

CHAPTER VI

Eight Bells

The moon must be monstrous coy, or some things fall out opportunely, or else almanacs are consulted by nocturnal adventurers; but so it is, that when Cynthia shows a round and chubby disk, few daring deeds are done. Though true it may be, that of moonlight nights, jewelers' caskets and maidens' hearts have been burglariously broken into--and rifled, for aught Copernicus can tell.

The gentle planet was in her final quarter, and upon her slender horn I hung my hopes of withdrawing from the ship undetected.

Now, making a tranquil passage across the ocean, we kept at this time what are called among whalemens "boatscrew-watches." That is, instead of the sailors being divided at night into two bands, alternately on deck every four hours, there were four watches, each composed of a boat's crew, the "headsman" (always one of the mates) excepted. To the officers, this plan gives uninterrupted repose--"all-night-in," as they call it, and of course greatly lightens the duties of the crew.

The harpooneers head the boats' crews, and are responsible for the ship during the continuance of their watches.

Now, my Viking being a stalwart seaman, pulled the midship oar of the

boat of which I was bowsman. Hence, we were in the same watch; to which, also, three others belonged, including Mark, the harpooner. One of these seamen, however, being an invalid, there were only two left for us to manage.

Voyaging in these seas, you may glide along for weeks without starting tack or sheet, hardly moving the helm a spoke, so mild and constant are the Trades. At night, the watch seldom trouble themselves with keeping much of a look-out; especially, as a strange sail is almost a prodigy in these lonely waters. In some ships, for weeks in and weeks out, you are puzzled to tell when your nightly turn on deck really comes round; so little heed is given to the standing of watches, where in the license of presumed safety, nearly every one nods without fear.

But remiss as you may be in the boats-crew-watch of a heedless whaleman, the man who heads it is bound to maintain his post on the quarter-deck until regularly relieved. Yet drowsiness being incidental to all natures, even to Napoleon, beside his own sentry napping in the snowy bivouac; so, often, in snowy moonlight, or ebon eclipse, dozed Mark, our harpooneer. Lethe be his portion this blessed night, thought I, as during the morning which preceded our enterprise, I eyed the man who might possibly cross my plans.

But let me come closer to this part of my story. During what are called at sea the "dog-watches" (between four o'clock and eight in

the evening), sailors are quite lively and frolicsome; their spirits even flow far into the first of the long "night-watches;" but upon its expiration at "eight bells" (midnight), silence begins to reign; if you hear a voice it is no cherub's: all exclamations are oaths.

At eight bells, the mariners on deck, now relieved from their cares, crawl out from their sleepy retreats in old monkey jackets, or coils of rigging, and he to their hammocks, almost without interrupting their dreams: while the sluggards below lazily drag themselves up the ladder to resume their slumbers in the open air.

For these reasons then, the moonless sea midnight was just the time to escape. Hence, we suffered a whole day to pass unemployed; waiting for the night, when the star board-quarter-boats'-watch, to which we belonged, would be summoned on deck at the eventful eight of the bell.

But twenty-four hours soon glide away; and "Starboleens ahoy; eight bells there below;" at last started me from a troubled doze.

I sprang from my hammock, and would have lighted my pipe. But the forecastle lamp had gone out. An old sea-dog was talking about sharks in his sleep. Jarl and our solitary watch-mate were groping their way into their trowsers. And little was heard but the humming of the still sails aloft; the dash of the waves against the bow; and the deep breathing of the dreaming sailors around.