A FREE COMPANION TO 20,000 LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA

Twelve Feet Aft

San Francisco, September 1855. Before the Susquehanna, before the Nautilus, Ned Land goes below with a lantern.



RICHARD LOWE

Twelve Feet Aft

The Montréal came in through the Gate on the afternoon flood with her head so low in the water that the men on the wharf took her for a ship with a shifted cargo. I had been watching her for twenty minutes before anybody else looked up. You learn a vessel's trouble from the way she moves long before you learn it from anything else, and this one moved like a man carrying a sack of wet sand on one shoulder.

Her pumps were going, and I could hear them across a quarter mile of water. It was the clank and suck of brakes worked by men who had been working them for days. There was no rhythm left in the sound, only the noise of arms that had stopped belonging to anybody.

I had been ashore two weeks. The Dauphin lay at her mooring off Rincon Point with her drive shaft in two pieces and her captain in a hotel on the hill, telling anyone who would buy him a brandy that he had decided to winter in California. I had nothing to do in San Francisco but eat, walk the waterfront and read the papers, and the papers that September were full of the monster.

That week one of them had reprinted an article by a professor in Paris, with a drawing of a squid wrapped around a ship the way a hand closes on a bottle. The professor said cephalopod, and the newspaper said horror of the deep in letters an inch high. I said nothing, because nobody in San Francisco had asked a harpooner.

By the time the Montréal had her lines on the wharf there were sixty people waiting for her. There were clerks, and boardinghouse runners hunting sailors with pay in their pockets, and a Chinese cook with a basket of oranges he was not going to sell to anybody on that ship. A young man stood on a bollard with a sketchbook and drew her as she came alongside, and when I looked over his shoulder he had the bow and the pumps and a long coil of serpent in the water beside her.

There was nothing in the water beside her.

“You see that?” the young man said. He did not look up from his pencil.

“No,” I said.

“The editor will.”

* * *

The mate met me at the head of the gangway. He was a square man of fifty or so with a gray beard trimmed close to the jaw and eyes that had not shut properly in a long while. He had his arms folded, and I guessed he had been standing on that spot since before the ship cleared the Gate, so that nobody would come aboard without going through him first.

“No,” he said, before I had said anything.

“I haven't asked yet.”

“You will ask to come aboard, and you will ask to see. There are twenty of you today and the answer for all of you is no.” His English was good and careful, the English of a Quebec man who had learned it from Scots captains.

I tried him in French. I have enough French to buy a drink in Quebec and to lose an argument over the price, and I lost this one inside three sentences. He listened with the patience of a man waiting for a dog to finish barking, and when I ran out of words he looked at my hands.

“What are you,” he said.

“Harpooner, twenty-two years, the last four on the Dauphin.” I nodded across the water at her. “She's laid up and I'm not.”

He looked at the Dauphin, and then at my hands again, and then down the deck at the pumps. Four men were on each brake, and two of them were asleep on their feet, the bodies going up and down with the handle and the eyes shut. One of the sleepers was a boy.

"You want to see," the mate said.

"Yes."

"Then work the pump first. One hour, and then we will see what you want."

I went aboard.

* * *

The water came out of the pump the color of weak tea and smelled of molasses.

That was the first thing I learned about the Montréal. She had been carrying sugar from the Sandwich Islands, with coffee in bags on top of it, and when the sea came into her forward hold it had come into the sugar. Nine days of salt water stirred through a hundred tons of brown sugar makes a smell like a candy maker's shop on fire, and it gets into the back of the throat and stays there.

I took the sleeping boy's place on the brake. He woke when I lifted his hands off the bar and stared up at me as if I had come out of the sea myself. Then he sat down on the hatch coaming where he stood and was asleep again before he had finished sitting.

The man opposite me on the brake was a Portuguese with a broken front tooth who did not speak to me once in the hour. We found the stroke between us inside of a minute, the bar coming back into the palms with the weight of the water on it and the pump sucking and gasping below. The man beside me was a big Irishman with a red neck who sang under his breath, the same two lines over and over, about a girl in Cork who would not wait.

My back started to burn at the half hour. It was a good burn, the burn of a body doing what it had been built to do after two weeks of nothing but walking up and down Montgomery Street with its hands in its pockets. I had missed the work more than I knew.

The mate stood by the mainmast and watched me. He did not pretend to be doing anything else.

At the hour he came over and put his hand on the bar. The Portuguese stopped, and I stopped, and the Irishman stopped in the middle of his girl from Cork.

"Hébert," the mate said. He meant himself.

"Land."

"Land," he said, as if he were weighing it. "Good name for a sailor."

"I've heard that one."

"I am sure you have." He went to the lamp locker and came back with a lantern and held it out to me.

"What's that for?" I said.

"The underwriters' man is coming at four," he said. "The owners' agent comes at five. Until four o'clock you may look at whatever you want, and after four o'clock you are a man who worked my pump and went home."

