

CHAPTER XX

Noises And Portents

I longed for day. For however now inclined to believe that the brigantine was untenanted, I desired the light of the sun to place that fact beyond a misgiving.

Now, having observed, previous to boarding the vessel, that she lay rather low in the water, I thought proper to sound the well. But there being no line-and-sinker at hand, I sent Jarl to hunt them up in the arm-chest on the quarter-deck, where doubtless they must be kept. Meanwhile I searched for the "breaks," or pump-handles, which, as it turned out, could not have been very recently used; for they were found lashed up and down to the main-mast.

Suddenly Jarl came running toward me, whispering that all doubt was dispelled;--there were spirits on board, to a dead certainty. He had overheard a supernatural sneeze. But by this time I was all but convinced, that we were alone in the brigantine. Since, if otherwise, I could assign no earthly reason for the crew's hiding away from a couple of sailors, whom, were they so minded, they might easily have mastered. And furthermore, this alleged disturbance of the atmosphere aloft by a sneeze, Jarl averred to have taken place in the main-top; directly underneath which I was all this time standing, and had heard nothing. So complimenting my good Viking upon the exceeding delicacy

of his auriculars, I bade him trouble himself no more with his piratical ghosts and goblins, which existed nowhere but in his own imagination.

Not finding the line-and-sinker, with the spare end of a bowline we rigged a substitute; and sounding the well, found nothing to excite our alarm. Under certain circumstances, however, this sounding a ship's well is a nervous sort of business enough. 'Tis like feeling your own pulse in the last stage of a fever.

At the Skyeman's suggestion, we now proceeded to throw round the brigantine's head on the other tack. For until daylight we desired to alter the vessel's position as little as possible, fearful of coming unawares upon reefs.

And here be it said, that for all his superstitious misgivings about the brigantine; his imputing to her something equivalent to a purely phantom-like nature, honest Jarl was nevertheless exceedingly downright and practical in all hints and proceedings concerning her. Wherein, he resembled my Right Reverend friend, Bishop Berkeley--truly, one of your lords spiritual--who, metaphysically speaking, holding all objects to be mere optical delusions, was, notwithstanding, extremely matter-of-fact in all matters touching matter itself. Besides being pervious to the points of pins, and possessing a palate capable of appreciating plum-puddings:--which sentence reads off like a pattering of hailstones.

Now, while we were employed bracing round the yards, whispering Jarl must needs pester me again with his confounded suspicions of goblins on board. He swore by the main-mast, that when the fore-yard swung round, he had heard a half-stifled groan from that quarter; as if one of his bugbears had been getting its aerial legs jammed. I laughed:-- hinting that goblins were incorporeal. Whereupon he besought me to ascend the fore-rigging and test the matter for myself But here my mature judgment got the better of my first crude opinion. I civilly declined. For assuredly, there was still a possibility, that the fore-top might be tenanted, and that too by living miscreants; and a pretty hap would be mine, if, with hands full of rigging, and legs dangling in air, while surmounting the oblique futtock-shrouds, some unseen arm should all at once tumble me overboard. Therefore I held my peace; while Jarl went on to declare, that with regard to the character of the brigantine, his mind was now pretty fully made up;--she was an arrant impostor, a shade of a ship, full of sailors' ghosts, and before we knew where we were, would dissolve in a supernatural squall, and leave us twain in the water. In short, Jarl, the descendant of the superstitious old Norsemen, was full of old Norse conceits, and all manner of Valhalla marvels concerning the land of goblins and goblets. No wonder then, that with this catastrophe in prospect, he again entreated me to quit the ill-starred craft, carrying off nothing from her ghostly hull. But I refused.

One can not relate every thing at once. While in the cabin, we came

across a "barge" of biscuit, and finding its contents of a quality much superior to our own, we had filled our pockets and occasionally regaled ourselves in the intervals of rummaging. Now this sea cake-basket we had brought on deck. And for the first time since bidding adieu to the Arcturion having fully quenched our thirst, our appetite returned with a rush; and having nothing better to do till day dawned, we planted the bread-barge in the middle of the quarter-deck; and crossing our legs before it, laid close seige thereto, like the Grand Turk and his Vizier Mustapha sitting down before Vienna.

Our castle, the Bread-Barge was of the common sort; an oblong oaken box, much battered and bruised, and like the Elgin Marbles, all over inscriptions and carving:--foul anchors, skewered hearts, almanacs, Burton-blocks, love verses, links of cable, Kings of Clubs; and divers mystic diagrams in chalk, drawn by old Finnish mariners; in casting horoscopes and prophecies. Your old tars are all Daniels. There was a round hole in one side, through which, in getting at the bread, invited guests thrust their hands.

And mighty was the thrusting of hands that night; also, many and earnest the glances of Mustapha at every sudden creaking of the spars or rigging. Like Belshazzar, my royal Viking ate with great fear and trembling; ever and anon pausing to watch the wild shadows flitting along the bulwarks.