

## Chapter XXXV.

"Ships!" exclaimed an elderly seaman in clean shore togs. "Ships"- -and his keen glance, turning away from my face, ran along the vista of magnificent figure-heads that in the late seventies used to overhang in a serried rank the muddy pavement by the side of the New South Dock--"ships are all right; it's the men in 'em. . ."

Fifty hulls, at least, moulded on lines of beauty and speed--hulls of wood, of iron, expressing in their forms the highest achievement of modern ship-building--lay moored all in a row, stem to quay, as if assembled there for an exhibition, not of a great industry, but of a great art. Their colours were gray, black, dark green, with a narrow strip of yellow moulding defining their sheer, or with a row of painted ports decking in warlike decoration their robust flanks of cargo-carriers that would know no triumph but of speed in carrying a burden, no glory other than of a long service, no victory but that of an endless, obscure contest with the sea. The great empty hulls with swept holds, just out of dry-dock, with their paint glistening freshly, sat high-sided with ponderous dignity alongside the wooden jetties, looking more like unmovable buildings than things meant to go afloat; others, half loaded, far on the way to recover the true sea-physiognomy of a ship brought down to her load-line, looked more accessible. Their less steeply slanting gangways seemed to invite the strolling sailors in search of a berth to walk on board and try "for a chance" with the chief mate, the guardian of a ship's efficiency. As if anxious to remain unperceived amongst their overtopping sisters, two or three "finished" ships floated low, with an air of straining at the leash of their level headfasts, exposing to view their cleared decks and covered hatches, prepared to drop stern first out of the labouring ranks, displaying the true comeliness of form which only her proper sea-trim gives to a ship. And for a good quarter of a mile, from the dockyard gate to the farthest corner, where the old housed-in hulk, the President (drill-ship, then, of the Naval Reserve), used to lie with her frigate side rubbing against the stone of the quay, above all these hulls, ready and unready, a hundred and fifty lofty masts, more or less, held out the web of their rigging like an immense net, in whose close mesh, black against the sky, the heavy yards seemed to be entangled and suspended.

It was a sight. The humblest craft that floats makes its appeal to a seaman by the faithfulness of her life; and this was the place where one beheld the aristocracy of ships. It was a noble gathering of the fairest and the swiftest, each bearing at the bow the carved emblem of her name, as in a gallery of plaster-casts, figures of women with mural crowns, women with flowing robes, with gold

fillets on their hair or blue scarves round their waists, stretching out rounded arms as if to point the way; heads of men helmeted or bare; full lengths of warriors, of kings, of statesmen, of lords and princesses, all white from top to toe; with here and there a dusky turbaned figure, bedizened in many colours, of some Eastern sultan or hero, all inclined forward under the slant of mighty bowsprits as if eager to begin another run of 11,000 miles in their leaning attitudes. These were the fine figure-heads of the finest ships afloat. But why, unless for the love of the life those effigies shared with us in their wandering impassivity, should one try to reproduce in words an impression of whose fidelity there can be no critic and no judge, since such an exhibition of the art of shipbuilding and the art of figure-head carving as was seen from year's end to year's end in the open-air gallery of the New South Dock no man's eye shall behold again? All that patient, pale company of queens and princesses, of kings and warriors, of allegorical women, of heroines and statesmen and heathen gods, crowned, helmeted, bare-headed, has run for good off the sea stretching to the last above the tumbling foam their fair, rounded arms; holding out their spears, swords, shields, tridents in the same unwearied, striving forward pose. And nothing remains but lingering perhaps in the memory of a few men, the sound of their names, vanished a long time ago from the first page of the great London dailies; from big posters in railway-stations and the doors of shipping offices; from the minds of sailors, dockmasters, pilots, and tugmen; from the hail of gruff voices and the flutter of signal flags exchanged between ships closing upon each other and drawing apart in the open immensity of the sea.