I took the lantern. It burned sperm oil, clean and faintly sweet, and I had probably killed the whale it came from, or one of his cousins.

"Why let me," I said.

"Because the underwriters' man will look for twenty minutes and write down whatever he came here to write down," Hébert said. "I want one man to look at it properly before he does."

* * *

The forward hold was a cave.

There is no other word for what a flooded hold becomes. The light from the hatch reached four feet down the ladder and gave up, and below that there was the lantern and nothing else, a ball of yellow ten feet across with the dark outside it and the sound of water moving in the dark. They had pumped her down as far as she would go, but a foot and a half still sloshed over the floor of the hold, and I went down into it to the knee.

The water was cold. The sea outside was September cold and tolerable, and this was the cold of water that has been shut in the dark for nine days and has forgotten the sun. Burst sugar bags floated against my legs like drowned sheep, and coffee beans lay in black swollen drifts along the timbers wherever the water had left them.

I stood still and let my eyes come to the lantern. Then I counted the frames forward from the ladder, eleven of them. At the twelfth, on the starboard side, the hull had a hole in it the size of a carriage.

They had stopped it from outside with a fothered sail, a spare topsail by the weight of it, hauled under her bottom and drawn tight against the wound so the sea pressed it in like a bandage. From inside they had shored it, a dozen timbers wedged from the hole across to the port side and hammered home. Between the shores you could see the canvas bellying inward with the harbor behind it, gray and wet and breathing a little with the swell.

Around the shoring the wound itself was still there to be read. I held the lantern close and read the wood.

* * *

A reef tears. I have seen a dozen ships come off reefs, and no two of the wounds were alike, because coral and rock rip planking along the grain however the rock happens to lie. The wood splits in long spears pointing back the way the ship was going, and the copper sheathing peels off in strips like bark off a birch.

A whale is worse and stranger. I have been in a boat that a sperm whale came up under, and I once saw a ship that a whale had stove on purpose, off the Azores, when I was in my twenties. A whale's head is a broad blunt thing driven by eighty tons of muscle, and it crushes a whole section in and leaves the planks hanging in broken flaps, and the hull goes soft for yards around from the shock.

This was neither one.

The planking had gone in whole. Three strakes of four inch oak had been driven inward in one piece, the way a cork goes into a bottle under your thumb. The edges of the hole were not split but crushed, a ring of mashed fiber an inch deep all the way round, as if the wood had been struck with a maul the size of a door.

The frames were the same. Two oak frames had been in the way, and they had broken clean across the grain, and oak does not break across the grain unless something gives it no choice.

I put my hand inside the ring where I could reach between the shores. The copper sheathing on the outside had not peeled at all. It had folded inward over the lip of the hole like the lid of a tin pressed down with a knife, and it was folded to the same depth all the way round.

“Same depth,” I said to nobody. My voice went into the dark and did not come back.

* * *

I needed to measure, and I had nothing to measure with but my own body. My hand from thumb to little finger is nine inches, and my forearm from elbow to fingertip is nineteen. I began with the hand, walking it around the edge of the wound between the shores, and lost the count twice on the timbers.

Then I saw the tools.

They lay on a ledge of the ship's side above the waterline, where somebody had set them down and not come back. There was a maul, a box of wedges and a coil of spunyarn, and a bucket of oakum gone dark with damp. On top of the wedge box sat a brass rule folded to two feet, the hinges stiff with salt, and beside it a short clay pipe with the bowl turned down so it would not fill.

Nobody leaves a pipe like that unless he means to come back for it in a minute.

I took the rule and opened it, a carpenter's rule, a good one, English made, with a name scratched into the brass of the hinge in a careful hand: P. Lacroix. I held it in the lantern light a while longer than I needed to, and then I measured the hole with it.

It was six feet across at the widest, near enough round. The planking had been driven in a little better than three feet from the outside of the hull to the deepest point, where the frames had gone, and the ring of crushed wood was an inch deep everywhere I could reach. I measured from the keelson to the center of the wound and got seven feet four inches, and I wrote that on the back of my hand with a splinter dipped in lantern soot, because I did not trust my head in that smell.

Then I went aft.

* * *

The second wound was twelve feet aft of the first.

I paced it first, five short steps against the water, and then I laid the dead man's rule along the ceiling planks six times and got the same answer, twelve feet. They had shored this one the same way and fothered it with a second sail, a fore course by the size. The canvas breathed in and out between the shores the same as the other.

It measured six feet across and three feet in, with the same crushed ring and the same copper folded over the lip. I measured from the keelson to the center and got seven feet four inches. I wrote it on my hand under the first figure and stood in the water and looked at the two of them, one above the other, the same.

Two blows can land at the same height by accident. A reef has a top, and a ship that hits the same reef twice will hit it at the same height both times, but a reef leaves its own marks and there was no reef in these wounds. Whatever had struck the Montréal had come at her square, at right angles to the hull, without raking fore or aft, and it had pulled back out of her both times without dragging the planking after it.

