

CHAPTER XXXI

Rovings Alow And Aloft

Every one knows what a fascination there is in wandering up and down in a deserted old tenement in some warm, dreamy country; where the vacant halls seem echoing of silence, and the doors creak open like the footsteps of strangers; and into every window the old garden trees thrust their dark boughs, like the arms of night-burglars; and ever and anon the nails start from the wainscot; while behind it the mice rattle like dice. Up and down in such old specter houses one loves to wander; and so much the more, if the place be haunted by some marvelous story.

And during the drowsy stillness of the tropical sea-day, very much such a fancy had I, for prying about our little brigantine, whose tragic hull was haunted by the memory of the massacre, of which it still bore innumerable traces.

And so far as the indulgence of quiet strolling and reverie was concerned, it was well nigh the same as if I were all by myself. For Samoa, for a time, was rather reserved, being occupied with thoughts of his own. And Annatoo seldom troubled me with her presence. She was taken up with her calicoes and jewelry; which I had permitted her to retain, to keep her in good humor if possible. And as for My royal old Viking, he was one of those individuals who seldom speak, unless

personally addressed.

Besides, all that by day was necessary to navigating the Parki was, that--somebody should stand at the helm; the craft being so small, and the grating, whereon the steersman stood, so elevated, that he commanded a view far beyond the bowsprit; thus keeping Argus eyes on the sea, as he steered us along. In all other respects we left the brigantine to the guardianship of the gentle winds.

My own turn at the helm--for though commander, I felt constrained to do duty with the rest--came but once in the twenty-four hours. And not only did Jarl and Samoa, officiate as helmsmen, but also Dame Annatoo, who had become quite expert at the business. Though Jarl always maintained that there was a slight drawback upon her usefulness in this vocation. Too much taken up by her lovely image partially reflected in the glass of the binnacle before her, Annatoo now and then neglected her duty, and led us some devious dances. Nor was she, I ween, the first woman that ever led men into zigzags.

For the reasons above stated, I had many spare hours to myself. At times, I mounted aloft, and lounging in the slings of the topsail yard--one of the many snug nooks in a ship's rigging--I gazed broad off upon the blue boundless sea, and wondered what they were doing in that unknown land, toward which we were fated to be borne. Or feeling less meditative, I roved about hither and thither; slipping over, by the stays, from one mast to the other; climbing up to the truck; or

lounging out to the ends of the yards; exploring wherever there was a foothold. It was like climbing about in some mighty old oak, and resting in the crotches.

To a sailor, a ship's ropes are a study. And to me, every rope-yarn of the Parki's was invested with interest. The outlandish fashion of her shrouds, the collars of her stays, the stirrups, seizings, Flemish-horses, gaskets,--all the wilderness of her rigging, bore unequivocal traces of her origin.

But, perhaps, my pleasantest hours were those which I spent, stretched out on a pile of old sails, in the fore-top; lazily dozing to the craft's light roll.

Frequently, I descended to the cabin: for the fiftieth time, exploring the lockers and state-rooms for some new object of curiosity. And often, with a glimmering light, I went into the midnight hold, as into old vaults and catacombs; and creeping between damp ranges of casks, penetrated into its farthest recesses.

Sometimes, in these under-ground burrowings, I lighted upon sundry out-of-the-way hiding places of Annatoo's; where were snugly secreted divers articles, with which she had been smitten. In truth, no small portion of the hull seemed a mine of stolen goods, stolen out of its own bowels. I found a jaunty shore-cap of the captain's, hidden away in the hollow heart of a coil of rigging; covered over in a manner

most touchingly natural, with a heap of old ropes; and near by, in a breaker, discovered several entire pieces of calico, heroically tied together with cords almost strong enough to sustain the mainmast.

Near the stray light, which, when the hatch was removed, gleamed down into this part of the hold, was a huge ground-tier butt, headless as Charles the First. And herein was a mat nicely spread for repose; a discovery which accounted for what had often proved an enigma. Not seldom Annatoo had been among the missing; and though, from stem to stern, loudly invoked to come forth and relieve the poignant distress of her anxious friends, the dame remained perdu; silent and invisible as a spirit. But in her own good time, she would mysteriously emerge; or be suddenly espied lounging quietly in the forecastle, as if she had been there from all eternity.

Useless to inquire, "Where hast thou been, sweet Annatoo?" For no sweet rejoinder would she give.

But now the problem was solved. Here, in this silent cask in the hold, Annatoo was wont to coil herself away, like a garter-snake under a stone.

Whether-she-thus stood sentry over her goods secreted round about: whether she here performed penance like a nun in her cell; or was moved to this unaccountable freak by the powers of the air; no one could tell. Can you?

Verily, her ways were as the ways of the inscrutable penguins in building their inscrutable nests, which baffle all science, and make a fool of a sage.

Marvelous Annatoo! who shall expound thee?