

Chapter XXI.

That is why your "strandings" are for the most part so unexpected. In fact, they are all unexpected, except those heralded by some short glimpse of the danger, full of agitation and excitement, like an awakening from a dream of incredible folly.

The land suddenly at night looms up right over your bows, or perhaps the cry of "Broken water ahead!" is raised, and some long mistake, some complicated edifice of self-delusion, over-confidence, and wrong reasoning is brought down in a fatal shock, and the heart-searing experience of your ship's keel scraping and scrunching over, say, a coral reef. It is a sound, for its size, far more terrific to your soul than that of a world coming violently to an end. But out of that chaos your belief in your own prudence and sagacity reasserts itself. You ask yourself, Where on earth did I get to? How on earth did I get there? with a conviction that it could not be your own act, that there has been at work some mysterious conspiracy of accident; that the charts are all wrong, and if the charts are not wrong, that land and sea have changed their places; that your misfortune shall for ever remain inexplicable, since you have lived always with the sense of your trust, the last thing on closing your eyes, the first on opening them, as if your mind had kept firm hold of your responsibility during the hours of sleep.

You contemplate mentally your mischance, till little by little your mood changes, cold doubt steals into the very marrow of your bones, you see the inexplicable fact in another light. That is the time when you ask yourself, How on earth could I have been fool enough to get there? And you are ready to renounce all belief in your good sense, in your knowledge, in your fidelity, in what you thought till then was the best in you, giving you the daily bread of life and the moral support of other men's confidence.

The ship is lost or not lost. Once stranded, you have to do your best by her. She may be saved by your efforts, by your resource and fortitude bearing up against the heavy weight of guilt and failure. And there are justifiable strandings in fogs, on uncharted seas, on dangerous shores, through treacherous tides. But, saved or not saved, there remains with her commander a distinct sense of loss, a flavour in the mouth of the real, abiding danger that lurks in all the forms of human existence. It is an acquisition, too, that feeling. A man may be the better for it, but he will not be the same. Damocles has seen the sword suspended by a hair over his head, and though a good man need not be made less valuable by such a knowledge, the feast shall not henceforth have the same flavour.

Years ago I was concerned as chief mate in a case of stranding which was not fatal to the ship. We went to work for ten hours on end, laying out anchors in readiness to heave off at high water. While I was still busy about the decks forward I heard the steward at my elbow saying: "The captain asks whether you mean to come in, sir, and have something to eat to-day."

I went into the cuddy. My captain sat at the head of the table like a statue. There was a strange motionlessness of everything in that pretty little cabin. The swing-table which for seventy odd days had been always on the move, if ever so little, hung quite still above the soup-tureen. Nothing could have altered the rich colour of my commander's complexion, laid on generously by wind and sea; but between the two tufts of fair hair above his ears, his skull, generally suffused with the hue of blood, shone dead white, like a dome of ivory. And he looked strangely untidy. I perceived he had not shaved himself that day; and yet the wildest motion of the ship in the most stormy latitudes we had passed through, never made him miss one single morning ever since we left the Channel. The fact must be that a commander cannot possibly shave himself when his ship is aground. I have commanded ships myself, but I don't know; I have never tried to shave in my life.

He did not offer to help me or himself till I had coughed markedly several times. I talked to him professionally in a cheery tone, and ended with the confident assertion:

"We shall get her off before midnight, sir."

He smiled faintly without looking up, and muttered as if to himself:

"Yes, yes; the captain put the ship ashore and we got her off."

Then, raising his head, he attacked grumpily the steward, a lanky, anxious youth with a long, pale face and two big front teeth.

"What makes this soup so bitter? I am surprised the mate can swallow the beastly stuff. I'm sure the cook's ladled some salt water into it by mistake."

The charge was so outrageous that the steward for all answer only dropped his eyelids bashfully.

There was nothing the matter with the soup. I had a second helping. My heart was warm with hours of hard work at the head of a willing crew. I was elated with having handled heavy anchors, cables, boats without the slightest hitch;

pleased with having laid out scientifically bower, stream, and kedge exactly where I believed they would do most good. On that occasion the bitter taste of a stranding was not for my mouth. That experience came later, and it was only then that I understood the loneliness of the man in charge.

It's the captain who puts the ship ashore; it's we who get her off.