An animal hits and drags. It follows through, because it is all one piece and it keeps moving. This thing had stopped, and drawn back, and come again.

I did not have a word for what that meant. I had the shape of it in front of me, two canvas patches breathing in the dark and a foot and a half of sweet black water around my legs. For the first time in a long while I was afraid of something in the sea.

* * *

“You want coffee?”

The voice came from the ladder. I turned with the lantern and found the boy from the pump sitting on the third rung from the bottom, with his boots out of the water and a tin cup in each hand. Up close he was fourteen or so, with a narrow French face and ears too big for it and a burn scar on the back of one wrist the shape of a kettle handle.

“It's from the cargo,” he said. “The top bags were dry, and Monsieur Hébert says it is salvage and the owners can bill him.”

I waded over and took a cup. It was thick and bitter and still hot, and it was the best coffee I have had in my life, and I have had coffee in Rio.

"What's your name," I said.

"Émile." He looked past me into the dark where the second patch was. "You are measuring them."

"Yes."

"The underwriters' man is going to say whale. The second mate heard the agent say so this morning in the boat, that it is cheaper for everybody if it is a whale."

"It isn't a whale."

"I know." He said it flat, the way a boy says a thing he has known for nine days without anyone asking him. "I was here."

I held the cup and said nothing. When a man has been somewhere and wants to tell it, you keep your mouth shut and let him find the way in by himself, and boys are no different, except that they find it faster.

* * *

"It was the middle watch," Émile said. "Three bells, maybe, and I was asleep in the forecastle, and then I was on the floor with everybody else on the floor. It was like the ship drove onto a rock, except we were a thousand miles out from the Farallones with the westerlies behind us and there are no rocks there."

He drank his coffee. He held the cup in both hands, the way you hold a cup when your hands are shaking and you would rather nobody saw.

"Monsieur Lacroix was the carpenter," he said. "He went down first, with Jory and Kalani, and I held the lantern on this ladder." He touched the rung beside him without looking at it.

"And the water?" I said.

"The water was coming in fast at the first one," he said. "It made a noise like a river. Monsieur Lacroix had them get the topsail and the lines, and Monsieur Hébert put the ship about and laid her to so she would sit still for the fothering."

"He hove her to," I said.

"Yes. She was lying still, and Monsieur Lacroix and Jory and Kalani got the shores in, two shores, three, with him shouting at them in French and in English and in the island language, which he did not know, so he was only shouting." On some other day Émile would have smiled at that.

"What did he shout?"

"He said a very bad word," he said. "And then he said sorry for it, to heaven, I mean, not to us, because he was a religious man."

"And then."

Émile looked at the dark aft. "Then it came back."

* * *

I asked him how long. Between the first blow and the second, I asked him how long.

"I counted," he said. "I always count when I am frightened, because my mother taught me that the counting is something to hold."

I did not tell him that I knew this. My hand had gone up to my chest of its own accord, to the coin I wear on a cord there, and I made it come down again.

"How many," I said.

"From when Monsieur Lacroix said sorry," Émile said, "forty-one."

A frightened boy counts fast, and forty-one in a boy's count is less than half a minute. For that half minute a ship lay hove to and still in the water with three men in her hold hammering shores, and the thing below her in the dark did nothing at all.

Then it struck.

I set my cup on the rung beside him. I wanted both hands empty, and I could not have told anybody why.

"Jory got the second shore in on the first hole," Émile said. "It was holding, and the water was slowing, and you could hear it slow. Monsieur Lacroix put his hand on the sail where it was pressing in and said there, we have it, we have it, in English, so Jory and Kalani would know."

He stopped. Above us the pumps went on, and somebody on deck laughed at a joke, and a gull came down on the hatch coaming and looked into the hold at us with one yellow eye.

"The second one hit there," Émile said, and pointed aft, "where you were standing."

* * *

He told the rest of it to his cup. I will not set down all of it, because it is his, and he told it to me only because I was standing in the water where it happened, holding the dead man's rule.

The second wound came in under the waterline behind the three men, between them and the ladder, and the sea came through it the way it comes through a broken dam. In a few breaths it was at their waists. They went for the door in the after bulkhead, the only other way out of the forward hold, a heavy door the owners had put in at Quebec the year before when they rebuilt her.

The door opened aft. To shut the forward hold off from the rest of the ship, you had to be on the after side of it and pull it to.

Kalani got through and turned round to haul the door closed behind the others, and the water came through the doorway at his chest, and a sack of sugar came with it and jammed in the sill. Jory went back for Lacroix, who was still at the first hole with both hands on the sail, trying to hold it. Kalani went back for Jory.

Hébert and the second mate and four others got to the door from aft, with the boy behind them holding the lantern up from the 'tween decks. They worked the sack out of the doorway with the water coming through the gap the whole time and the ship going down by the head under their feet, and every man of them knowing what was on the other side. It took them most of an hour.

