

Chapter XXIX.

In the atmosphere of the Easterly weather, as pellucid as a piece of crystal and refracting like a prism, we could see the appalling numbers of our helpless company, even to those who in more normal conditions would have remained invisible, sails down under the horizon. It is the malicious pleasure of the East Wind to augment the power of your eyesight, in order, perhaps, that you should see better the perfect humiliation, the hopeless character of your captivity. Easterly weather is generally clear, and that is all that can be said for it--almost supernaturally clear when it likes; but whatever its mood, there is something uncanny in its nature. Its duplicity is such that it will deceive a scientific instrument. No barometer will give warning of an easterly gale, were it ever so wet. It would be an unjust and ungrateful thing to say that a barometer is a stupid contrivance. It is simply that the wiles of the East Wind are too much for its fundamental honesty. After years and years of experience the most trusty instrument of the sort that ever went to sea screwed on to a ship's cabin bulkhead will, almost invariably, be induced to rise by the diabolic ingenuity of the Easterly weather, just at the moment when the Easterly weather, discarding its methods of hard, dry, impassive cruelty, contemplates drowning what is left of your spirit in torrents of a peculiarly cold and horrid rain. The sleet-and-hail squalls following the lightning at the end of a westerly gale are cold and benumbing and stinging and cruel enough. But the dry, Easterly weather, when it turns to wet, seems to rain poisoned showers upon your head. It is a sort of steady, persistent, overwhelming, endlessly driving downpour, which makes your heart sick, and opens it to dismal forebodings. And the stormy mood of the Easterly weather looms black upon the sky with a peculiar and amazing blackness. The West Wind hangs heavy gray curtains of mist and spray before your gaze, but the Eastern interloper of the narrow seas, when he has mustered his courage and cruelty to the point of a gale, puts your eyes out, puts them out completely, makes you feel blind for life upon a lee-shore. It is the wind, also, that brings snow.

Out of his black and merciless heart he flings a white blinding sheet upon the ships of the sea. He has more manners of villainy, and no more conscience than an Italian prince of the seventeenth century. His weapon is a dagger carried under a black cloak when he goes out on his unlawful enterprises. The mere hint of his approach fills with dread every craft that swims the sea, from fishing-smacks to four-masted ships that recognise the sway of the West Wind. Even in his most accommodating mood he inspires a dread of treachery. I have heard upwards of ten score of windlasses spring like one into clanking life in the dead of

night, filling the Downs with a panic-struck sound of anchors being torn hurriedly out of the ground at the first breath of his approach. Fortunately, his heart often fails him: he does not always blow home upon our exposed coast; he has not the fearless temper of his Westerly brother.

The natures of those two winds that share the dominions of the great oceans are fundamentally different. It is strange that the winds which men are prone to style capricious remain true to their character in all the various regions of the earth. To us here, for instance, the East Wind comes across a great continent, sweeping over the greatest body of solid land upon this earth. For the Australian east coast the East Wind is the wind of the ocean, coming across the greatest body of water upon the globe; and yet here and there its characteristics remain the same with a strange consistency in everything that is vile and base. The members of the West Wind's dynasty are modified in a way by the regions they rule, as a Hohenzollern, without ceasing to be himself, becomes a Roumanian by virtue of his throne, or a Saxe-Coburg learns to put the dress of Bulgarian phrases upon his particular thoughts, whatever they are.

The autocratic sway of the West Wind, whether forty north or forty south of the Equator, is characterized by an open, generous, frank, barbarous recklessness. For he is a great autocrat, and to be a great autocrat you must be a great barbarian. I have been too much moulded to his sway to nurse now any idea of rebellion in my heart. Moreover, what is a rebellion within the four walls of a room against the tempestuous rule of the West Wind? I remain faithful to the memory of the mighty King with a double-edged sword in one hand, and in the other holding out rewards of great daily runs and famously quick passages to those of his courtiers who knew how to wait watchfully for every sign of his secret mood. As we deep-water men always reckoned, he made one year in three fairly lively for anybody having business upon the Atlantic or down there along the "forties" of the Southern Ocean. You had to take the bitter with the sweet; and it cannot be denied he played carelessly with our lives and fortunes. But, then, he was always a great king, fit to rule over the great waters where, strictly speaking, a man would have no business whatever but for his audacity.

The audacious should not complain. A mere trader ought not to grumble at the tolls levied by a mighty king. His mightiness was sometimes very overwhelming; but even when you had to defy him openly, as on the banks of the Agulhas homeward bound from the East Indies, or on the outward passage round the Horn, he struck at you fairly his stinging blows (full in the face, too), and it was your business not to get too much staggered. And, after all, if you showed anything of a countenance, the good-natured barbarian would let you fight your way past the very steps of his throne. It was only now and then that the sword descended and a head fell; but if you fell you were sure of impressive obsequies

and of a roomy, generous grave.

Such is the king to whom Viking chieftains bowed their heads, and whom the modern and palatial steamship defies with impunity seven times a week. And yet it is but defiance, not victory. The magnificent barbarian sits enthroned in a mantle of gold-lined clouds looking from on high on great ships gliding like mechanical toys upon his sea and on men who, armed with fire and iron, no longer need to watch anxiously for the slightest sign of his royal mood. He is disregarded; but he has kept all his strength, all his splendour, and a great part of his power. Time itself, that shakes all the thrones, is on the side of that king. The sword in his hand remains as sharp as ever upon both its edges; and he may well go on playing his royal game of quoits with hurricanes, tossing them over from the continent of republics to the continent of kingdoms, in the assurance that both the new republics and the old kingdoms, the heat of fire and the strength of iron, with the untold generations of audacious men, shall crumble to dust at the steps of his throne, and pass away, and be forgotten before his own rule comes to an end.