

Chapter XV

The Burden Whereof, Is Hail Columbia!

A dark and dreary night; people nestling in their beds or circling late about the fire; Want, colder than Charity, shivering at the street corners; church-towers humming with the faint vibration of their own tongues, but newly resting from the ghostly preachment 'One!' The earth covered with a sable pall as for the burial of yesterday; the clumps of dark trees, its giant plumes of funeral feathers, waving sadly to and fro: all hushed, all noiseless, and in deep repose, save the swift clouds that skim across the moon, and the cautious wind, as, creeping after them upon the ground, it stops to listen, and goes rustling on, and stops again, and follows, like a savage on the trail.

Whither go the clouds and wind so eagerly? If, like guilty spirits, they repair to some dread conference with powers like themselves, in what wild regions do the elements hold council, or where unbend in terrible disport?

Here! Free from that cramped prison called the earth, and out upon the waste of waters. Here, roaring, raging, shrieking, howling, all night long. Hither come the sounding voices from the caverns on the coast of that small island, sleeping, a thousand miles away, so quietly in the midst of angry waves; and hither, to meet them, rush the blasts from unknown desert places of the world. Here, in the fury of their unchecked liberty, they storm and buffet with each other, until the sea, lashed into passion like their own, leaps up, in ravings mightier than theirs, and the whole scene is madness.

On, on, on, over the countless miles of angry space roll the long heaving billows. Mountains and caves are here, and yet are not; for what is now the one, is now the other; then all is but a boiling heap of rushing water. Pursuit, and flight, and mad return of wave on wave, and savage struggle, ending in a spouting-up of foam that whitens the black night; incessant change of place, and form, and hue; constancy in nothing, but eternal strife; on, on, on, they roll, and darker grows the night, and louder howls the wind, and more clamorous and fierce become the million voices in the sea, when the wild cry goes forth upon the storm 'A ship!'

Onward she comes, in gallant combat with the elements, her tall masts trembling, and her timbers starting on the strain; onward she comes, now high upon the curling billows, now low down in the hollows of the sea, as hiding for the moment from its fury; and every storm-voice in the air and water cries more loudly yet, 'A ship!'

Still she comes striving on; and at her boldness and the spreading cry, the angry waves rise up above each other's hoary heads to look; and round about the vessel, far as the mariners on the decks can pierce into the gloom, they press upon her, forcing each other down and starting up, and rushing forward from afar, in dreadful curiosity. High over her they break; and round her surge and roar; and giving place to others, moaningly depart, and dash themselves to fragments in their baffled anger. Still she comes onward bravely. And though the eager multitude crowd thick and fast upon her all the night, and dawn of day discovers the untiring train yet bearing down upon the ship in an eternity of troubled water, onward she comes, with dim lights burning in her hull, and people there, asleep; as if no deadly element were peering in at every seam and chink, and no drowned seaman's grave, with but a plank to cover it, were yawning in the unfathomable depths below.

Among these sleeping voyagers were Martin and Mark Tapley, who, rocked into a heavy drowsiness by the unaccustomed motion, were as insensible to the foul air in which they lay, as to the uproar without. It was broad day when the latter awoke with a dim idea that he was dreaming of having gone to sleep in a four-post bedstead which had turned bottom upwards in the course of the night. There was more reason in this too, than in the roasting of eggs; for the first objects Mr Tapley recognized when he opened his eyes were his own heels - looking down to him, as he afterwards observed, from a nearly perpendicular elevation.

'Well!' said Mark, getting himself into a sitting posture, after various ineffectual struggles with the rolling of the ship. 'This is the first time as ever I stood on my head all night.'

'You shouldn't go to sleep upon the ground with your head to leeward then,' growled a man in one of the berths.

'With my head to WHERE?' asked Mark.

The man repeated his previous sentiment.

'No, I won't another time,' said Mark, 'when I know whereabouts on the map that country is. In the meanwhile I can give you a better piece of advice. Don't you nor any other friend of mine never go to sleep with his head in a ship any more.'

The man gave a grunt of discontented acquiescence, turned over in his berth, and drew his blanket over his head.

' - For,' said Mr Tapley, pursuing the theme by way of soliloquy in a low tone of voice; 'the sea is as nonsensical a thing as any going. It

never knows what to do with itself. It hasn't got no employment for its mind, and is always in a state of vacancy. Like them Polar bears in the wild-beast shows as is constantly a-nodding their heads from side to side, it never CAN be quiet. Which is entirely owing to its uncommon stupidity.'

'Is that you, Mark?' asked a faint voice from another berth.