"When they had the sack out," Émile said, "there was nobody left to shut it on."

He finished his coffee and wiped his mouth on his wrist, on the burn scar. Then he looked at me.

"The bulkhead held," he said. "The agent told Monsieur Hébert this morning that the owners' door saved the ship, and that we should be grateful for it."

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I went up the ladder because I needed air more than light. The smell of the hold had gotten all the way down into my chest, and I wanted to breathe something that had not been shut in the dark with three dead men and a hundred tons of sugar.

The afternoon had gone gold over the city. The hills behind the waterfront were brown and bare, sand and scrub with new houses stuck up on them like a child's blocks, and the fog stood off the Gate the way it does in the late afternoon, a white wall on the water waiting for the sun to go. A cart went by on the wharf loaded with barrels, and the young man with the sketchbook was gone.

Hébert was at the rail with a pipe in his teeth, not lit.

"Well," he said.

“It isn't a reef,” I said. “It isn't a whale, and it isn't a squid, whatever the papers in Paris say.”

“Then what.”

I looked at the soot on the back of my hand, the two numbers and the boy's forty-one under them.

“Something that hits square,” I said, “and pulls back out clean, and can hit twice at the same depth.” I held my hands up a foot apart, flat, and moved them toward each other.

“That is not a thing,” Hébert said. “That is a list.”

“It struck your ship and stopped,” I said. “It drew off and waited, and then it came back and struck her again twelve feet aft, at the same height, on a ship lying still in the water.”

Hébert took the pipe out of his mouth.

“You are telling me it meant to,” he said.

“I'm telling you what's in your hold. I don't know what it meant, and I don't know what it is.”

“But you have an opinion.”

“I have a shape,” I said. “Animals don't come back the same way twice, and they don't measure.”

He put the pipe back in his teeth. He looked down the deck at the pumps, at the Portuguese with the broken tooth and the Irishman with his girl from Cork, and he said nothing for a long time.

* * *

The underwriters' man came at a quarter past four.

His name was Ashby. He was a narrow, clean, pink man in a gray coat that had cost more than my whole lay on the Dauphin's last voyage, and he came up the gangway ahead of a clerk carrying a portable desk. He shook Hébert's hand without taking off his glove, and he looked at my wet trousers and my sooted hands and decided I was crew, and did not look at me again until he had to.

He went down the ladder as far as the fourth rung from the bottom. He did not put his boots in the water. The clerk held the lantern above him, and he looked at the first patch for about a minute and at the second for less.

Then he came up, and the clerk opened the desk on the hatch cover and uncapped the ink.

“Struck by whale,” Ashby said, “or other large animal of the sea, species unknown, a peril of the sea within the meaning of the policy, with damage forward, starboard, below the waterline, in two places.” He looked at Hébert. “Loss of life?”

“Three men.”

“Three men.” The clerk wrote it down. “Names for the owners' book?”

Hébert gave him the names: Paul Lacroix, carpenter, of Lévis; William Jory, seaman, of Falmouth in Cornwall; and Kalani, seaman, shipped at Honolulu.

“Kalani what?”

“Kalani,” Hébert said.

The clerk looked at Ashby, and Ashby looked at his gloves. “Write it as given,” he said.

* * *

I should have gone home. Hébert had said I could look until four and then I was a man who had worked his pump and left, and it was twenty past, and I had what I came for.

“It wasn't a whale,” I said.

Ashby looked at me then. It was the look a man in a good gray coat gives a dog that has wandered into his office, while he waits for somebody to remove it. When nobody did, he spoke to the dog himself.

“And you are?” he said.

“A harpooner, twenty-two years.” I gave it to him in the voice I use on a deck in weather. “I've killed more whales than you have seen pictures of, and I know what a whale's head does to oak, and this isn't it.”

“Then what is it, Mr. ...?”

“Land.”

“Mr. Land.” He let the name sit a moment, as if it were a joke he was too well bred to make. “What is it?”

“I don't know.”

“There we are,” Ashby said, and turned back to the desk.

“Struck twice,” I said, “twelve feet apart and the same height to the inch, square on, no drag, with a pause between them on a ship hove to and lying still. Your whale came back and measured where to hit her the second time.”

Ashby did not turn round. He spoke to the clerk, or the desk, or the inkwell.

“The underwriters do not pay for opinions, Mr. Land,” he said. “They pay for perils, and a whale is a peril of the sea and is named in the policy, and the thing you describe is not.”

“Then name it,” I said.

He took the pen from the clerk and signed. “A thing that has no name cannot be insured against, and so it cannot be paid for,” he said, “so it is a whale, Mr. Land, and everybody is paid, the widows too, and is that not the object?”

I had Lacroix's rule in my hand. I had not known it was still there until I looked down and saw it, and I opened it out to its full two feet and held it out to Ashby.

