

JULES VERNES' 'A FLOATING CITY'



In this early extract from the novel, the narrator-hero walks around the ss *Great Eastern* as it is prepared for its transatlantic voyage.

The deck was still nothing but an immense timber-yard given up to an army of workmen. I could not believe I was on board a ship. Several thousand men – workmen, crew, officers, lookers on – mingled and jostled together, some on deck, others in the engine-room; here pacing the upper decks, there scattered in the rigging, all in an indescribable pell-mell. Here fly-wheel cranes were raising enormous pieces of cast-iron, there heavy joists were hoisted by steam-windlasses; above the engine-rooms an iron cylinder, a metal shaft in fact, was balanced. At the bows, the yards creaked as the sails were hoisted; at the stern rose a scaffolding which, doubtless, concealed some building in construction. Building, fixing, carpentering, rigging, and painting, were going on in the midst of the greatest disorder.

... A black mire – that British mud which is so rarely absent from the pavements of English towns – covered the deck of the steamship; dirty gutters wound here and there. One might have thought oneself in the worst part of Upper Thames Street, near London Bridge. I walked on, following the upper decks towards the stern. Stretching on either side were two wide streets, or rather boulevards, filled with a compact crowd; thus walking, I came to the centre of the steamship between the paddles, united by a double set of bridges.

... I continued my walk till I reached the bows, where the carpenters were finishing the decoration of a large saloon called the 'smoking-room', a magnificent apartment with fourteen windows; the ceiling white and gold, and wainscoted with lemon-coloured panels. Then, after having crossed a small triangular space at the bows, I reached the stem, which descends perpendicularly into the water.

Turning round from this extreme point, I saw through an opening in the mists, the stern of the Great Eastern at a distance of over two hundred yards.



Illustrations of Brunel's *Great Eastern*.

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