'It's as much of me as is left, sir, after a fortnight of this work,' Mr Tapley replied, 'What with leading the life of a fly, ever since I've been aboard - for I've been perpetually holding-on to something or other in a upside-down position - what with that, sir, and putting a very little into myself, and taking a good deal out of myself, there an't too much of me to swear by. How do you find yourself this morning, sir?'

'Very miserable,' said Martin, with a peevish groan. 'Ugh. This is wretched, indeed!'

'Creditable,' muttered Mark, pressing one hand upon his aching head and looking round him with a rueful grin. 'That's the great comfort. It IS creditable to keep up one's spirits here. Virtue's its own reward. So's jollity.'

Mark was so far right that unquestionably any man who retained his cheerfulness among the steerage accommodations of that noble and fast-sailing line-of-packet ship, 'THE SCREW,' was solely indebted to his own resources, and shipped his good humour, like his provisions, without any contribution or assistance from the owners. A dark, low, stifling cabin, surrounded by berths all filled to overflowing with men, women, and children, in various stages of sickness and misery, is not the liveliest place of assembly at any time; but when it is so crowded (as the steerage cabin of the Screw was, every passage out), that mattresses and beds are heaped upon the floor, to the extinction of everything like comfort, cleanliness, and decency, it is liable to operate not only as a pretty strong banner against amiability of temper, but as a positive encourager of selfish and rough humours. Mark felt this, as he sat looking about him; and his spirits rose proportionately.

There were English people, Irish people, Welsh people, and Scotch people there; all with their little store of coarse food and shabby clothes; and nearly all with their families of children. There were children of all ages; from the baby at the breast, to the slattern-girl who was as much a grown woman as her mother. Every kind of domestic suffering that is bred in poverty, illness, banishment, sorrow, and long travel in bad weather, was crammed into the little space; and yet was there infinitely less of complaint and querulousness, and infinitely more of mutual assistance and general

kindness to be found in that unwholesome ark, than in many brilliant ballrooms.

Mark looked about him wistfully, and his face brightened as he looked. Here an old grandmother was crooning over a sick child, and rocking it to and fro, in arms hardly more wasted than its own young limbs; here a poor woman with an infant in her lap, mended another little creature's clothes, and quieted another who was creeping up about her from their scanty bed upon the floor. Here were old men awkwardly engaged in little household offices, wherein they would have been ridiculous but for their good-will and kind purpose; and here were swarthy fellows - giants in their way - doing such little acts of tenderness for those about them, as might have belonged to gentlest-hearted dwarfs. The very idiot in the corner who sat mowing there, all day, had his faculty of imitation roused by what he saw about him; and snapped his fingers to amuse a crying child.

'Now, then,' said Mark, nodding to a woman who was dressing her three children at no great distance from him - and the grin upon his face had by this time spread from ear to ear - 'Hand over one of them young 'uns according to custom.'

'I wish you'd get breakfast, Mark, instead of worrying with people who don't belong to you,' observed Martin, petulantly.

'All right,' said Mark. 'SHE'll do that. It's a fair division of labour, sir. I wash her boys, and she makes our tea. I never COULD make tea, but any one can wash a boy.'

The woman, who was delicate and ill, felt and understood his kindness, as well she might, for she had been covered every night with his greatcoat, while he had for his own bed the bare boards and a rug. But Martin, who seldom got up or looked about him, was quite incensed by the folly of this speech, and expressed his dissatisfaction by an impatient groan.

'So it is, certainly,' said Mark, brushing the child's hair as coolly as if he had been born and bred a barber.

'What are you talking about, now?' asked Martin.

'What you said,' replied Mark; 'or what you meant, when you gave that there dismal vent to your feelings. I quite go along with it, sir. It IS very hard upon her.'

'What is?'

'Making the voyage by herself along with these young impediments here, and going such a way at such a time of the year to join her husband. If you don't want to be driven mad with yellow soap in your eye, young man,' said Mr Tapley to the second urchin, who was by this time under his hands at the basin, 'you'd better shut it.'

'Where does she join her husband?' asked Martin, yawning.

'Why, I'm very much afraid,' said Mr Tapley, in a low voice, 'that she don't know. I hope she mayn't miss him. But she sent her last letter by hand, and it don't seem to have been very clearly understood between 'em without it, and if she don't see him a-waving his pocket-handkerchief on the shore, like a pictur out of a song-book, my opinion is, she'll break her heart.'

'Why, how, in Folly's name, does the woman come to be on board ship on such a wild-goose venture!' cried Martin.