“Go down and measure it,” I said. “It won't take you five minutes.”

He looked at the rule, and then at me, and then he capped the ink.

“Good afternoon, Captain Hébert,” he said, though Hébert was not the captain. He went down the gangway with his clerk and his desk behind him and did not look back.

* * *

“He is right,” Hébert said.

We were in the mate's cabin aft, a box seven feet by six with a bunk and a desk and a lamp in gimbals. He had a bottle of rum on the desk with two glasses and three sheets of paper, and only one of the sheets had any writing on it. Through the bulkhead I could hear the pumps, slower now, a fresh watch on the brakes.

“About the whale,” I said.

“About the widows.” He poured. “If it is a whale, the underwriters pay the owners, and the owners pay Madame Lacroix what is owed and a little more, because they are Quebec men and they knew him.”

“And if it's what I say.”

“Then there is a lawsuit, and two years of lawyers, and at the end of the lawyers there is nothing.” He pushed a glass at me. “The underwriters will say it was a reef and the master kept no proper lookout, so it is a whale, and I signed his paper, and I will sign it again if they ask.”

I drank. It was good Jamaica rum, dark, and it went down and sat on top of the sugar smell without moving it an inch.

“Then why did you let me go down,” I said.

Hébert looked at the paper on the desk. There was one line on it, in French, and I could read enough to see it began Chère Madame.

"Because I wanted to know," he said. "For me, not for the policy." He touched the edge of the sheet.

"Know what?"

"I hove her to," he said. "After the first blow I put her about and laid her to, because a ship lying still is easier to fother, and that is in every book and every mate in the world would do it, and then she was lying still, and it came back."

He had sat in this box for nine days with the pumps going through the bulkhead, turning it over: whether the thing in the dark had waited for the ship to be still, and whether he had held her there for it.

"You couldn't have known," I said.

"No," he said. "But I would like to know if it knew."

* * *

There was nothing to say to that, and I am not a man who talks when there is nothing to say. I sat with my glass and Hébert sat with his. The lamp swung a little in its gimbals with the ship working against her fenders.

"Jory's mother lives in Falmouth," Hébert said after a while, "and my English is good for talking but not for this." He moved the second blank sheet across the desk to me with one finger. "You will write it."

"I didn't know him."

"Nobody knew him. He was with us eight months, and he was nineteen, and he had red hair and could not keep his hat on in the wind." Hébert pushed the pen across after the paper.

"What else?"

"He sent half his money home every port," he said. "He was a good seaman, better than he knew, and you will write that."

I have written perhaps a dozen letters in my life, and four of them were like this one. You learn on a whaling ship that somebody has to write them, and that the man who writes them best is the one who does not try to make them beautiful. I uncorked the ink.

I wrote that her son had died at sea on the night of the seventh of September, in the forward hold of the barque Montréal, a thousand miles west of San Francisco, while trying to save the ship. I wrote that he had gone back into the water for his officer, and that it had been his own choice, and that no man aboard thought less of him for it and every man aboard thought more. I wrote the red hair, and the hat, and the money home.

I did not write whale. When I came to the place where the reason should go, I wrote that the ship had been struck twice in the night by a thing none of us had seen.

Hébert read it over my shoulder. He read it twice.

"That is not an answer," he said.

"It's what I've got," I said. "I won't give her one I made up."

He took the pen back. After a moment he dipped it and turned the French letter toward himself and began to write under Chère Madame, and I watched him put down the same sentence in his own language. Frappé deux fois dans la nuit.

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The third sheet stayed blank.

“Kalani shipped at Honolulu last November,” Hébert said, holding the pen over the sheet without writing. “He came aboard with a sea chest and a guitar with four strings, and he signed the articles with a mark, and the shipping master wrote Kalani beside the mark.”

“He has people somewhere.”

“He has people all over those islands, I would think. They will wait for this ship to come back to Honolulu in the spring, and he will not be on her, and nobody will come up the beach and tell them why.” He laid the pen down across the paper.

“Somebody can carry word to them.”

“I can write to the shipping master,” he said. “He will put the letter on a nail in his office, and perhaps someone who cannot read will ask someone who can.”

“Then write that.”

“Write what, and to whom?” For the first time his voice came up off the floor. “Dear family of Kalani, he could sing, and he was afraid of nothing in the world except the cook, and he went back through that door for a boy from Cornwall he could hardly talk to?”

“Yes,” I said. “Write that.”

Hébert looked at me across the lamp. His eyes were wet and his face had not moved, and a man can stand on a deck a long time like that.

He wrote it. It took him a long time in his careful English, and when he was done he folded all three letters and sealed them with a candle end and set them on the corner of the desk in a row.

Then he took Lacroix's rule out of my hand, where it had been the whole time, and folded it shut.

“This goes to Lévis,” he said, “with the pipe.”

