

Chapter XXXIII.

A ship in dock, surrounded by quays and the walls of warehouses, has the appearance of a prisoner meditating upon freedom in the sadness of a free spirit put under restraint. Chain cables and stout ropes keep her bound to stone posts at the edge of a paved shore, and a berthing-master, with brass buttons on his coat, walks about like a weather-beaten and ruddy gaoler, casting jealous, watchful glances upon the moorings that fetter a ship lying passive and still and safe, as if lost in deep regrets of her days of liberty and danger on the sea.

The swarm of renegades--dock-masters, berthing-masters, gatemen, and such like--appear to nurse an immense distrust of the captive ship's resignation. There never seem chains and ropes enough to satisfy their minds concerned with the safe binding of free ships to the strong, muddy, enslaved earth. "You had better put another bight of a hawser astern, Mr. Mate," is the usual phrase in their mouth. I brand them for renegades, because most of them have been sailors in their time. As if the infirmities of old age--the gray hair, the wrinkles at the corners of the eyes, and the knotted veins of the hands--were the symptoms of moral poison, they prowl about the quays with an underhand air of gloating over the broken spirit of noble captives. They want more fenders, more breasting-ropes; they want more springs, more shackles, more fetters; they want to make ships with volatile souls as motionless as square blocks of stone. They stand on the mud of pavements, these degraded sea-dogs, with long lines of railway-trucks clanking their couplings behind their backs, and run malevolent glances over your ship from headgear to taffrail, only wishing to tyrannize over the poor creature under the hypocritical cloak of benevolence and care. Here and there cargo cranes looking like instruments of torture for ships swing cruel hooks at the end of long chains. Gangs of dock-labourers swarm with muddy feet over the gangways. It is a moving sight this, of so many men of the earth, earthy, who never cared anything for a ship, trampling unconcerned, brutal and hob-nailed upon her helpless body.

Fortunately, nothing can deface the beauty of a ship. That sense of a dungeon, that sense of a horrible and degrading misfortune overtaking a creature fair to see and safe to trust, attaches only to ships moored in the docks of great European ports. You feel that they are dishonestly locked up, to be hunted about from wharf to wharf on a dark, greasy, square pool of black water as a brutal reward at the end of a faithful voyage.

A ship anchored in an open roadstead, with cargo-lighters alongside and her own tackle swinging the burden over the rail, is accomplishing in freedom a function

of her life. There is no restraint; there is space: clear water around her, and a clear sky above her mastheads, with a landscape of green hills and charming bays opening around her anchorage. She is not abandoned by her own men to the tender mercies of shore people. She still shelters, and is looked after by, her own little devoted band, and you feel that presently she will glide between the headlands and disappear. It is only at home, in dock, that she lies abandoned, shut off from freedom by all the artifices of men that think of quick despatch and profitable freights. It is only then that the odious, rectangular shadows of walls and roofs fall upon her decks, with showers of soot.

To a man who has never seen the extraordinary nobility, strength, and grace that the devoted generations of ship-builders have evolved from some pure nooks of their simple souls, the sight that could be seen five-and-twenty years ago of a large fleet of clippers moored along the north side of the New South Dock was an inspiring spectacle. Then there was a quarter of a mile of them, from the iron dockyard-gates guarded by policemen, in a long, forest-like perspective of masts, moored two and two to many stout wooden jetties. Their spars dwarfed with their loftiness the corrugated-iron sheds, their jibbooms extended far over the shore, their white-and-gold figure-heads, almost dazzling in their purity, overhung the straight, long quay above the mud and dirt of the wharfside, with the busy figures of groups and single men moving to and fro, restless and grimy under their soaring immobility.

At tide-time you would see one of the loaded ships with battened-down hatches drop out of the ranks and float in the clear space of the dock, held by lines dark and slender, like the first threads of a spider's web, extending from her bows and her quarters to the mooring-posts on shore. There, graceful and still, like a bird ready to spread its wings, she waited till, at the opening of the gates, a tug or two would hurry in noisily, hovering round her with an air of fuss and solicitude, and take her out into the river, tending, shepherding her through open bridges, through dam-like gates between the flat pier-heads, with a bit of green lawn surrounded by gravel and a white signal-mast with yard and gaff, flying a couple of dingy blue, red, or white flags.