Mr Tapley glanced at him for a moment as he lay prostrate in his berth, and then said, very quietly:

'Ah! How indeed! I can't think! He's been away from her for two year; she's been very poor and lonely in her own country; and has always been a-looking forward to meeting him. It's very strange she should be here. Quite amazing! A little mad perhaps! There can't be no other way of accounting for it.'

Martin was too far gone in the lassitude of sea-sickness to make any reply to these words, or even to attend to them as they were spoken. And the subject of their discourse returning at this crisis with some hot tea, effectually put a stop to any resumption of the theme by Mr Tapley; who, when the meal was over and he had adjusted Martin's bed, went up on deck to wash the breakfast service, which consisted of two half-pint tin mugs, and a shaving-pot of the same metal.

It is due to Mark Tapley to state that he suffered at least as much from sea-sickness as any man, woman, or child, on board; and that he had a peculiar faculty of knocking himself about on the smallest provocation, and losing his legs at every lurch of the ship. But resolved, in his usual phrase, to 'come out strong' under disadvantageous circumstances, he was the life and soul of the steerage, and made no more of stopping in the middle of a facetious conversation to go away and be excessively ill by himself, and afterwards come back in the very best and gayest of tempers to resume it, than if such a course of proceeding had been the commonest in the world.

It cannot be said that as his illness wore off, his cheerfulness and good nature increased, because they would hardly admit of augmentation; but his usefulness among the weaker members of the party was much enlarged; and at all times and seasons there he was exerting it. If a gleam of sun shone out of the dark sky, down Mark tumbled into the cabin, and presently up he came again with a woman in his arms, or half-a-dozen children, or a man, or a bed, or a saucepan, or a basket, or something animate or inanimate, that he thought would be the better for the air. If an hour or two of fine weather in the middle of the day tempted those who seldom or never came on deck at other times to crawl into the long-boat, or lie down upon the spare spars, and try to eat, there, in the centre of the group, was Mr Tapley, handing about salt beef and biscuit, or dispensing tastes of grog, or cutting up the children's provisions with his pocketknife, for their greater ease and comfort, or reading aloud from a venerable newspaper, or singing some roaring old song to a select party, or writing the beginnings of letters to their friends at home for people who couldn't write, or cracking jokes with the crew, or nearly getting blown over the side, or emerging, half-drowned, from a shower of spray, or lending a hand somewhere or other; but always doing something for the general entertainment. At night, when the cooking-fire was lighted on the deck, and the driving sparks that flew among the rigging, and the clouds of sails, seemed to menace the ship with certain annihilation by fire, in case the elements of air and water failed to compass her destruction; there, again, was Mr Tapley, with his coat off and his shirt-sleeves turned up to his elbows, doing all kinds of culinary offices; compounding the strangest dishes; recognized by every one as an established authority; and helping all parties to achieve something which, left to themselves, they never could have done, and never would have dreamed of. In short, there never was a more popular character than Mark Tapley became, on board that noble and fast-sailing line-of-packet ship, the Screw; and he attained at last to such a pitch of universal admiration, that he began to have grave doubts within himself whether a man might reasonably claim any credit for being jolly under such exciting circumstances.

'If this was going to last,' said Tapley, 'there'd be no great difference as I can perceive, between the Screw and the Dragon. I never am to get credit, I think. I begin to be afraid that the Fates is determined to make the world easy to me.'

'Well, Mark,' said Martin, near whose berth he had ruminated to this effect. 'When will this be over?'

'Another week, they say, sir,' returned Mark, 'will most likely bring us into port. The ship's a-going along at present, as sensible as a ship can, sir; though I don't mean to say as that's any very high praise.'

'I don't think it is, indeed,' groaned Martin.

'You'd feel all the better for it, sir, if you was to turn out,' observed Mark.

'And be seen by the ladies and gentlemen on the after-deck,' returned Martin, with a scornful emphasis upon the words, 'mingling with the beggarly crowd that are stowed away in this vile hole. I should be greatly the better for that, no doubt.'

'I'm thankful that I can't say from my own experience what the feelings of a gentleman may be,' said Mark, 'but I should have thought, sir, as a gentleman would feel a deal more uncomfortable down here than up in the fresh air, especially when the ladies and gentlemen in the after-cabin know just as much about him as he does about them, and are likely to trouble their heads about him in the same proportion. I should have thought that, certainly.'

'I tell you, then,' rejoined Martin, 'you would have thought wrong, and do think wrong.'

'Very likely, sir,' said Mark, with imperturbable good temper. 'I often do.'