* * *

When I came up on deck the sun was down and the fog had come in through the Gate the way it does every evening of the world, rolling over the water like smoke from a fire nobody can find. The pumps had stopped. A watchman was going along the wharf with a lantern, and the lights of the city were coming on up the hills behind him one at a time, yellow and soft in the gray.

Émile was sitting on the hatch coaming where he had fallen asleep at the pump that morning, with the empty tin cups stacked in his lap. He looked up at me.

“You will go after it,” he said.

It was not a question, and I did not know what to tell him. I had no ship, the Dauphin was lying off Rincon Point with her shaft in two pieces, and the only men going after the thing with no name were the editors with their pencils.

“I don't have a ship,” I said.

“You will find one,” Émile said, with the certainty of fourteen. “You are the only one who measured.”

* * *

My boardinghouse was on Pacific Street, three flights up and twelve feet wide, kept by a Mrs. Coogan from Wexford who charged too much and fed you well enough that you did not argue. When I came in out of the fog she was waiting at the foot of the stairs with her arms folded and her chin up.

“There's a Navy man in the parlor,” she said. “He's sat there an hour drinking my tea and not saying what he wants, and if it's trouble, Mr. Land, you'll take it elsewhere.”

He was a lieutenant, young, in a blue coat buttoned all the way up, with his cap on his knee. He stood when I came in. He had a good handshake and a Virginia voice, and he looked at my wet trousers

and my sooted hands the way Ashby had looked at them, except that he did not mind.

"Lieutenant Marsh, United States steam frigate Susquehanna," he said. "We're fitting out to hunt the animal that has been striking ships in the Pacific, and Captain Creighton wants a harpooner aboard. We're told you're the best in San Francisco."

"Who told you?"

"A gentleman named Hébert sent a boy to the Navy office an hour ago." Marsh's mouth moved under his mustache. "The boy was most insistent."

I sat down in Mrs. Coogan's horsehair chair. I was tired all at once in a way the pump had not made me tired, all through, down into the long bones.

Marsh named the pay, and it was three times what the whalers were paying. He named the sailing date, the first week of October, and the frigate's speed and her guns and her coal. He told me Captain Creighton had made a study of the newspaper accounts and was confident the animal was a cephalopod of unusual size, or possibly a narwhal.

"It isn't," I said.

Marsh stopped.

"It isn't a squid and it isn't a narwhal," I said. "I spent three hours this afternoon in the forward hold of the Montréal with a lantern, and whatever hit her hit her square and pulled out clean."

"Clean," Marsh said.

"Then it lay off in the dark and waited while her men tried to stop the first hole," I said. "And then it came back and made a second hole twelve feet aft, at the same height to the inch."

"You're telling me you don't believe in the creature," Marsh said.

"No," I said. "I don't."

He turned his cap over on his knee. He was a sensible young man, and I watched him go over the thing in his head: the pay, the captain, the harpooner who did not believe in what the frigate was going out to hunt.

"Then why would you come?" he said.

I looked at the soot on the back of my hand. I had not washed it, and it still said seven feet four, and seven feet four, and forty-one.

I could have given him the pay, and it was a good reason. I could have given him the Dauphin and her shaft and her captain in his hotel, and that would have been true too, but neither of them was the one sitting in my chest like the smell of that hold.

"Because it came back for the second one," I said.

Marsh waited for more, and there was no more. After a while he took a paper out of his coat and unfolded it on Mrs. Coogan's table beside the teapot, and gave me his pencil, and I signed.

The World of 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea

Who's Who

The people of the voyage, as Ned Land comes to know them.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Ned Land	The narrator. A harpooner out of St. John's, Newfoundland, sent to sea at sixteen and thirty-eight years old in 1855. Six feet tall, a strong swimmer, and a man who counts everything: steps, crewmen, days. He wears a drilled coin on a cord at his chest and does not believe in sea monsters.
Pierre Aronnax	Professor of natural history at the Paris Museum, about fifty, author of eight books on marine biology. He sails on the Susquehanna sure the ship killer is a giant squid. Wonder is the strongest force in him.
Conseil	Aronnax's servant for eleven years. Flemish, from Ghent, about forty, with a face trained not to show what it thinks. He mends, he listens, and he notices what everyone else misses.
Skipper	Aronnax's English bulldog. He goes into the Pacific with the rest of them and treats every ocean afterward as adequate.
Captain Creighton	Commander of the steam frigate Susquehanna. A Tennessean of forty-two who runs a tight deck and believes what he reads in the newspapers.
Captain Nemo	Master of the Nautilus. North Indian, educated in Europe, in his forties, courteous and unreadable. He has named himself Nobody, keeps twelve thousand books at the bottom of the sea, and holds his prisoners with good food and perfect manners.
Lakara	The Nautilus's executive officer, who runs the ship day to day. Nemo found her at a card table in San Francisco in 1853. She is always at the end of the corridor before Ned arrives.
Wan	A Malay crewman, with Nemo since the early months of recruiting. He knows the engineering spaces as well as anyone aboard, and he quietly keeps Skipper's arrangements in order.
Rajan	The crewman Ned calls the Mechanic. He works the equipment room and the hull, wears a plain steel bracelet on his right wrist, and gives Skipper a treat every morning.
The crew	Men of many nations who chose the sea for good, speaking among themselves a language Ned never manages to place.

