

CHAPTER I

A Cold Collation Is Served

You can't beat Saturday as a launching-day. Shipyard workers have been known to celebrate a successful launching, not wisely but too well, and having the affair on a Saturday enables them to sober up on their own time. All of this may or may not have been why Saturday, November 14, 1863, was chosen for that festive day at the yard of Messrs. Gibson, McDonald & Arnold at Ramsey, in the far-off Isle of Man.

On the stocks was the naked hull of an iron ship, awaiting the dollop of baptismal wine across her forefoot. Among the flags which dressed the sleek iron hull, three stood out smartly -- the British Union Jack, the colors of the Port of Liverpool and, for reasons which are not entirely clear, the Stars and Stripes. And in this pretty gesture there was something prophetic, for it was the American flag, last of the three under which she was fated to sail, which was to carry her, re-named Star of India, to the end of her first century afloat.

Above the platform which had been rigged for the launching-party, her figurehead gazed serenely over the crowd; it was a buxom figure of the Greek goddess Euterpe, fresh from the skillfully plied chisels of George Sutherland, the Glasgow carver. That was to be her name -- Euterpe -- and that figurehead was to scan the rolling greybacks of the Roaring Forties, the pack-ice of the Bering Sea, and the waterfronts of, to name but a few, Calcutta, Melbourne, Wellington and San Francisco. Most of that figurehead is intact today, and whether the few missing bits were lost to a nameless Spanish brig off the Welsh coast, to the steamship Canadian in Glasgow or to the plodding stern-wheeler Port Bragg in San Francisco is not a matter of record.

