

Chapter XXX.

The estuaries of rivers appeal strongly to an adventurous imagination. This appeal is not always a charm, for there are estuaries of a particularly dispiriting ugliness: lowlands, mud- flats, or perhaps barren sandhills without beauty of form or amenity of aspect, covered with a shabby and scanty vegetation conveying the impression of poverty and uselessness. Sometimes such an ugliness is merely a repulsive mask. A river whose estuary resembles a breach in a sand rampart may flow through a most fertile country. But all the estuaries of great rivers have their fascination, the attractiveness of an open portal. Water is friendly to man. The ocean, a part of Nature furthest removed in the unchangeableness and majesty of its might from the spirit of mankind, has ever been a friend to the enterprising nations of the earth. And of all the elements this is the one to which men have always been prone to trust themselves, as if its immensity held a reward as vast as itself.

From the offing the open estuary promises every possible fruition to adventurous hopes. That road open to enterprise and courage invites the explorer of coasts to new efforts towards the fulfilment of great expectations. The commander of the first Roman galley must have looked with an intense absorption upon the estuary of the Thames as he turned the beaked prow of his ship to the westward under the brow of the North Foreland. The estuary of the Thames is not beautiful; it has no noble features, no romantic grandeur of aspect, no smiling geniality; but it is wide open, spacious, inviting, hospitable at the first glance, with a strange air of mysteriousness which lingers about it to this very day. The navigation of his craft must have engrossed all the Roman's attention in the calm of a summer's day (he would choose his weather), when the single row of long sweeps (the galley would be a light one, not a trireme) could fall in easy cadence upon a sheet of water like plate-glass, reflecting faithfully the classic form of his vessel and the contour of the lonely shores close on his left hand. I assume he followed the land and passed through what is at present known as Margate Roads, groping his careful way along the hidden sandbanks, whose every tail and spit has its beacon or buoy nowadays. He must have been anxious, though no doubt he had collected beforehand on the shores of the Gauls a store of information from the talk of traders, adventurers, fishermen, slave-dealers, pirates--all sorts of unofficial men connected with the sea in a more or less reputable way. He would have heard of channels and sandbanks, of natural features of the land useful for sea-marks, of villages and tribes and modes of barter and precautions to take: with the instructive tales about native chiefs dyed more or less blue, whose character for greediness, ferocity, or amiability must have been expounded to him

with that capacity for vivid language which seems joined naturally to the shadiness of moral character and recklessness of disposition. With that sort of spiced food provided for his anxious thought, watchful for strange men, strange beasts, strange turns of the tide, he would make the best of his way up, a military seaman with a short sword on thigh and a bronze helmet on his head, the pioneer post-captain of an imperial fleet. Was the tribe inhabiting the Isle of Thanet of a ferocious disposition, I wonder, and ready to fall with stone-studded clubs and wooden lances hardened in the fire, upon the backs of unwary mariners?

Amongst the great commercial streams of these islands, the Thames is the only one, I think, open to romantic feeling, from the fact that the sight of human labour and the sounds of human industry do not come down its shores to the very sea, destroying the suggestion of mysterious vastness caused by the configuration of the shore. The broad inlet of the shallow North Sea passes gradually into the contracted shape of the river; but for a long time the feeling of the open water remains with the ship steering to the westward through one of the lighted and buoyed passage-ways of the Thames, such as Queen's Channel, Prince's Channel, Four-Fathom Channel; or else coming down the Swin from the north. The rush of the yellow flood-tide hurries her up as if into the unknown between the two fading lines of the coast. There are no features to this land, no conspicuous, far-famed landmarks for the eye; there is nothing so far down to tell you of the greatest agglomeration of mankind on earth dwelling no more than five and twenty miles away, where the sun sets in a blaze of colour flaming on a gold background, and the dark, low shores trend towards each other. And in the great silence the deep, faint booming of the big guns being tested at Shoeburyness hangs about the Nore--a historical spot in the keeping of one of England's appointed guardians.