The elderly, respectable seaman, withdrawing his gaze from that multitude of spars, gave me a glance to make sure of our fellowship in the craft and mystery of the sea. We had met casually, and had got into contact as I had stopped near him, my attention being caught by the same peculiarity he was looking at in the rigging of an obviously new ship, a ship with her reputation all to make yet in the talk of the seamen who were to share their life with her. Her name was already on their lips. I had heard it uttered between two thick, red-necked fellows of the semi-nautical type at the Fenchurch Street Railway-station, where, in those days, the everyday male crowd was attired in jerseys and pilot-cloth mostly, and had the air of being more conversant with the times of high-water than with the times of the trains. I had noticed that new ship's name on the first page of my morning paper. I had stared at the unfamiliar grouping of its letters, blue on white ground, on the advertisement-boards, whenever the train came to a standstill alongside one of the shabby, wooden, wharf-like platforms of the dock railway-line. She had been named, with proper observances, on the day she came off the stocks, no doubt, but she was very far yet from "having a name." Untried, ignorant of the ways of the sea, she had been thrust amongst that renowned company of ships to load for her maiden voyage. There was nothing to vouch for her soundness and the worth of her character, but the reputation of the building-

yard whence she was launched headlong into the world of waters. She looked modest to me. I imagined her diffident, lying very quiet, with her side nestling shyly against the wharf to which she was made fast with very new lines, intimidated by the company of her tried and experienced sisters already familiar with all the violences of the ocean and the exacting love of men. They had had more long voyages to make their names in than she had known weeks of carefully tended life, for a new ship receives as much attention as if she were a young bride. Even crabbed old dock-masters look at her with benevolent eyes. In her shyness at the threshold of a laborious and uncertain life, where so much is expected of a ship, she could not have been better heartened and comforted, had she only been able to hear and understand, than by the tone of deep conviction in which my elderly, respectable seaman repeated the first part of his saying, "Ships are all right . . ."

His civility prevented him from repeating the other, the bitter part. It had occurred to him that it was perhaps indelicate to insist. He had recognised in me a ship's officer, very possibly looking for a berth like himself, and so far a comrade, but still a man belonging to that sparsely-peopled after-end of a ship, where a great part of her reputation as a "good ship," in seaman's parlance, is made or marred.

"Can you say that of all ships without exception?" I asked, being in an idle mood, because, if an obvious ship's officer, I was not, as a matter of fact, down at the docks to "look for a berth," an occupation as engrossing as gambling, and as little favourable to the free exchange of ideas, besides being destructive of the kindly temper needed for casual intercourse with one's fellow-creatures.

"You can always put up with 'em," opined the respectable seaman judicially.

He was not averse from talking, either. If he had come down to the dock to look for a berth, he did not seem oppressed by anxiety as to his chances. He had the serenity of a man whose estimable character is fortunately expressed by his personal appearance in an unobtrusive, yet convincing, manner which no chief officer in want of hands could resist. And, true enough, I learned presently that the mate of the *Hyperion* had "taken down" his name for quarter-master. "We sign on Friday, and join next day for the morning tide," he remarked, in a deliberate, careless tone, which contrasted strongly with his evident readiness to stand there yarning for an hour or so with an utter stranger.

"*Hyperion*," I said. "I don't remember ever seeing that ship anywhere. What sort of a name has she got?"

It appeared from his discursive answer that she had not much of a name one way

or another. She was not very fast. It took no fool, though, to steer her straight, he believed. Some years ago he had seen her in Calcutta, and he remembered being told by somebody then, that on her passage up the river she had carried away both her hawse-pipes. But that might have been the pilot's fault. Just now, yarning with the apprentices on board, he had heard that this very voyage, brought up in the Downs, outward bound, she broke her sheer, struck adrift, and lost an anchor and chain. But that might have occurred through want of careful tending in a tideway. All the same, this looked as though she were pretty hard on her ground-tackle. Didn't it? She seemed a heavy ship to handle, anyway. For the rest, as she had a new captain and a new mate this voyage, he understood, one couldn't say how she would turn out. . . .

