

Chapter XXXIV.

These towns of the Antipodes, not so great then as they are now, took an interest in the shipping, the running links with "home," whose numbers confirmed the sense of their growing importance. They made it part and parcel of their daily interests. This was especially the case in Sydney, where, from the heart of the fair city, down the vista of important streets, could be seen the wool-clippers lying at the Circular Quay--no walled prison-house of a dock that, but the integral part of one of the finest, most beautiful, vast, and safe bays the sun ever shone upon. Now great steam-liners lie at these berths, always reserved for the sea aristocracy--grand and imposing enough ships, but here to-day and gone next week; whereas the general cargo, emigrant, and passenger clippers of my time, rigged with heavy spars, and built on fine lines, used to remain for months together waiting for their load of wool. Their names attained the dignity of household words. On Sundays and holidays the citizens trooped down, on visiting bent, and the lonely officer on duty solaced himself by playing the cicerone--especially to the citizenesses with engaging manners and a well-developed sense of the fun that may be got out of the inspection of a ship's cabins and state-rooms. The tinkle of more or less untuned cottage pianos floated out of open stern-ports till the gas-lamps began to twinkle in the streets, and the ship's night-watchman, coming sleepily on duty after his unsatisfactory day slumbers, hauled down the flags and fastened a lighted lantern at the break of the gangway. The night closed rapidly upon the silent ships with their crews on shore. Up a short, steep ascent by the King's Head pub., patronized by the cooks and stewards of the fleet, the voice of a man crying "Hot saveloys!" at the end of George Street, where the cheap eating-houses (sixpence a meal) were kept by Chinamen (Sun-kum-on's was not bad), is heard at regular intervals. I have listened for hours to this most pertinacious pedlar (I wonder whether he is dead or has made a fortune), while sitting on the rail of the old Duke of S- (she's dead, poor thing! a violent death on the coast of New Zealand), fascinated by the monotony, the regularity, the abruptness of the recurring cry, and so exasperated at the absurd spell, that I wished the fellow would choke himself to death with a mouthful of his own infamous wares.

A stupid job, and fit only for an old man, my comrades used to tell me, to be the night-watchman of a captive (though honoured) ship. And generally the oldest of the able seamen in a ship's crew does get it. But sometimes neither the oldest nor any other fairly steady seaman is forthcoming. Ships' crews had the trick of melting away swiftly in those days. So, probably on account of my youth, innocence, and pensive habits (which made me sometimes dilatory in my work

about the rigging), I was suddenly nominated, in our chief mate Mr. B-'s most sardonic tones, to that enviable situation. I do not regret the experience. The night humours of the town descended from the street to the waterside in the still watches of the night: larrikins rushing down in bands to settle some quarrel by a stand-up fight, away from the police, in an indistinct ring half hidden by piles of cargo, with the sounds of blows, a groan now and then, the stamping of feet, and the cry of "Time!" rising suddenly above the sinister and excited murmurs; night-prowlers, pursued or pursuing, with a stifled shriek followed by a profound silence, or slinking stealthily along-side like ghosts, and addressing me from the quay below in mysterious tones with incomprehensible propositions. The cabmen, too, who twice a week, on the night when the A.S.N. Company's passenger-boat was due to arrive, used to range a battalion of blazing lamps opposite the ship, were very amusing in their way. They got down from their perches and told each other impolite stories in racy language, every word of which reached me distinctly over the bulwarks as I sat smoking on the main-hatch. On one occasion I had an hour or so of a most intellectual conversation with a person whom I could not see distinctly, a gentleman from England, he said, with a cultivated voice, I on deck and he on the quay sitting on the case of a piano (landed out of our hold that very afternoon), and smoking a cigar which smelt very good. We touched, in our discourse, upon science, politics, natural history, and operatic singers. Then, after remarking abruptly, "You seem to be rather intelligent, my man," he informed me pointedly that his name was Mr. Senior, and walked off--to his hotel, I suppose. Shadows! Shadows! I think I saw a white whisker as he turned under the lamp-post. It is a shock to think that in the natural course of nature he must be dead by now. There was nothing to object to in his intelligence but a little dogmatism maybe. And his name was Senior! Mr. Senior!

The position had its drawbacks, however. One wintry, blustering, dark night in July, as I stood sleepily out of the rain under the break of the poop something resembling an ostrich dashed up the gangway. I say ostrich because the creature, though it ran on two legs, appeared to help its progress by working a pair of short wings; it was a man, however, only his coat, ripped up the back and flapping in two halves above his shoulders, gave him that weird and fowl-like appearance. At least, I suppose it was his coat, for it was impossible to make him out distinctly. How he managed to come so straight upon me, at speed and without a stumble over a strange deck, I cannot imagine. He must have been able to see in the dark better than any cat. He overwhelmed me with panting entreaties to let him take shelter till morning in our fore-castle. Following my strict orders, I refused his request, mildly at first, in a sterner tone as he insisted with growing impudence.

"For God's sake let me, matey! Some of 'em are after me--and I've got hold of a

ticker here."

"You clear out of this!" I said.

"Don't be hard on a chap, old man!" he whined pitifully.

"Now then, get ashore at once. Do you hear?"

Silence. He appeared to cringe, mute, as if words had failed him through grief; then--bang! came a concussion and a great flash of light in which he vanished, leaving me prone on my back with the most abominable black eye that anybody ever got in the faithful discharge of duty. Shadows! Shadows! I hope he escaped the enemies he was fleeing from to live and flourish to this day. But his fist was uncommonly hard and his aim miraculously true in the dark.