This New South Dock (it was its official name), round which my earlier professional memories are centred, belongs to the group of West India Docks, together with two smaller and much older basins called Import and Export respectively, both with the greatness of their trade departed from them already. Picturesque and clean as docks go, these twin basins spread side by side the dark lustre of their glassy water, sparsely peopled by a few ships laid up on buoys or tucked far away from each other at the end of sheds in the corners of empty quays, where they seemed to slumber quietly remote, untouched by the bustle of men's affairs--in retreat rather than in captivity. They were quaint and

sympathetic, those two homely basins, unfurnished and silent, with no aggressive display of cranes, no apparatus of hurry and work on their narrow shores. No railway-lines cumbered them. The knots of labourers trooping in clumsily round the corners of cargo-sheds to eat their food in peace out of red cotton handkerchiefs had the air of picnicking by the side of a lonely mountain pool. They were restful (and I should say very unprofitable), those basins, where the chief officer of one of the ships involved in the harassing, strenuous, noisy activity of the New South Dock only a few yards away could escape in the dinner-hour to stroll, unhampered by men and affairs, meditating (if he chose) on the vanity of all things human. At one time they must have been full of good old slow West Indiamen of the square-stern type, that took their captivity, one imagines, as stolidly as they had faced the buffeting of the waves with their blunt, honest bows, and disgorged sugar, rum, molasses, coffee, or logwood sedately with their own winch and tackle. But when I knew them, of exports there was never a sign that one could detect; and all the imports I have ever seen were some rare cargoes of tropical timber, enormous baulks roughed out of iron trunks grown in the woods about the Gulf of Mexico. They lay piled up in stacks of mighty boles, and it was hard to believe that all this mass of dead and stripped trees had come out of the flanks of a slender, innocent-looking little barque with, as likely as not, a homely woman's name--Ellen this or Annie that--upon her fine bows. But this is generally the case with a discharged cargo. Once spread at large over the quay, it looks the most impossible bulk to have all come there out of that ship along-side.

They were quiet, serene nooks in the busy world of docks, these basins where it has never been my good luck to get a berth after some more or less arduous passage. But one could see at a glance that men and ships were never hustled there. They were so quiet that, remembering them well, one comes to doubt that they ever existed--places of repose for tired ships to dream in, places of meditation rather than work, where wicked ships--the cranky, the lazy, the wet, the bad sea boats, the wild steerers, the capricious, the pig-headed, the generally ungovernable--would have full leisure to take count and repent of their sins, sorrowful and naked, with their rent garments of sailcloth stripped off them, and with the dust and ashes of the London atmosphere upon their mastheads. For that the worst of ships would repent if she were ever given time I make no doubt. I have known too many of them. No ship is wholly bad; and now that their bodies that had braved so many tempests have been blown off the face of the sea by a puff of steam, the evil and the good together into the limbo of things that have served their time, there can be no harm in affirming that in these vanished generations of willing servants there never has been one utterly unredeemable soul.

In the New South Dock there was certainly no time for remorse, introspection, repentance, or any phenomena of inner life either for the captive ships or for their

officers. From six in the morning till six at night the hard labour of the prison-house, which rewards the valiance of ships that win the harbour went on steadily, great slings of general cargo swinging over the rail, to drop plumb into the hatchways at the sign of the gangway-tender's hand. The New South Dock was especially a loading dock for the Colonies in those great (and last) days of smart wool-clippers, good to look at and--well--exciting to handle. Some of them were more fair to see than the others; many were (to put it mildly) somewhat over-masted; all were expected to make good passages; and of all that line of ships, whose rigging made a thick, enormous network against the sky, whose brasses flashed almost as far as the eye of the policeman at the gates could reach, there was hardly one that knew of any other port amongst all the ports on the wide earth but London and Sydney, or London and Melbourne, or London and Adelaide, perhaps with Hobart Town added for those of smaller tonnage. One could almost have believed, as her gray-whiskered second mate used to say of the old Duke of S-, that they knew the road to the Antipodes better than their own skippers, who, year in, year out, took them from London--the place of captivity--to some Australian port where, twenty-five years ago, though moored well and tight enough to the wooden wharves, they felt themselves no captives, but honoured guests.