



Rudyard Kipling

**The Ship
That Found
Herself**

The Editors of New Word City



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RUDYARD KIPLING, THE LIFE

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It was her first voyage, and though she was but a cargo steamer of 2,500 tons, she was the very best of her kind, the outcome of 40 years of experiments and improvements in framework and machinery; and her designers and owner thought as much of her as though she had been the *Lucania*. Anyone can make a floating hotel that will pay expenses, if he puts enough money into the saloon, and charges for private baths, suites of rooms, and such like; but in these days of competition and low freights every square inch of a cargo-boat must be built for cheapness, great hold capacity, and a certain steady speed. This boat was, perhaps, 240 feet long and 32 feet wide, with arrangements that enabled her to carry cattle on her main and sheep on her upper deck if she wanted to; but her great glory was the amount of cargo that she could store away in her holds. Her owners - they were a very well known Scotch firm - came round with her from the north, where she had been launched and christened and fitted, to [Liverpool](#), where she was to take cargo for New York; and the owner's daughter, Miss Frazier, went to and fro on the clean decks, admiring the new paint and the brass work, and the patent winches, and particularly the strong, straight bow, over which she had cracked a bottle of champagne when she named the steamer the *Dimbula*. It was a beautiful September afternoon, and the boat in all her newness - she was painted lead-color with a red funnel - looked very fine indeed. Her house-flag was flying, and her whistle from time to time acknowledged the salutes of friendly boats, who saw that she was new to the High and Narrow Seas and wished to make her welcome.

"And now," said Miss Frazier, delightedly, to the captain, "she's a real ship, isn't she? It seems only the other day father gave the order for her, and now - and now - isn't she a beauty!" The girl was proud of the firm, and talked as though she were the controlling partner.

"Oh, she's no so bad," the skipper replied cautiously. "But I'm sayin' that it takes more than christenin' to mak' a ship. In the nature o' things, Miss Frazier, if ye follow me, she's just irons and rivets and plates put into the form of a ship. She has to find herself yet."

“I thought father said she was exceptionally well found.”

“So she is, said the skipper, with a laugh. “But it’s this way wi’ ships, Miss Frazier. She’s all here, but the parts of her have not learned to work together yet. They’ve had no chance.”

“The engines are working beautifully. I can hear them.”

“Yes, indeed. But there’s more than engines to a ship. Every inch of her, ye’ll understand, has to be livened up and made to work wi’ its neighbor - sweetenin’ her, we call it, technically.”

“And how will you do it?” the girl asked.

“We can no more than drive and steer her and so forth; but if we have rough weather this trip - it’s likely - she’ll learn the rest by heart! For a ship, ye’ll o’bairve, Miss Frazier, is in no sense a reegid body closed at both ends. She’s a highly complex structure o’ various an’ conflictin’ strains, wi’ tissues that must give an’ tak’ accordin’ to her personal modulus of elastecity.” Mr. Buchanan, the chief engineer, was coming towards them. “I’m sayin’ to Miss Frazier, here, that our little *Dimbula* has to be sweetened yet, and nothin’ but a gale will do it. How’s all wi’ your engines, Buck?”

“Well enough - true by plumb an’ rule, o’ course; but there’s no spontaneecity yet.” He turned to the girl. “Take my word, Miss Frazier, and maybe ye’ll comprehend later; even after a pretty girl’s christened a ship it does not follow that there’s such a thing as a ship under the men that work her.”

“I was sayin’ the very same, Mr. Buchanan,” the skipper interrupted.

“That’s more metaphysical than I can follow,” said Miss Frazier, laughing.

“Why so? Ye’re good Scotch, an’ - I knew your mother’s father, he was fra’ [Dumfries](#) - ye’ve a vested right in metaphesics, Miss Frazier, just as ye have in the *Dimbula*,” the engineer said.

“Eh, well, we must go down to the deep waters, an’ earn Miss Frazier her deevideends. Will you not come to my cabin for tea?” said the skipper. “We’ll be in dock the night, and when you’re goin’ back to Glasgie ye can think of us loadin’ her down an’ drivin’ her forth - all for your sake.”

In the next few days they stowed some 4,000 tons dead-weight into the *Dimbula*, and took her out from Liverpool. As soon as she met the lift of the open water, she naturally began to talk. If you lay your ear to the side of the cabin, the next time you are in a steamer, you will hear hundreds of little voices in every direction, thrilling and buzzing, and whispering and popping, and gurgling and sobbing and squeaking exactly like a telephone in a thunderstorm. Wooden ships shriek and growl and grunt, but iron vessels throb and quiver through all their hundreds of ribs and thousands of rivets. The *Dimbula* was very strongly built, and every piece of her had a letter or a number, or both, to describe it; and every piece had been hammered, or forged, or rolled, or punched by man, and had lived in the roar and rattle of the shipyard for months. Therefore, every piece had its own separate voice, in exact proportion to the amount of trouble spent upon it. Cast iron, as a rule, says very little; but mild steel plates and wrought iron, and ribs and beams that have been much bent and welded and riveted, talk continuously. Their conversation, of course, is not half as wise as our human talk, because they are all, though they do not know it, bound down one to the other in a black darkness, where they cannot tell what is happening near them, nor what will overtake them next.

As soon as she had cleared the Irish coast, a sullen, grey-headed old wave of the Atlantic climbed leisurely over her straight bows, and sat down on the steam [capstan](#) used for hauling up the anchor. Now the capstan and the engine that drove it had been newly painted red and green; besides which, nobody likes being ducked.

“Don’t you do that again,” the capstan sputtered through the teeth of his cogs. “Hi! Where’s the fellow gone?”

The wave had slouched overside with a plop and a chuckle; but “Plenty more where he came from,” said a brother wave, and went through and over the capstan, who was bolted firmly to an iron plate on the iron deck-beams below.

“Can’t you keep still up there?” said the deckbeams. “What’s the matter with you? One minute you weigh twice as much as you ought to, and the next you don’t!”

“It isn’t my fault,” said the capstan. “There’s a green brute outside that comes and hits me on the head.”