Hébert, Émile, Paul Lacroix, William Jory, Kalani, Mr. Ashby, Lieutenant Marsh and Mrs. Coogan appear only in this story.

Timeline

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
1833	At sixteen, Ned ships out of St. John's on the whaler Minerva under Captain Blythe.
Age nineteen	A man dies in front of Ned on the Minerva. Ned starts wearing the coin.
March 1841	The morning a man who will become Captain Nemo makes his list and decides to go into the ocean.
1842	He finds a volcanic island with a sea cave and a hidden channel, off the run between Sydney and Honolulu.
1847	Aronnax publishes his book on the deep-ocean fauna of the western Pacific. Nemo will own a copy and correct it in the margins.
Winter 1848	Ned's voyage below fifty degrees south, the trip he does not discuss.
About 1848	The Nautilus, built in pieces by forty-seven contractors on three continents and assembled in the island cave, goes to sea.
1853	Nemo, ashore in San Francisco for coffee and medicines, recruits Lakara.
Summer 1855	Ships come into port with their hulls staved in: three ships in four months, in three parts of the Pacific, the same wound every time.
September 1855	The Dauphin comes into San Francisco with a broken drive shaft and Ned goes ashore.
September 1855	**The events of *Twelve Feet Aft*: the Montréal comes in, and Ned goes below with a lantern.**
October 1855	The Susquehanna sails from San Francisco with Ned, Aronnax, Conseil and Skipper aboard.
November 1855	Ned sees running lights two hundred feet down. Four nights later comes the collision, and the Nautilus surfaces beside the men in the water.

The Nautilus, Deck by Deck

Pieced together from Ned's pacing, Aronnax's reports and Conseil's listening. Ned puts her at about four hundred and fifty feet long and forty in the beam. She runs on electricity, gives off no smoke, and is lit by steady white strips along the ceilings.

PART OF THE SHIP	WHAT IS THERE
Upper hull	The forward hatch the castaways came down through. A deck locker aft holding long-handled axes. A drainage fitting a swimmer can climb by. A bracket forward that holds a flagpole.

Bow observation room	The very bow, below the waterline. A curved glass panel cold at the frame and a wooden bench worn smooth in the middle, the only wood Ned finds aboard. It is the best listening post on the ship.
Forward drive compartment	Beyond the forward bulkhead at the end of the main corridor, one of the only two locked doors aboard.
Forward compartment	The chart table, the depth gauge and the speaking tube, where Nemo gives his orders.
Library	Forward, port side, past the second bulkhead. Twelve thousand volumes, with literature in seven languages, and a smell of leather, paper and stone.
Laboratory and greenhouse	Farther forward on the same corridor. Behind the laboratory, algae and one flowering plant grow under electric lights.
Specimen collection	Next to the laboratory, the last room before the drive compartment, organized by depth and by kind. It holds three specimens from below five hundred fathoms.
The locked room	Starboard, between the specimen collection and the drive compartment, behind a newer lock fitted after the ship was built. Only Nemo goes in.
Lakara's office	Starboard, midship. Standing outside its door you can hear footsteps from three directions at once.
Nemo's cabin	Amidships, starboard, behind an unmarked door. A portrait hangs on a hook on the starboard wall.
Main corridor	Runs the length of the ship, curving with the hull. Three bulkhead doors are never locked and never unwatched, and Ned counts about one hundred and ninety steps of walkable corridor.
Equipment room	Off the forward corridor. Self-contained dive suits with two hours of air, folded boats in racks, and a hatch lever on the port wall that takes four seconds to open.
The guests' room	Three bolted bunks, a bolted table, one lamp and an eighteen-inch porthole sealed with brass. The door has no lock, and a crewman stands outside it.
Corridor junction	About thirty feet from the guests' room, where a cross-corridor meets the main one. It carries sound from the forward section as if through a speaking tube.
Aft corridor and crew quarters	Lakara keeps Ned out of the aft corridor. Skipper goes where he likes and comes back smelling of fish.
Engineering space	Aft, at the lowest point of the ship, through a hatch that takes two men to work. The spare parts are kept on racks inside.
Aft hold	A small crewless submersible in a cradle, lowered on a cable to collect from the deep.
Hatches	Ned finds four: forward top, aft, the equipment room, and one in the port midship section he can only infer.

The Route as Ned Reckoned It

Days by Ned's count, positions by his best estimate from heading, water and time elapsed.

