

Chapter XXXI.

The Nore sand remains covered at low-water, and never seen by human eye; but the Nore is a name to conjure with visions of historical events, of battles, of fleets, of mutinies, of watch and ward kept upon the great throbbing heart of the State. This ideal point of the estuary, this centre of memories, is marked upon the steely gray expanse of the waters by a lightship painted red that, from a couple of miles off, looks like a cheap and bizarre little toy. I remember how, on coming up the river for the first time, I was surprised at the smallness of that vivid object--a tiny warm speck of crimson lost in an immensity of gray tones. I was startled, as if of necessity the principal beacon in the water-way of the greatest town on earth should have presented imposing proportions. And, behold! the brown sprit-sail of a barge hid it entirely from my view.

Coming in from the eastward, the bright colouring of the lightship marking the part of the river committed to the charge of an Admiral (the Commander-in-Chief at the Nore) accentuates the dreariness and the great breadth of the Thames Estuary. But soon the course of the ship opens the entrance of the Medway, with its men-of-war moored in line, and the long wooden jetty of Port Victoria, with its few low buildings like the beginning of a hasty settlement upon a wild and unexplored shore. The famous Thames barges sit in brown clusters upon the water with an effect of birds floating upon a pond. On the imposing expanse of the great estuary the traffic of the port where so much of the world's work and the world's thinking is being done becomes insignificant, scattered, streaming away in thin lines of ships stringing themselves out into the eastern quarter through the various navigable channels of which the Nore lightship marks the divergence. The coasting traffic inclines to the north; the deep-water ships steer east with a southern inclination, on through the Downs, to the most remote ends of the world. In the widening of the shores sinking low in the gray, smoky distances the greatness of the sea receives the mercantile fleet of good ships that London sends out upon the turn of every tide. They follow each other, going very close by the Essex shore. Such as the beads of a rosary told by business-like shipowners for the greater profit of the world they slip one by one into the open: while in the offing the inward-bound ships come up singly and in bunches from under the sea horizon closing the mouth of the river between Orfordness and North Foreland. They all converge upon the Nore, the warm speck of red upon the tones of drab and gray, with the distant shores running together towards the west, low and flat, like the sides of an enormous canal. The sea-reach of the Thames is straight, and, once Sheerness is left behind, its banks seem very uninhabited, except for the cluster of houses which is Southend, or here and there a lonely wooden jetty

where petroleum ships discharge their dangerous cargoes, and the oil-storage tanks, low and round with slightly-domed roofs, peep over the edge of the fore-shore, as it were a village of Central African huts imitated in iron. Bordered by the black and shining mud-flats, the level marsh extends for miles. Away in the far background the land rises, closing the view with a continuous wooded slope, forming in the distance an interminable rampart overgrown with bushes.

Then, on the slight turn of the Lower Hope Reach, clusters of factory chimneys come distinctly into view, tall and slender above the squat ranges of cement works in Grays and Greenhithe. Smoking quietly at the top against the great blaze of a magnificent sunset, they give an industrial character to the scene, speak of work, manufactures, and trade, as palm-groves on the coral strands of distant islands speak of the luxuriant grace, beauty and vigour of tropical nature. The houses of Gravesend crowd upon the shore with an effect of confusion as if they had tumbled down haphazard from the top of the hill at the back. The flatness of the Kentish shore ends there. A fleet of steam-tugs lies at anchor in front of the various piers. A conspicuous church spire, the first seen distinctly coming from the sea, has a thoughtful grace, the serenity of a fine form above the chaotic disorder of men's houses. But on the other side, on the flat Essex side, a shapeless and desolate red edifice, a vast pile of bricks with many windows and a slate roof more inaccessible than an Alpine slope, towers over the bend in monstrous ugliness, the tallest, heaviest building for miles around, a thing like an hotel, like a mansion of flats (all to let), exiled into these fields out of a street in West Kensington. Just round the corner, as it were, on a pier defined with stone blocks and wooden piles, a white mast, slender like a stalk of straw and crossed by a yard like a knitting-needle, flying the signals of flag and balloon, watches over a set of heavy dock-gates. Mast-heads and funnel-tops of ships peep above the ranges of corrugated iron roofs. This is the entrance to Tilbury Dock, the most recent of all London docks, the nearest to the sea.

Between the crowded houses of Gravesend and the monstrous red-brick pile on the Essex shore the ship is surrendered fairly to the grasp of the river. That hint of loneliness, that soul of the sea which had accompanied her as far as the Lower Hope Reach, abandons her at the turn of the first bend above. The salt, acrid flavour is gone out of the air, together with a sense of unlimited space opening free beyond the threshold of sandbanks below the Nore. The waters of the sea rush on past Gravesend, tumbling the big mooring buoys laid along the face of the town; but the sea-freedom stops short there, surrendering the salt tide to the needs, the artifices, the contrivances of toiling men. Wharves, landing-places, dock-gates, waterside stairs, follow each other continuously right up to London Bridge, and the hum of men's work fills the river with a menacing, muttering note as of a breathless, ever-driving gale. The water-way, so fair above and wide below, flows oppressed by bricks and mortar and stone, by blackened timber and

grimmed glass and rusty iron, covered with black barges, whipped up by paddles and screws, overburdened with craft, overhung with chains, overshadowed by walls making a steep gorge for its bed, filled with a haze of smoke and dust.