In such marine shore-talk as this is the name of a ship slowly established, her fame made for her, the tale of her qualities and of her defects kept, her idiosyncrasies commented upon with the zest of personal gossip, her achievements made much of, her faults glossed over as things that, being without remedy in our imperfect world, should not be dwelt upon too much by men who, with the help of ships, wrest out a bitter living from the rough grasp of the sea. All that talk makes up her "name," which is handed over from one crew to another without bitterness, without animosity, with the indulgence of mutual dependence, and with the feeling of close association in the exercise of her perfections and in the danger of her defects.

This feeling explains men's pride in ships. "Ships are all right," as my middle-aged, respectable quartermaster said with much conviction and some irony; but they are not exactly what men make them. They have their own nature; they can of themselves minister to our self-esteem by the demand their qualities make upon our skill and their shortcomings upon our hardiness and endurance. Which is the more flattering exaction it is hard to say; but there is the fact that in listening for upwards of twenty years to the sea-talk that goes on afloat and ashore I have never detected the true note of animosity. I won't deny that at sea, sometimes, the note of profanity was audible enough in those chiding interpellations a wet, cold, weary seaman addresses to his ship, and in moments of exasperation is disposed to extend to all ships that ever were launched--to the whole everlastingly exacting brood that swims in deep waters. And I have heard curses launched at the unstable element itself, whose fascination, outlasting the accumulated experience of ages, had captured him as it had captured the generations of his forebears.

For all that has been said of the love that certain natures (on shore) have professed to feel for it, for all the celebrations it had been the object of in prose and song, the sea has never been friendly to man. At most it has been the accomplice of human restlessness, and playing the part of dangerous abettor of

world- wide ambitions. Faithful to no race after the manner of the kindly earth, receiving no impress from valour and toil and self- sacrifice, recognising no finality of dominion, the sea has never adopted the cause of its masters like those lands where the victorious nations of mankind have taken root, rocking their cradles and setting up their gravestones. He--man or people--who, putting his trust in the friendship of the sea, neglects the strength and cunning of his right hand, is a fool! As if it were too great, too mighty for common virtues, the ocean has no compassion, no faith, no law, no memory. Its fickleness is to be held true to men's purposes only by an undaunted resolution and by a sleepless, armed, jealous vigilance, in which, perhaps, there has always been more hate than love. Odi et amo may well be the confession of those who consciously or blindly have surrendered their existence to the fascination of the sea. All the tempestuous passions of mankind's young days, the love of loot and the love of glory, the love of adventure and the love of danger, with the great love of the unknown and vast dreams of dominion and power, have passed like images reflected from a mirror, leaving no record upon the mysterious face of the sea. Impenetrable and heartless, the sea has given nothing of itself to the suitors for its precarious favours. Unlike the earth, it cannot be subjugated at any cost of patience and toil. For all its fascination that has lured so many to a violent death, its immensity has never been loved as the mountains, the plains, the desert itself, have been loved. Indeed, I suspect that, leaving aside the protestations and tributes of writers who, one is safe in saying, care for little else in the world than the rhythm of their lines and the cadence of their phrase, the love of the sea, to which some men and nations confess so readily, is a complex sentiment wherein pride enters for much, necessity for not a little, and the love of ships--the untiring servants of our hopes and our self-esteem--for the best and most genuine part. For the hundreds who have reviled the sea, beginning with Shakespeare in the line

"More fell than hunger, anguish, or the sea,"

down to the last obscure sea-dog of the "old model," having but few words and still fewer thoughts, there could not be found, I believe, one sailor who has ever coupled a curse with the good or bad name of a ship. If ever his profanity, provoked by the hardships of the sea, went so far as to touch his ship, it would be lightly, as a hand may, without sin, be laid in the way of kindness on a woman.