

## The Ship

Holidays. Excitement, anticipation of new experiences - that's what it's all about. I remember hearing an old story of a cruise liner - one of those big multi-storey ships that you can go off on a long trip on, just enjoying all the experiences along the way. Well, with this ship - I can't remember what her name was - all seemed to be going fine, but then she started to develop some trouble, you know, things weren't going as well as they could have been, so they stopped and pulled into port. The captain, wanting to make sure all the passengers still had a good time while she was docked, sent them off to explore, saying he would sound the ship's foghorn when it was time to return. After the crew made some enquiries, the locals in the port said they knew just the man to come and sort out her problem, and they sent a message asking him to bring what he needed to the ship, and to meet the captain.

After what seemed like an age or two, an old man arrived, looking as though he'd had a lot of experience in life, some good and some bad, but he had the twinkle of fun in his eye that made you think twice about your ideas of how old or capable he was. He had a small bag with him, presumably with all the things he needed to sort out the problem inside. He walked slowly up the gangplank, taking his time to look at the outside of the ship, before arriving on deck. He spoke to one of the crew and said, "Please ask the captain to come outside - I need to speak with whoever is in charge of this problem". At first the captain was a little reluctant to come outside and meet the old man, but his curiosity got the better of him as the crew described him, and he duly came outside to meet the old man.

"Pleased to meet you." said the old man, offering his hand. The captain, without really thinking, reached out and took the old man's hand and shook it. Despite appearances, the old man's handshake was firm and strong, but not over-bearingly so. "Please, let me walk around her with you," the old man requested of the captain, "I need to experience what's going on here, outside first and then inside, before I can sort out the problem."

The captain and the old man walked around the upper decks first, as the old man looked around, listening to what he could hear, touching and feeling things as he went. The old man chatted to the captain about the ship, her history, where she'd sailed and a lot of other things that, at least to the captain, didn't seem to have a bearing on the problem at hand. Nonetheless, he patiently answered all the old man's questions and talked politely and honestly with him. Before long the old man turned to the captain and said, "OK, now it's time to go inside, first to the control room, then further on down to the engine room."

So they went to the control room, opened the door and went inside, closing the door behind them.

The light inside was somehow different, filtered through the control room windows. The sounds were different too - outside was muffled, seeming more and more distant, and the voices of the command crew could be heard clearly now as they ran the different parts of the ship. The thrum of the engine could be felt through the floor too. The captain and the old man stood, seeing the things inside, hearing the sounds around them, feeling the feelings of the ship and her engine as she rocked gently to and fro in the water, soothingly. And standing there, in the control room, with the old man, for the first time the captain began to notice things he'd not noticed before. Some he'd never really noticed, though he knew they were there, while other things he seemed to be noticing for the first time - you know, sometimes you've lived in the same place for a while, yet you still

notice new things, or you've known someone for years, yet they can still surprise you with things about them that you never knew they knew, or that you never knew they were capable of before now.

"I'd like to go deeper inside the ship now." said the old man, so the captain opened the large door in the back of the control room and let the old man through, carefully closing the door behind them.

On the other side was a staircase that led down to the lower decks, and the sounds and throb of the engine were even more apparent as they descended the first flights of stairs. Strangely, the old man seemed to know where he was going, always observing things as they walked down, looking around, listening to the sounds, and feeling as they went further and further down, and so the Captain followed.

"You see," the old man said, to no-one in particular, "the thing with a ship is, no matter how old or young she is, they're all different - even though you might think she's like others, they're really all different. No two ships have had exactly the same people build her in exactly the same way, and no two ships have been sailed in exactly the same way by the same captain through the same seas in the same weather. So you need to understand that, even though it may seem like she has the same problem as another ship, chances are that the cause is different - you can't assume anything. All you can do is look at what she shows you, listen to what she tells you and pay attention to the rhythm of her engine and her motion in the water as she sits and as she sails."

The deeper they went, the more the sounds and feel of the engine became apparent, and again the captain began to notice things he hadn't noticed before - how the engine note changed every so often, even though she wasn't doing anything in particular, nuances and details in the quality of the vibrations that he'd not felt before. But then the captain realised he'd never really been this deep inside the ship before either, despite having been her captain since the ship was first launched.

When they came to the engine room, to the captain's surprise, the old man carried on walking right through, still looking around, listening to the sounds, and touching and feeling as he went. On the far side of the engine room was another large door, and the old man waited as the captain creaked opened the heavy door and they both stepped through.