'As to lying here,' cried Martin, raising himself on his elbow, and looking angrily at his follower. 'Do you suppose it's a pleasure to lie here?'

'All the madhouses in the world,' said Mr Tapley, 'couldn't produce such a maniac as the man must be who could think that.'

'Then why are you forever goading and urging me to get up?' asked Martin, 'I lie here because I don't wish to be recognized, in the better days to which I aspire, by any purse-proud citizen, as the man who came over with him among the steerage passengers. I lie here because I wish to conceal my circumstances and myself, and not to arrive in a new world badged and ticketed as an utterly poverty-stricken man. If I could have afforded a passage in the after-cabin I should have held up my head with the rest. As I couldn't I hide it. Do you understand that?'

'I am very sorry, sir,' said Mark. 'I didn't know you took it so much to heart as this comes to.'

'Of course you didn't know,' returned his master. 'How should you know, unless I told you? It's no trial to you, Mark, to make yourself comfortable and to bustle about. It's as natural for you to do so under the circumstances as it is for me not to do so. Why, you don't suppose

there is a living creature in this ship who can by possibility have half so much to undergo on board of her as I have? Do you?' he asked, sitting upright in his berth and looking at Mark, with an expression of great earnestness not unmixed with wonder.

Mark twisted his face into a tight knot, and with his head very much on one side, pondered upon this question as if he felt it an extremely difficult one to answer. He was relieved from his embarrassment by Martin himself, who said, as he stretched himself upon his back again and resumed the book he had been reading:

'But what is the use of my putting such a case to you, when the very essence of what I have been saying is, that you cannot by possibility understand it! Make me a little brandy-and-water - cold and very weak - and give me a biscuit, and tell your friend, who is a nearer neighbour of ours than I could wish, to try and keep her children a little quieter to-night than she did last night; that's a good fellow.'

Mr Tapley set himself to obey these orders with great alacrity, and pending their execution, it may be presumed his flagging spirits revived; inasmuch as he several times observed, below his breath, that in respect of its power of imparting a credit to jollity, the Screw unquestionably had some decided advantages over the Dragon. He also remarked that it was a high gratification to him to reflect that he would carry its main excellence ashore with him, and have it constantly beside him wherever he went; but what he meant by these consolatory thoughts he did not explain.

And now a general excitement began to prevail on board; and various predictions relative to the precise day, and even the precise hour at which they would reach New York, were freely broached. There was infinitely more crowding on deck and looking over the ship's side than there had been before; and an epidemic broke out for packing up things every morning, which required unpacking again every night. Those who had any letters to deliver, or any friends to meet, or any settled plans of going anywhere or doing anything, discussed their prospects a hundred times a day; and as this class of passengers was very small, and the number of those who had no prospects whatever was very large, there were plenty of listeners and few talkers. Those who had been ill all along, got well now, and those who had been well, got better. An American gentleman in the after-cabin, who had been wrapped up in fur and oilskin the whole passage, unexpectedly appeared in a very shiny, tall, black hat, and constantly overhauled a very little valise of pale leather, which contained his clothes, linen, brushes, shaving apparatus, books, trinkets, and other baggage. He likewise stuck his hands deep into his pockets, and walked the deck with his nostrils dilated, as already inhaling the air of Freedom which carries death to all tyrants, and can never (under any circumstances

worth mentioning) be breathed by slaves. An English gentleman who was strongly suspected of having run away from a bank, with something in his possession belonging to its strong box besides the key, grew eloquent upon the subject of the rights of man, and hummed the Marseillaise Hymn constantly. In a word, one great sensation pervaded the whole ship, and the soil of America lay close before them; so close at last, that, upon a certain starlight night they took a pilot on board, and within a few hours afterwards lay to until the morning, awaiting the arrival of a steamboat in which the passengers were to be conveyed ashore.

Off she came, soon after it was light next morning, and lying alongside an hour or more - during which period her very firemen were objects of hardly less interest and curiosity than if they had been so many angels, good or bad - took all her living freight aboard. Among them Mark, who still had his friend and her three children under his close protection; and Martin, who had once more dressed himself in his usual attire, but wore a soiled, old cloak above his ordinary clothes, until such time as he should separate for ever from his late companions.

The steamer - which, with its machinery on deck, looked, as it worked its long slim legs, like some enormously magnified insect or antediluvian monster - dashed at great speed up a beautiful bay; and presently they saw some heights, and islands, and a long, flat, straggling city.

'And this,' said Mr Tapley, looking far ahead, 'is the Land of Liberty, is it? Very well. I'm agreeable. Any land will do for me, after so much water!'