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First Impressions • Sail Ho!

The first day we passed at sea was the Sabbath. As we were just from port, and there was a great deal to be done on board, we were kept at work all day, and at night the watches were set, and everything put into sea order. When we were called aft to be divided into watches, I had a good specimen of the manner of a sea captain. After the division had been made, he gave a short characteristic speech, walking the quarter deck with a cigar in his mouth, and dropping the words out between the puffs.

“Now, my men, we have begun a long voyage. If we get along well together, we shall have a comfortable time; if we don’t, we shall have hell afloat. All you’ve got to do is to obey your orders and do your duty like men, then you’ll fare well enough; if you don’t, you’ll fare hard enough, I can tell you. If we pull together, you’ll find me a clever fellow; if we don’t, you’ll find me a bloody rascal. That’s all I’ve got to say. Go below, the larboard watch!”

larboard Before 1844, the term for port, the left side of a vessel. In 1844 the term was changed to port, to avoid confusion with **starboard**, the right side of the ship. May have been derived from ladeboard, the side from which a vessel was laden. (It was difficult to present the starboard side to a dock because the steering board (hence starboard) was on that side. Or, it may have been come from landboard, the side on which land was seen by ships returning home to England through the English Channel.

quarterdeck *The part of the upper deck behind the mainmast. The quarterdeck is traditionally the preserve of the captain and officers, common seamen being restricted to the front part of the ship unless summoned.*

forecastle *(pronounced fo'csal) The space at the front of the ship, below the short front deck. The name comes from the fact that in early warships a tower or castle was built at the front and back of the ship from which archers attacked would-be boarders. The castle in the front was known as the forecastle; the castle in the back — the sterncastle. Since the forecastle was for many years the area where the crew had their living quarters, the word forecastle is synonymous with the crew's quarters.*

yard *A horizontal spar from which the square sails of a square-rigged sailing ship are hung.*

I being in the starboard, or second mate's watch, had the opportunity of keeping the first watch at sea. S____, a young man, making, like myself, his first voyage, was in the same watch, and as he was the son of a professional man, and had been in a counting-room in Boston, we found that we had many friends and topics in common. We talked these matters over,--Boston, what our friends were probably doing, our voyage, etc., until he went to take his turn at the look-out, and left me to myself. I had now a fine time for reflection.

I felt for the first time the perfect silence of the sea. The officer was, walking the quarter deck, where I had no right to go, one or two men were talking on the forecastle, whom I had little inclination to join, so that I was left open to the full impression of everything about me. However much I was affected by the beauty of the sea, the bright stars, and the clouds driven swiftly over them, I could not but remember that I was separating myself from all the social and intellectual enjoyments of life. Yet, strange as it may seem, I did then and afterwards take pleasure in these reflections, hoping by them to prevent my becoming insensible to the value of what I was leaving.

But all my dreams were soon put to flight by an order from the officer to trim the yards, as the wind was getting ahead; and I could plainly see by the looks the sailors occasionally cast to windward, and by the dark clouds that were fast coming up, that we had bad weather to prepare for, and had heard the captain say that he expected to be in the Gulf Stream by twelve o'clock. In a few minutes eight bells were struck, the watch called, and we went below.



I now began to feel the first discomforts of a sailor's life. The steerage in which I lived was filled with coils of rigging, spare sails, old junk and ship stores, which had not been stowed away. Moreover, there had been no berths built for us to sleep in, and we were not allowed to drive nails to hang our clothes upon.

, The sea, too, had risen, the vessel was rolling heavily, and everything was pitched about in grand confusion. There was a complete "hurrah's nest," as the sailors say, "everything on top and nothing at hand." A large hawser had been coiled away upon my chest; my hats, boots, mattress and blankets had all "fetched away" and gone over to leeward, and were jammed and broken under the boxes and coils of rigging.

leeward (pronounced loo'ard) The direction in which the wind is blowing. The opposite term is **windward** — the direction from which the wind is blowing.

hawser — A rope which has a circumference of inches or more (127 millimeters). Mainly used securing the ship to a dock.



