

Chapter XXXII.

The view of ships lying moored in some of the older docks of London has always suggested to my mind the image of a flock of swans kept in the flooded backyard of grim tenement houses. The flatness of the walls surrounding the dark pool on which they float brings out wonderfully the flowing grace of the lines on which a ship's hull is built. The lightness of these forms, devised to meet the winds and the seas, makes, by contrast with the great piles of bricks, the chains and cables of their moorings appear very necessary, as if nothing less could prevent them from soaring upwards and over the roofs. The least puff of wind stealing round the corners of the dock buildings stirs these captives fettered to rigid shores. It is as if the soul of a ship were impatient of confinement. Those masted hulls, relieved of their cargo, become restless at the slightest hint of the wind's freedom. However tightly moored, they range a little at their berths, swaying imperceptibly the spire-like assemblages of cordage and spars. You can detect their impatience by watching the sway of the mastheads against the motionless, the soulless gravity of mortar and stones. As you pass alongside each hopeless prisoner chained to the quay, the slight grinding noise of the wooden fenders makes a sound of angry muttering. But, after all, it may be good for ships to go through a period of restraint and repose, as the restraint and self-communion of inactivity may be good for an unruly soul--not, indeed, that I mean to say that ships are unruly; on the contrary, they are faithful creatures, as so many men can testify. And faithfulness is a great restraint, the strongest bond laid upon the self-will of men and ships on this globe of land and sea.

This interval of bondage in the docks rounds each period of a ship's life with the sense of accomplished duty, of an effectively played part in the work of the world. The dock is the scene of what the world would think the most serious part in the light, bounding, swaying life of a ship. But there are docks and docks. The ugliness of some docks is appalling. Wild horses would not drag from me the name of a certain river in the north whose narrow estuary is inhospitable and dangerous, and whose docks are like a nightmare of dreariness and misery. Their dismal shores are studded thickly with scaffold-like, enormous timber structures, whose lofty heads are veiled periodically by the infernal gritty night of a cloud of coal-dust. The most important ingredient for getting the world's work along is distributed there under the circumstances of the greatest cruelty meted out to helpless ships. Shut up in the desolate circuit of these basins, you would think a free ship would droop and die like a wild bird put into a dirty cage. But a ship, perhaps because of her faithfulness to men, will endure an extraordinary lot of ill-usage. Still, I have seen ships issue from certain docks like half-dead

prisoners from a dungeon, bedraggled, overcome, wholly disguised in dirt, and with their men rolling white eyeballs in black and worried faces raised to a heaven which, in its smoky and soiled aspect, seemed to reflect the sordidness of the earth below. One thing, however, may be said for the docks of the Port of London on both sides of the river: for all the complaints of their insufficient equipment, of their obsolete rules, of failure (they say) in the matter of quick despatch, no ship need ever issue from their gates in a half-fainting condition. London is a general cargo port, as is only proper for the greatest capital of the world to be. General cargo ports belong to the aristocracy of the earth's trading places, and in that aristocracy London, as it is its way, has a unique physiognomy.

The absence of picturesqueness cannot be laid to the charge of the docks opening into the Thames. For all my unkind comparisons to swans and backyards, it cannot be denied that each dock or group of docks along the north side of the river has its own individual attractiveness. Beginning with the cosy little St. Katherine's Dock, lying overshadowed and black like a quiet pool amongst rocky crags, through the venerable and sympathetic London Docks, with not a single line of rails in the whole of their area and the aroma of spices lingering between its warehouses, with their far-famed wine-cellars--down through the interesting group of West India Docks, the fine docks at Blackwall, on past the Galleons Reach entrance of the Victoria and Albert Docks, right down to the vast gloom of the great basins in Tilbury, each of those places of restraint for ships has its own peculiar physiognomy, its own expression. And what makes them unique and attractive is their common trait of being romantic in their usefulness.

In their way they are as romantic as the river they serve is unlike all the other commercial streams of the world. The cosiness of the St. Katherine's Dock, the old-world air of the London Docks, remain impressed upon the memory. The docks down the river, abreast of Woolwich, are imposing by their proportions and the vast scale of the ugliness that forms their surroundings--ugliness so picturesque as to become a delight to the eye. When one talks of the Thames docks, "beauty" is a vain word, but romance has lived too long upon this river not to have thrown a mantle of glamour upon its banks.

The antiquity of the port appeals to the imagination by the long chain of adventurous enterprises that had their inception in the town and floated out into the world on the waters of the river. Even the newest of the docks, the Tilbury Dock, shares in the glamour conferred by historical associations. Queen Elizabeth has made one of her progresses down there, not one of her journeys of pomp and ceremony, but an anxious business progress at a crisis of national history. The menace of that time has passed away, and now Tilbury is known by its docks. These are very modern, but their remoteness and isolation upon the

Essex marsh, the days of failure attending their creation, invested them with a romantic air. Nothing in those days could have been more striking than the vast, empty basins, surrounded by miles of bare quays and the ranges of cargo-sheds, where two or three ships seemed lost like bewitched children in a forest of gaunt, hydraulic cranes. One received a wonderful impression of utter abandonment, of wasted efficiency. From the first the Tilbury Docks were very efficient and ready for their task, but they had come, perhaps, too soon into the field. A great future lies before Tilbury Docks. They shall never fill a long-felt want (in the sacramental phrase that is applied to railways, tunnels, newspapers, and new editions of books). They were too early in the field. The want shall never be felt because, free of the trammels of the tide, easy of access, magnificent and desolate, they are already there, prepared to take and keep the biggest ships that float upon the sea. They are worthy of the oldest river port in the world.

And, truth to say, for all the criticisms flung upon the heads of the dock companies, the other docks of the Thames are no disgrace to the town with a population greater than that of some commonwealths. The growth of London as a well-equipped port has been slow, while not unworthy of a great capital, of a great centre of distribution. It must not be forgotten that London has not the backing of great industrial districts or great fields of natural exploitation. In this it differs from Liverpool, from Cardiff, from Newcastle, from Glasgow; and therein the Thames differs from the Mersey, from the Tyne, from the Clyde. It is an historical river; it is a romantic stream flowing through the centre of great affairs, and for all the criticism of the river's administration, my contention is that its development has been worthy of its dignity. For a long time the stream itself could accommodate quite easily the oversea and coasting traffic. That was in the days when, in the part called the Pool, just below London Bridge, the vessels moored stem and stern in the very strength of the tide formed one solid mass like an island covered with a forest of gaunt, leafless trees; and when the trade had grown too big for the river there came the St. Katherine's Docks and the London Docks, magnificent undertakings answering to the need of their time. The same may be said of the other artificial lakes full of ships that go in and out upon this high road to all parts of the world. The labour of the imperial waterway goes on from generation to generation, goes on day and night. Nothing ever arrests its sleepless industry but the coming of a heavy fog, which clothes the teeming stream in a mantle of impenetrable stillness.

After the gradual cessation of all sound and movement on the faithful river, only the ringing of ships' bells is heard, mysterious and muffled in the white vapour from London Bridge right down to the Nore, for miles and miles in a decrescendo tinkling, to where the estuary broadens out into the North Sea, and the anchored ships lie scattered thinly in the shrouded channels between the sand-banks of

the Thames' mouth. Through the long and glorious tale of years of the river's strenuous service to its people these are its only breathing times.