DAY	WATERS	WHAT HAPPENED THERE
1	Western Pacific, about 20° north, five hundred miles from land	Collision with the Susquehanna. Three men and a dog climb onto a warm steel hull and go below.
7	Pacific, running deep	Captain Nemo introduces himself and sets the terms.
12	Pacific	Aronnax sees the library and finds his own book in it, corrected.
23	A coral field on a volcanic shelf, about twenty fathoms	The first walk on the seafloor, two hours of air, Lakara thirty feet behind Ned.
44	Torres Strait	Aground on the southern reef. Ned's hand is on the hatch lever.
46	Open ocean, heading west-northwest	Ned reads a tidal wave in the water from the hull. The ship dives to ninety feet and rides it out.
48	The bottom, ninety fathoms	A sheared coupling pin, and Lakara goes below to fix it.
51	A pearl bay off Ceylon, Indian Ocean	A shark, a pearl diver, and a fistful of pearls.
70	Indian Ocean, thirty fathoms	Nemo takes Ned to the coral cemetery at night.
77 to 78	North Atlantic, in winter	Lakara's watch at the bow window, between one and three in the morning.
84	Atlantic	Aronnax comes back from the drowned land Nemo calls Atlantis.
85 to 97	South, twelve days	The water drops a degree every two days.
97	82° south, the southern ice	A black flag in the polar wind.
99	Beneath an ice shelf	Four hours of air, if the men keep calm.
Onward	North into the Pacific	The rest of the count is in the novel.

Ships of the Story

SHIP	WHAT SHE IS
Minerva	The whaler out of St. John's that took Ned to sea at sixteen.
Evangeline	A whaler out of Halifax, and a well-made ship by Ned's reckoning.
Dauphin	Ned's ship for four years, with an Ericsson caloric engine only he could service. She is laid up in San Francisco with a broken drive shaft.
Perière and **Montréal**	Two of the three ships hulled in the summer of 1855, each with a wound six feet wide that no reef or animal could have made.

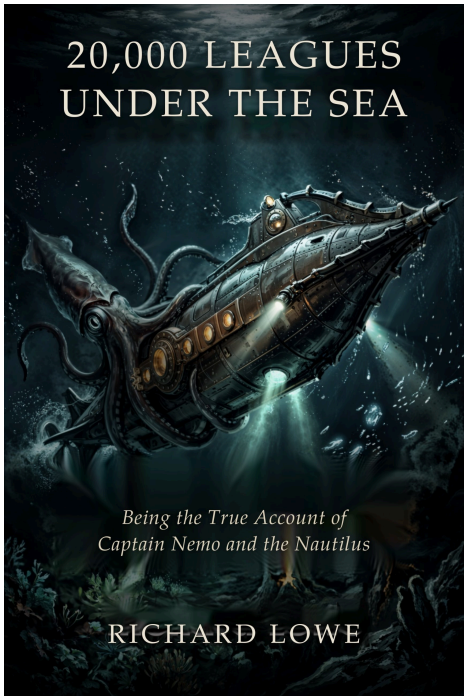
Susquehanna	A United States Navy side-wheel steam frigate out of the Philadelphia yard, good for fifteen knots and carrying two hundred and thirty men.
Nautilus	Nemo's ship. She needs nothing from the world above.

Words of the Sea

WORD	MEANING
Fathom	Six feet of depth. Ninety fathoms is five hundred and forty feet.
Knot	A speed of one nautical mile an hour.
League	An old measure of distance at sea, about three nautical miles.
Heave to	To set a ship's sails and helm so she lies nearly still in the water.
Fother	To stop a leak by hauling a sail under the hull so the sea presses it into the hole.
Shore	A timber wedged against a damaged hull from inside to hold it.
Strake	One continuous line of planking along a ship's side.
Frame	One of the oak ribs the planking is fastened to.
Keelson	The timber laid along the top of the keel inside the hold.
Brake	The long handle men work up and down to drive a ship's pump.
Lay	A whaleman's share of the voyage's profit, paid in place of wages.
Underwriter	The insurer who pays for a ship lost or damaged by a named peril of the sea.
The inventory expression	Ned's name for the look the Nautilus crew gives the prisoners, the look of men taking stock rather than seeing a person.
The two-knock pattern	Nemo's knock at the guests' door: two knocks, then a pause.
Acoustic positions	Three places aboard where the ship carries sound as if through a speaking tube. Conseil finds them.
Davan	A word Ned keeps hearing in the crew's language, said as if its meaning were obvious to everyone but him.

Read the Novel

Six weeks out of San Francisco, Ned Land is in the Pacific at night, climbing onto the warm steel hull of a ship that should not exist. 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea is his own account of what came next: the Nautilus, Captain Nemo, a woman who is always at the end of the corridor before he gets there, and a count of days he never stops keeping. He signed on to hunt a monster he did not believe in, and he was right not to.



20,000 Leagues Under the Sea:
Being the True Account of Captain Nemo and the Nautilus
The Adventures of Captain Nemo, book 1

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