To crown all, we were allowed no light to find anything with, and I was just beginning to feel strong symptoms of sea-sickness, and that listlessness and inactivity which accompany it. Giving up all attempts to collect my things together, I lay down upon the sails, expecting every moment to hear the cry of "all hands ahoy," which the approaching storm would soon make necessary. I shortly heard the rain-drops falling on deck, thick and fast, and the watch evidently had their hands full of work, for I could hear the loud and repeated orders of the mate, the trampling of feet, the creaking of blocks, and all the accompaniments of a coming storm.

In a few minutes the slide of the hatch was thrown back, which let down the noise and tumult of the deck still louder, the loud cry of "All hands, ahoy! tumble up here and take in sail," saluted our ears, and the hatch was quickly shut again. When I got upon deck, a new scene and a new experience was before me. The little brig was close hauled upon the wind, and lying over, as it then seemed to me, nearly upon her beam ends.



close-hauled The condition of a ship that is traveling as directly into the wind as possible. With square-rigged ships this was something more than 45° away from the direction of the wind with sails full and not shivering.

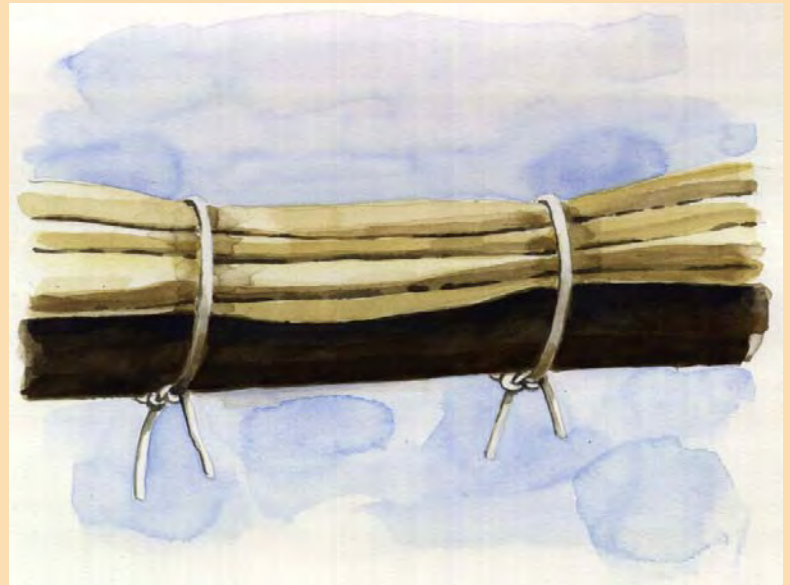
block Device that facilitates the working of ropes and lines. Basically a wheel or wheels, called sheaves, set in a block of wood or metal through which a rope passes. Blocks increase the mechanical power applied on the ropes by their use in various combinations. It would be very hard work to raise a large, heavy sail by pulling on a single rope, but by reeving (threading) the rope through several blocks, the effort required to do the same amount of work is greatly reduced.



beam ends A ship is said to be on her beam ends when she has rolled over sideways to such an extent that she can no longer right herself again; that is, when she is floating on the ends of those transverse members of her frame known as beams.

The heavy head sea was beating against her bows with the noise and force almost of a sledge hammer, and flying over the deck, drenching us completely through. The topsail halyards had been let go, and the great sails were filling out and backing against the masts with a noise like thunder. The wind was whistling through the rigging, loose ropes flying about; loud and, to me, unintelligible orders constantly given and rapidly executed, and the sailors "singing out" at the ropes in their hoarse and peculiar strains. In addition to all this, I had not got my "sea legs on," was dreadfully sick, with hardly strength enough to hold on to anything, and it was "pitch dark."

This was my state when I was ordered aloft, for the first time, to reef topsails.



reefed sail