They were in the boiler room - where all the power for the whole ship comes from - not just the power for the engine, to move the ship forwards but, thanks to the steam turbines that the boiler drives, all the ship's heating, the lighting - everything that she and her crew use on a daily basis to live. The coal for the boiler was piled high all around the room, along with what looked like huge piles of old bits of junk - broken chairs, empty cartons and boxes, paper waste and other detritus from the passengers, crew and visitors to the ship along her journey. Several members of the crew were occupied in continuously feeding shovels-full of junk and coal into the open mouth of the firebox, keeping the fire for the boiler alight.

The old man proceeded to talk to the various members of the crew, though quite what he was talking about and what he was saying, the captain couldn't make out over the noise of the engine and the boiler. And then the old man stopped, and then walked over to a small valve, tucked away out of sight near the bottom of the firebox. He bent down and, reaching into the bag that he'd brought with him, he took out a

small hammer and gave the valve a gentle tap and then a small tweak with his hand.

The effect of that single, gentle act was astounding - the fire in the firebox roared high and burned brighter than any of the crew ever remembered seeing it burn, so much so that they all took a step back and stopped shovelling. The old man walked over to the firebox door and carefully closed it - none of the crew ever remembered it being closed before either. The old man then spoke to one of the crew, motioning towards the piles of rubbish and waste that they had been using for fuel and shaking his head, then motioning towards the coal and nodding his head and, though the captain couldn't hear what the old man had actually said, it seemed that all the crew understood. Then, just a few moments later, the thrum of the engine suddenly changed - the note became smoother and more stable. What had been quite a noticeable thump-thump through the floor changed to a more continuous and quieter hum. The crew looked at the old man, at the captain and at each other, surprised at first, but then they seemed to relax, realising that perhaps this was in fact the way it was always supposed to have been.

The old man put away his hammer, picked up his bag and left, followed closely by the captain. As they closed the door to the boiler room behind them, the captain asked, "Was that it? Just a little tap on a simple valve?" "Ah!" replied the old man, "A simple valve, yes, but an all important one nonetheless. It's a common problem. The valve gets set early in the ship's life, sometimes even before she's set sail. And often it's set slightly tight to limit the speed and power of the engine while it wears in, so to speak. However, that's not how it's supposed to stay, though often it's neglected and left like that, so even though the engine has worn in and become capable of more and more, sooner or later you find that not enough air is getting into the firebox to burn the coal properly and she finds herself feeling somehow held back. That's why the crew has been constantly feeding stuff in day and night to keep the fire burning and the engine running. The irony is that when you over-fill the firebox, you smother the fire. Oh, and although using rubbish for fuel might seem like a good idea, the soot clogs up the chimney and stops the flue gases escaping, and the fire can get smothered again. Now, with the valve set where it should be, and by keeping the door closed between the times you add coal, and by giving the coal time to breathe and to burn, the fire will burn hotter, more efficiently, and you'll need less fuel." The captain thought for a moment or two, then said, "...and that means that since we carry less, we can go faster, and further - experience more, see more places." "And," said the old man, "her engine will last longer since she's running smoother, and you and the crew and all the passengers can enjoy her for a long time to come."

The old man and the captain ascended the stairs again, and the captain couldn't help noticing the quieter, more pleasing note of the engine just humming away in the background. After a while, they reached the control room, and stepped inside, closing the door behind them. The command crew, who had also noticed the change in the feel of the ship and the sound of the engine, and the fact that the colour of the smoke from the funnel had changed from a sooty-stained grey to a clean, crisp white, rushed over to the captain and the old man to find out what had happened and to shake the old man's hand. "I'll leave you to explain things," the old man said as he and the captain stepped outside into the fresh air and warm sunshine once again. They both took a deep breath, and the captain noticed the absence of the stale smoky smell that normally lingered near the command deck. "Just remember," said the old man, with a smile on his face and that twinkle in his eye, "Her fire burns brighter now, so she'll expect you to push her that bit harder and faster and further - give her what she needs and she'll repay you a thousand times over."

Then he reached into his bag and took out the small hammer he'd tapped the valve with, "Just in case you need to give it a tap again," he said with a wink, handing the tool to the captain, who took it gratefully and smiled the same smile as the old man. The old man turned and walked across the deck, down the gangplank and off back into the town.

That evening the captain sounded the foghorn, and one by one the passengers returned to the ship, came onboard and went off to their cabins to sleep. None of them seemed to notice the change in the ship straight away, but the following morning many commented to the captain that they'd had their soundest night's sleep since they started their voyage. Some noticed the change in the engine note and the thrum of the engine through the deck and the colour of the smoke from the stack, and others noticed how the crew seemed more relaxed, as though they didn't have to work as hard to maintain the ship. Some even noticed the extra speed and agility as she sailed from place to place. There were a few passengers who complained that something wasn't quite the same, because there are always those few who don't like change, even for the better. And some passengers never consciously noticed the changes at all.

But the captain knew, and the crew knew, and the ship herself knew, and that was really all that mattered.

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