This stretch of the Thames from London Bridge to the Albert Docks is to other watersides of river ports what a virgin forest would be to a garden. It is a thing grown up, not made. It recalls a jungle by the confused, varied, and impenetrable aspect of the buildings that line the shore, not according to a planned purpose, but as if sprung up by accident from scattered seeds. Like the matted growth of bushes and creepers veiling the silent depths of an unexplored wilderness, they hide the depths of London's infinitely varied, vigorous, seething life. In other river ports it is not so. They lie open to their stream, with quays like broad clearings, with streets like avenues cut through thick timber for the convenience of trade. I am thinking now of river ports I have seen--of Antwerp, for instance; of Nantes or Bordeaux, or even old Rouen, where the night-watchmen of ships, elbows on rail, gaze at shop-windows and brilliant cafes, and see the audience go in and come out of the opera-house. But London, the oldest and greatest of river ports, does not possess as much as a hundred yards of open quays upon its river front. Dark and impenetrable at night, like the face of a forest, is the London waterside. It is the waterside of watersides, where only one aspect of the world's life can be seen, and only one kind of men toils on the edge of the stream. The lightless walls seem to spring from the very mud upon which the stranded barges lie; and the narrow lanes coming down to the foreshore resemble the paths of smashed bushes and crumbled earth where big game comes to drink on the banks of tropical streams.

Behind the growth of the London waterside the docks of London spread out unsuspected, smooth, and placid, lost amongst the buildings like dark lagoons hidden in a thick forest. They lie concealed in the intricate growth of houses with a few stalks of mastheads here and there overtopping the roof of some four-story warehouse.

It is a strange conjunction this of roofs and mastheads, of walls and yard-arms. I remember once having the incongruity of the relation brought home to me in a practical way. I was the chief officer of a fine ship, just docked with a cargo of wool from Sydney, after a ninety days' passage. In fact, we had not been in more than half an hour and I was still busy making her fast to the stone posts of a very narrow quay in front of a lofty warehouse. An old man with a gray whisker under the chin and brass buttons on his pilot-cloth jacket, hurried up along the quay hailing my ship by name. He was one of those officials called berthing-masters--not the one who had berthed us, but another, who, apparently, had been busy securing a steamer at the other end of the dock. I could see from afar his hard blue eyes staring at us, as if fascinated, with a queer sort of absorption. I

wondered what that worthy sea-dog had found to criticise in my ship's rigging. And I, too, glanced aloft anxiously. I could see nothing wrong there. But perhaps that superannuated fellow-craftsman was simply admiring the ship's perfect order aloft, I thought, with some secret pride; for the chief officer is responsible for his ship's appearance, and as to her outward condition, he is the man open to praise or blame. Meantime the old salt ("ex-coasting skipper" was writ large all over his person) had hobbled up alongside in his bumpy, shiny boots, and, waving an arm, short and thick like the flipper of a seal, terminated by a paw red as an uncooked beef-steak, addressed the poop in a muffled, faint, roaring voice, as if a sample of every North-Sea fog of his life had been permanently lodged in his throat: "Haul 'em round, Mr. Mate!" were his words. "If you don't look sharp, you'll have your topgallant yards through the windows of that 'ere warehouse presently!" This was the only cause of his interest in the ship's beautiful spars. I own that for a time I was struck dumb by the bizarre associations of yard-arms and window-panes. To break windows is the last thing one would think of in connection with a ship's topgallant yard, unless, indeed, one were an experienced berthing-master in one of the London docks. This old chap was doing his little share of the world's work with proper efficiency. His little blue eyes had made out the danger many hundred yards off. His rheumaticky feet, tired with balancing that squat body for many years upon the decks of small coasters, and made sore by miles of tramping upon the flagstones of the dock side, had hurried up in time to avert a ridiculous catastrophe. I answered him pettishly, I fear, and as if I had known all about it before.

"All right, all right! can't do everything at once."

He remained near by, muttering to himself till the yards had been hauled round at my order, and then raised again his foggy, thick voice:

"None too soon," he observed, with a critical glance up at the towering side of the warehouse. "That's a half-sovereign in your pocket, Mr. Mate. You should always look first how you are for them windows before you begin to breast in your ship to the quay."

It was good advice. But one cannot think of everything or foresee contacts of things apparently as remote as stars and hop-poles.