There were other experiences, less painful and more funny for the most part, with one amongst them of a dramatic complexion; but the greatest experience of them all was Mr. B-, our chief mate himself.

He used to go ashore every night to foregather in some hotel's parlour with his crony, the mate of the barque Cicero, lying on the other side of the Circular Quay. Late at night I would hear from afar their stumbling footsteps and their voices raised in endless argument. The mate of the Cicero was seeing his friend on board. They would continue their senseless and muddled discourse in tones of profound friendship for half an hour or so at the shore end of our gangway, and then I would hear Mr. B- insisting that he must see the other on board his ship. And away they would go, their voices, still conversing with excessive amity, being heard moving all round the harbour. It happened more than once that they would thus perambulate three or four times the distance, each seeing the other on board his ship out of pure and disinterested affection. Then, through sheer weariness, or perhaps in a moment of forgetfulness, they would manage to part from each other somehow, and by-and-by the planks of our long gangway would bend and creak under the weight of Mr. B- coming on board for good at last.

On the rail his burly form would stop and stand swaying.

"Watchman!"

"Sir."

A pause.

He waited for a moment of steadiness before negotiating the three steps of the

inside ladder from rail to deck; and the watchman, taught by experience, would forbear offering help which would be received as an insult at that particular stage of the mate's return. But many times I trembled for his neck. He was a heavy man.

Then with a rush and a thump it would be done. He never had to pick himself up; but it took him a minute or so to pull himself together after the descent.

"Watchman!"

"Sir."

"Captain aboard?"

"Yes, sir."

Pause.

"Dog aboard?"

"Yes, sir."

Pause.

Our dog was a gaunt and unpleasant beast, more like a wolf in poor health than a dog, and I never noticed Mr. B- at any other time show the slightest interest in the doings of the animal. But that question never failed.

"Let's have your arm to steady me along."

I was always prepared for that request. He leaned on me heavily till near enough the cabin-door to catch hold of the handle. Then he would let go my arm at once.

"That'll do. I can manage now."

And he could manage. He could manage to find his way into his berth, light his lamp, get into his bed--ay, and get out of it when I called him at half-past five, the first man on deck, lifting the cup of morning coffee to his lips with a steady hand, ready for duty as though he had virtuously slept ten solid hours--a better chief officer than many a man who had never tasted grog in his life. He could manage all that, but could never manage to get on in life.

Only once he failed to seize the cabin-door handle at the first grab. He waited a

little, tried again, and again failed. His weight was growing heavier on my arm. He sighed slowly.

"D-n that handle!"

Without letting go his hold of me he turned about, his face lit up bright as day by the full moon.

"I wish she were out at sea," he growled savagely.

"Yes, sir."

I felt the need to say something, because he hung on to me as if lost, breathing heavily.

"Ports are no good--ships rot, men go to the devil!"

I kept still, and after a while he repeated with a sigh.

"I wish she were at sea out of this."

"So do I, sir," I ventured.

Holding my shoulder, he turned upon me.

"You! What's that to you where she is? You don't--drink."

And even on that night he "managed it" at last. He got hold of the handle. But he did not manage to light his lamp (I don't think he even tried), though in the morning as usual he was the first on deck, bull-necked, curly-headed, watching the hands turn-to with his sardonic expression and unflinching gaze.

I met him ten years afterwards, casually, unexpectedly, in the street, on coming out of my consignee office. I was not likely to have forgotten him with his "I can manage now." He recognised me at once, remembered my name, and in what ship I had served under his orders. He looked me over from head to foot.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I am commanding a little barque," I said, "loading here for Mauritius." Then, thoughtlessly, I added: "And what are you doing, Mr. B-?"

"I," he said, looking at me unflinchingly, with his old sardonic grin--"I am looking

for something to do."

I felt I would rather have bitten out my tongue. His jet-black, curly hair had turned iron-gray; he was scrupulously neat as ever, but frightfully threadbare. His shiny boots were worn down at heel. But he forgave me, and we drove off together in a hansom to dine on board my ship. He went over her conscientiously, praised her heartily, congratulated me on my command with absolute sincerity. At dinner, as I offered him wine and beer he shook his head, and as I sat looking at him interrogatively, muttered in an undertone:

"I've given up all that."

After dinner we came again on deck. It seemed as though he could not tear himself away from the ship. We were fitting some new lower rigging, and he hung about, approving, suggesting, giving me advice in his old manner. Twice he addressed me as "My boy," and corrected himself quickly to "Captain." My mate was about to leave me (to get married), but I concealed the fact from Mr. B-. I was afraid he would ask me to give him the berth in some ghastly jocular hint that I could not refuse to take. I was afraid. It would have been impossible. I could not have given orders to Mr. B-, and I am sure he would not have taken them from me very long. He could not have managed that, though he had managed to break himself from drink--too late.

He said good-bye at last. As I watched his burly, bull-necked figure walk away up the street, I wondered with a sinking heart whether he had much more than the price of a night's lodging in his pocket. And I understood that if that very minute I were to call out after him, he would not even turn his head. He, too, is no more than a shadow, but I seem to hear his words spoken on the moonlit deck of the old Duke--:

"Ports are no good--ships rot, men go to the devil!"