missing," had she not been sighted in a snowstorm, vaguely, like a strange rolling island, by a whaler going north from her Polar cruising ground. There was plenty of food on board, and I don't know whether the nerves of her passengers were at all affected by anything else than the sense of interminable boredom or the vague fear of that unusual situation. Does a passenger ever feel the life of the ship in which he is being carried like a sort of honoured bale of highly sensitive goods? For a man who has never been a passenger it is impossible to say. But I know that there is no harder trial for a seaman than to feel a dead ship under his feet.

There is no mistaking that sensation, so dismal, so tormenting and so subtle, so full of unhappiness and unrest. I could imagine no worse eternal punishment for evil seamen who die unrepentant upon the earthly sea than that their souls should be condemned to man the ghosts of disabled ships, drifting for ever across a ghostly and tempestuous ocean.

She must have looked ghostly enough, that broken-down steamer, rolling in that snowstorm--a dark apparition in a world of white snowflakes to the staring eyes of that whaler's crew. Evidently they didn't believe in ghosts, for on arrival into port her captain unromantically reported having sighted a disabled steamer in latitude somewhere about 50 degrees S. and a longitude still more uncertain. Other steamers came out to look for her, and ultimately towed her away from the cold edge of the world into a harbour with docks and workshops, where, with many blows of hammers, her pulsating heart of steel was set going again to go forth presently in the renewed pride of its strength, fed on fire and water, breathing black smoke into the air, pulsating, throbbing, shouldering its arrogant way against the great rollers in blind disdain of winds and sea.

The track she had made when drifting while her heart stood still within her iron ribs looked like a tangled thread on the white paper of the chart. It was shown to me by a friend, her second officer. In that surprising tangle there were words in minute letters--"gales," "thick fog," "ice"--written by him here and there as memoranda of the weather. She had interminably turned upon her tracks, she had crossed and recrossed her haphazard path till it resembled nothing so much as a puzzling maze of pencilled lines without a meaning. But in that maze there lurked all the romance of the "overdue" and a menacing hint of "missing."

"We had three weeks of it," said my friend, "just think of that!"

"How did you feel about it?" I asked.

He waved his hand as much as to say: It's all in the day's work. But then, abruptly, as if making up his mind:

"I'll tell you. Towards the last I used to shut myself up in my berth and cry."

"Cry?"

"Shed tears," he explained briefly, and rolled up the chart.

I can answer for it, he was a good man--as good as ever stepped upon a ship's deck--but he could not bear the feeling of a dead ship under his feet: the sickly, disheartening feeling which the men of some "overdue" ships that come into harbour at last under a jury-rig must have felt, combated, and overcome in the faithful discharge of their duty.