

#### XXXIV. THE IRRAWADDY

Among the various ships lying in Prince's Dock, none interested me more than the Irrawaddy, of Bombay, a "country ship," which is the name bestowed by Europeans upon the large native vessels of India. Forty years ago, these merchantmen were nearly the largest in the world; and they still exceed the generality. They are built of the celebrated teak wood, the oak of the East, or in Eastern phrase, "the King of the Oaks." The Irrawaddy had just arrived from Hindostan, with a cargo of cotton. She was manned by forty or fifty Lascars, the native seamen of India, who seemed to be immediately governed by a countryman of theirs of a higher caste. While his inferiors went about in strips of white linen, this dignitary was arrayed in a red army-coat, brilliant with gold lace, a cocked hat, and drawn sword. But the general effect was quite spoiled by his bare feet.

In discharging the cargo, his business seemed to consist in flagellating the crew with the flat of his saber, an exercise in which long practice had made him exceedingly expert. The poor fellows jumped away with the tackle-rope, elastic as cats.

One Sunday, I went aboard of the Irrawaddy, when this oriental usher accosted me at the gangway, with his sword at my throat. I gently pushed it aside, making a sign expressive of the pacific character of my motives in paying a visit to the ship. Whereupon he very considerably

let me pass.

I thought I was in Pegu, so strangely woody was the smell of the dark-colored timbers, whose odor was heightened by the rigging of kayar, or cocoa-nut fiber.

The Lascars were on the fore-castle-deck. Among them were Malays, Mahrattas, Burmese, Siamese, and Cingalese. They were seated round "kiddies" full of rice, from which, according to their invariable custom, they helped themselves with one hand, the other being reserved for quite another purpose. They were chattering like magpies in Hindostanee, but I found that several of them could also speak very good English. They were a small-limbed, wiry, tawny set; and I was informed made excellent seamen, though ill adapted to stand the hardships of northern voyaging.

They told me that seven of their number had died on the passage from Bombay; two or three after crossing the Tropic of Cancer, and the rest met their fate in the Channel, where the ship had been tost about in violent seas, attended with cold rains, peculiar to that vicinity. Two more had been lost overboard from the flying-jib-boom.

I was condoling with a young English cabin-boy on board, upon the loss of these poor fellows, when he said it was their own fault; they would never wear monkey-jackets, but clung to their thin India robes, even in the bitterest weather. He talked about them much as a farmer would about the loss of so many sheep by the murrain.

The captain of the vessel was an Englishman, as were also the three mates, master and boatswain. These officers lived astern in the cabin, where every Sunday they read the Church of England's prayers, while the heathen at the other end of the ship were left to their false gods and idols. And thus, with Christianity on the quarter-deck, and paganism on the fore-castle, the Irrawaddy ploughed the sea.

As if to symbolize this state of things, the "fancy piece" astern comprised, among numerous other carved decorations, a cross and a miter; while forward, on the bows, was a sort of devil for a figure-head--a dragon-shaped creature, with a fiery red mouth, and a switchy-looking tail.

After her cargo was discharged, which was done "to the sound of flutes and soft recorders"--something as work is done in the navy to the music of the boatswain's pipe--the Lascars were set to "stripping the ship" that is, to sending down all her spars and ropes.

At this time, she lay alongside of us, and the Babel on board almost drowned our own voices. In nothing but their girdles, the Lascars hopped about aloft, chattering like so many monkeys; but, nevertheless, showing much dexterity and seamanship in their manner of doing their work.

Every Sunday, crowds of well-dressed people came down to the dock to see this singular ship; many of them perched themselves in the shrouds of

the neighboring craft, much to the wrath of Captain Riga, who left strict orders with our old ship-keeper, to drive all strangers out of the Highlander's rigging. It was amusing at these times, to watch the old women with umbrellas, who stood on the quay staring at the Lascars, even when they desired to be private. These inquisitive old ladies seemed to regard the strange sailors as a species of wild animal, whom they might gaze at with as much impunity, as at leopards in the Zoological Gardens.

One night I was returning to the ship, when just as I was passing through the Dock Gate, I noticed a white figure squatting against the wall outside. It proved to be one of the Lascars who was smoking, as the regulations of the docks prohibit his indulging this luxury on board his vessel. Struck with the curious fashion of his pipe, and the odor from it, I inquired what he was smoking; he replied "Joggerry," which is a species of weed, used in place of tobacco.

Finding that he spoke good English, and was quite communicative, like most smokers, I sat down by Dattabdool-mans, as he called himself, and we fell into conversation. So instructive was his discourse, that when we parted, I had considerably added to my stock of knowledge. Indeed, it is a Godsend to fall in with a fellow like this. He knows things you never dreamed of; his experiences are like a man from the moon--wholly strange, a new revelation. If you want to learn romance, or gain an insight into things quaint, curious, .and marvelous, drop your books of travel, and take a stroll along the docks of a great commercial port.

Ten to one, you will encounter Crusoe himself among the crowds of mariners from all parts of the globe.

But this is no place for making mention of all the subjects upon which I and my Lascar friend mostly discoursed; I will only try to give his account of the teakwood and kayar rope, concerning which things I was curious, and sought information.

The "sagoon" as he called the tree which produces the teak, grows in its greatest excellence among the mountains of Malabar, whence large quantities are sent to Bombay for shipbuilding. He also spoke of another kind of wood, the "sissor," which supplies most of the "shin-logs," or "knees," and crooked timbers in the country ships. The sagoon grows to an immense size; sometimes there is fifty feet of trunk, three feet through, before a single bough is put forth. Its leaves are very large; and to convey some idea of them, my Lascar likened them to elephants' ears. He said a purple dye was extracted from them, for the purpose of staining cottons and silks. The wood is specifically heavier than water; it is easily worked, and extremely strong and durable. But its chief merit lies in resisting the action of the salt water, and the attacks of insects; which resistance is caused by its containing a resinous oil called "poonja."

To my surprise, he informed me that the Irrawaddy was wholly built by the native shipwrights of India, who, he modestly asserted, surpassed the European artisans.

The rigging, also, was of native manufacture. As the kayar, of which it is composed, is now getting into use both in England and America, as well for ropes and rigging as for mats and rugs, my Lascar friend's account of it, joined to my own observations, may not be uninteresting.

In India, it is prepared very much in the same way as in Polynesia. The cocoa-nut is gathered while the husk is still green, and but partially ripe; and this husk is removed by striking the nut forcibly, with both hands, upon a sharp-pointed stake, planted uprightly in the ground. In this way a boy will strip nearly fifteen hundred in a day. But the kayar is not made from the husk, as might be supposed, but from the rind of the nut; which, after being long soaked in water, is beaten with mallets, and rubbed together into fibers. After this being dried in the sun, you may spin it, just like hemp, or any similar substance. The fiber thus produced makes very strong and durable ropes, extremely well adapted, from their lightness and durability, for the running rigging of a ship; while the same causes, united with its great strength and buoyancy, render it very suitable for large cables and hawsers.

But the elasticity of the kayar ill fits it for the shrouds and standing-rigging of a ship, which require to be comparatively firm. Hence, as the Irrawaddy's shrouds were all of this substance, the Lascar told me, they were continually setting up or slacking off her standing-rigging, according as the weather was cold or warm. And the loss of a foretopmast, between the tropics, in a squall, he attributed

to this circumstance.

After a stay of about two weeks, the Irrawaddy had her heavy Indian spars replaced with Canadian pine, and her kayar shrouds with hempen ones. She then mustered her pagans, and hoisted sail for London.