

XXIV. HE BEGINS TO HOP ABOUT IN THE RIGGING LIKE A SAINT JAGO'S MONKEY

But we have not got to Liverpool yet; though, as there is little more to be said concerning the passage out, the Highlander may as well make sail and get there as soon as possible. The brief interval will perhaps be profitably employed in relating what progress I made in learning the duties of a sailor.

After my heroic feat in loosing the main-skysail, the mate entertained good hopes of my becoming a rare mariner. In the fullness of his heart, he ordered me to turn over the superintendence of the chicken-coop to the Lancashire boy; which I did, very willingly. After that, I took care to show the utmost alacrity in running aloft, which by this time became mere fun for me; and nothing delighted me more than to sit on one of the topsail-yards, for hours together, helping Max or the Green-lander as they worked at the rigging.

At sea, the sailors are continually engaged in "parcelling," "serving," and in a thousand ways ornamenting and repairing the numberless shrouds and stays; mending sails, or turning one side of the deck into a rope-walk, where they manufacture a clumsy sort of twine, called spun-yarn. This is spun with a winch; and many an hour the Lancashire boy had to play the part of an engine, and contribute the motive power. For material, they use odds and ends of old rigging called "junk," the

yarns of which are picked to pieces, and then twisted into new combinations, something as most books are manufactured. This "junk" is bought at the junk shops along the wharves; outlandish looking dens, generally subterranean, full of old iron, old shrouds, spars, rusty blocks, and superannuated tackles; and kept by villainous looking old men, in tarred trowsers, and with yellow beards like oakum. They look like wreckers; and the scattered goods they expose for sale, involuntarily remind one of the sea-beach, covered with keels and cordage, swept ashore in a gale.

Yes, I was now as nimble as a monkey in the rigging, and at the cry of "tumble up there, my hearties, and take in sail," I was among the first ground-and-lofty tumblers, that sprang aloft at the word.

But the first time we reefed top-sails of a dark night, and I found myself hanging over the yard with eleven others, the ship plunging and rearing like a mad horse, till I felt like being jerked off the spar; then, indeed, I thought of a feather-bed at home, and hung on with tooth and nail; with no chance for snoring. But a few repetitions, soon made me used to it; and before long, I tied my reef-point as quickly and expertly as the best of them; never making what they call a "granny-knot," and slipt down on deck by the bare stays, instead of the shrouds. It is surprising, how soon a boy overcomes his timidity about going aloft. For my own part, my nerves became as steady as the earth's diameter, and I felt as fearless on the royal yard, as Sam Patch on the cliff of Niagara. To my amazement, also, I found, that running up the

rigging at sea, especially during a squall, was much easier than while lying in port. For as you always go up on the windward side, and the ship leans over, it makes more of a stairs of the rigging; whereas, in harbor, it is almost straight up and down.

Besides, the pitching and rolling only imparts a pleasant sort of vitality to the vessel; so that the difference in being aloft in a ship at sea, and a ship in harbor, is pretty much the same, as riding a real live horse and a wooden one. And even if the live charger should pitch you over his head, that would be much more satisfactory, than an inglorious fall from the other.

I took great delight in furling the top-gallant sails and royals in a hard blow; which duty required two hands on the yard.

There was a wild delirium about it; a fine rushing of the blood about the heart; and a glad, thrilling, and throbbing of the whole system, to find yourself tossed up at every pitch into the clouds of a stormy sky, and hovering like a judgment angel between heaven and earth; both hands free, with one foot in the rigging, and one somewhere behind you in the air. The sail would fill out like a balloon, with a report like a small cannon, and then collapse and sink away into a handful. And the feeling of mastering the rebellious canvas, and tying it down like a slave to the spar, and binding it over and over with the gasket, had a touch of pride and power in it, such as young King Richard must have felt, when he trampled down the insurgents of Wat Tyler.

As for steering, they never would let me go to the helm, except during a calm, when I and the figure-head on the bow were about equally employed.

By the way, that figure-head was a passenger I forgot to make mention of before.

He was a gallant six-footer of a Highlander "in full fig," with bright tartans, bare knees, barred leggings, and blue bonnet and the most vermilion of cheeks. He was game to his wooden marrow, and stood up to it through thick and thin; one foot a little advanced, and his right arm stretched forward, daring on the waves. In a gale of wind it was glorious to watch him standing at his post like a hero, and plunging up and down the watery Highlands and Lowlands, as the ship went roaming on her way. He was a veteran with many wounds of many sea-fights; and when he got to Liverpool a figure-head-builder there, amputated his left leg, and gave him another wooden one, which I am sorry to say, did not fit him very well, for ever after he looked as if he limped. Then this figure-head-surgeon gave him another nose, and touched up one eye, and repaired a rent in his tartans. After that the painter came and made his toilet all over again; giving him a new suit throughout, with a plaid of a beautiful pattern.

I do not know what has become of Donald now, but I hope he is safe and snug with a handsome pension in the "Sailors'-Snug-Harbor" on Staten Island.

The reason why they gave me such a slender chance of learning to steer was this. I was quite young and raw, and steering a ship is a great art, upon which much depends; especially the making a short passage; for if the helmsman be a clumsy, careless fellow, or ignorant of his duty, he keeps the ship going about in a melancholy state of indecision as to its precise destination; so that on a voyage to Liverpool, it may be pointing one while for Gibraltar, then for Rotterdam, and now for John o' Groat's; all of which is worse than wasted time. Whereas, a true steersman keeps her to her work night and day; and tries to make a bee-line from port to port.

Then, in a sudden squall, inattention, or want of quickness at the helm, might make the ship "lurch to"--or "bring her by the lee." And what those things are, the cabin passengers would never find out, when they found themselves going down, down, down, and bidding good-by forever to the moon and stars.

And they little think, many of them, fine gentlemen and ladies that they are, what an important personage, and how much to be had in reverence, is the rough fellow in the pea-jacket, whom they see standing at the wheel, now cocking his eye aloft, and then peeping at the compass, or looking out to windward.

Why, that fellow has all your lives and eternities in his hand; and with one small and almost imperceptible motion of a spoke, in a gale of wind,

might give a vast deal of work to surrogates and lawyers, in proving last wills and testaments.

Ay, you may well stare at him now. He does not look much like a man who might play into the hands of an heir-at-law, does he? Yet such is the case. Watch him close, therefore; take him down into your state-room occasionally after a stormy watch, and make a friend of him. A glass of cordial will do it. And if you or your heirs are interested with the underwriters, then also have an eye on him. And if you remark, that of the crew, all the men who come to the helm are careless, or inefficient; and if you observe the captain scolding them often, and crying out: "Luff, you rascal; she's falling off!" or, "Keep her steady, you scoundrel, you're boxing the compass!" then hurry down to your state-room, and if you have not yet made a will, get out your stationery and go at it; and when it is done, seal it up in a bottle, like Columbus' log, and it may possibly drift ashore, when you are drowned in the next gale of wind.