

I did not know exactly what he had meant by his benches; till, shortly after, I overheard two of the sailors debating, whether mankind would stand or sit at the Last Day.

XIX. A NARROW ESCAPE

This Dream Book of Blunt's reminds me of a narrow escape we had, early one morning.

It was the larboard watch's turn to remain below from midnight till four o'clock; and having turned in and slept, Blunt suddenly turned out again about three o'clock, with a wonderful dream in his head; which he was desirous of at once having interpreted.

So he goes to his chest, gets out his tools, and falls to ciphering on the lid. When, all at once, a terrible cry was heard, that routed him and all the rest of us up, and sent the whole ship's company flying on deck in the dark. We did not know what it was; but somehow, among sailors at sea, they seem to know when real danger of any land is at hand, even in their sleep.

When we got on deck, we saw the mate standing on the bowsprit, and

crying out Luff! Luff! to some one in the dark water before the ship. In that direction, we could just see a light, and then, the great black hull of a strange vessel, that was coming down on us obliquely; and so near, that we heard the flap of her topsails as they shook in the wind, the trampling of feet on the deck, and the same cry of Luff! Luff! that our own mate, was raising.

In a minute more, I caught my breath, as I heard a snap and a crash, like the fall of a tree, and suddenly, one of our flying-jib guys jerked out the bolt near the cat-head; and presently, we heard our jib-boom thumping against our bows.

Meantime, the strange ship, scraping by us thus, shot off into the darkness, and we saw her no more. But she, also, must have been injured; for when it grew light, we found pieces of strange rigging mixed with ours. We repaired the damage, and replaced the broken spar with another jib-boom we had; for all ships carry spare spars against emergencies.

The cause of this accident, which came near being the death of all on board, was nothing but the drowsiness of the look-out men on the forecastles of both ships. The sailor who had the look-out on our vessel was terribly reprimanded by the mate.

No doubt, many ships that are never heard of after leaving port, meet their fate in this way; and it may be, that sometimes two vessels coming together, jib-boom-and-jib-boom, with a sudden shock in the middle watch

of the night, mutually destroy each other; and like fighting elks, sink down into the ocean, with their antlers locked in death.

While I was at Liverpool, a fine ship that lay near us in the docks, having got her cargo on board, went to sea, bound for India, with a good breeze; and all her crew felt sure of a prosperous voyage. But in about seven days after, she came back, a most distressing object to behold. All her starboard side was torn and splintered; her starboard anchor was gone; and a great part of the starboard bulwarks; while every one of the lower yard-arms had been broken, in the same direction; so that she now carried small and unsightly jury-yards.

When I looked at this vessel, with the whole of one side thus shattered, but the other still in fine trim; and when I remembered her gay and gallant appearance, when she left the same harbor into which she now entered so forlorn; I could not help thinking of a young man I had known at home, who had left his cottage one morning in high spirits, and was brought back at noon with his right side paralyzed from head to foot.

It seems that this vessel had been run against by a strange ship, crowding all sail before a fresh breeze; and the stranger had rushed past her starboard side, reducing her to the sad state in which she now was.

Sailors can not be too wakeful and cautious, when keeping their night look-outs; though, as I well know, they too often suffer themselves to

become negligent, and nod. And this is not so wonderful, after all; for though every seaman has heard of those accidents at sea; and many of them, perhaps, have been in ships that have suffered from them; yet, when you find yourself sailing along on the ocean at night, without having seen a sail for weeks and weeks, it is hard for you to realize that any are near. Then, if they are near, it seems almost incredible that on the broad, boundless sea, which washes Greenland at one end of the world, and the Falkland Islands at the other, that any one vessel upon such a vast highway, should come into close contact with another. But the likelihood of great calamities occurring, seldom obtrudes upon the minds of ignorant men, such as sailors generally are; for the things which wise people know, anticipate, and guard against, the ignorant can only become acquainted with, by meeting them face to face. And even when experience has taught them, the lesson only serves for that day; inasmuch as the foolish in prosperity are infidels to the possibility of adversity; they see the sun in heaven, and believe it to be far too bright ever to set. And even, as suddenly as the bravest and fleetest ships, while careering in pride of canvas over the sea, have been struck, as by lightning, and quenched out of sight; even so, do some lordly men, with all their plans and prospects gallantly trimmed to the fair, rushing breeze of life, and with no thought of death and disaster, suddenly encounter a shock unforeseen, and go down, foundering, into death.