

IX. THE SAILORS BECOMING A LITTLE SOCIAL, REDBURN CONVERSES WITH THEM

The latter part of this first long watch that we stood was very pleasant, so far as the weather was concerned. From being rather cloudy, it became a soft moonlight; and the stars peeped out, plain enough to count one by one; and there was a fine steady breeze; and it was not very cold; and we were going through the water almost as smooth as a sled sliding down hill. And what was still better, the wind held so steady, that there was little running aloft, little pulling ropes, and scarcely any thing disagreeable of that kind.

The chief mate kept walking up and down the quarter-deck, with a lighted long-nine cigar in his mouth by way of a torch; and spoke but few words to us the whole watch. He must have had a good deal of thinking to attend to, which hi truth is the case with most seamen the first night out of port, especially when they have thrown away their money in foolish dissipation, and got very sick into the bargain. For when ashore, many of these sea-officers are as wild and reckless in their way, as the sailors they command.

While I stood watching the red cigar-end promenading up and down, the mate suddenly stopped and gave an order, and the men sprang to obey it. It was not much, only something about hoisting one of the sails a little higher up on the mast. The men took hold of the rope, and began pulling

upon it; the foremost man of all setting up a song with no words to it, only a strange musical rise and fall of notes. In the dark night, and far out upon the lonely sea, it sounded wild enough, and made me feel as I had sometimes felt, when in a twilight room a cousin of mine, with black eyes, used to play some old German airs on the piano. I almost looked round for goblins, and felt just a little bit afraid. But I soon got used to this singing; for the sailors never touched a rope without it. Sometimes, when no one happened to strike up, and the pulling, whatever it might be, did not seem to be getting forward very well, the mate would always say, "Come, men, can't any of you sing? Sing now, and raise the dead." And then some one of them would begin, and if every man's arms were as much relieved as mine by the song, and he could pull as much better as I did, with such a cheering accompaniment, I am sure the song was well worth the breath expended on it. It is a great thing in a sailor to know how to sing well, for he gets a great name by it from the officers, and a good deal of popularity among his shipmates. Some sea-captains, before shipping a man, always ask him whether he can sing out at a rope.

During the greater part of the watch, the sailors sat on the windlass and told long stories of their adventures by sea and land, and talked about Gibraltar, and Canton, and Valparaiso, and Bombay, just as you and I would about Peck Slip and the Bowery. Every man of them almost was a volume of Voyages and Travels round the World. And what most struck me was that like books of voyages they often contradicted each other, and would fall into long and violent disputes about who was keeping the Foul

Anchor tavern in Portsmouth at such a time; or whether the King of Canton lived or did not live in Persia; or whether the bar-maid of a particular house in Hamburg had black eyes or blue eyes; with many other mooted points of that sort.

At last one of them went below and brought up a box of cigars from his chest, for some sailors always provide little delicacies of that kind, to break off the first shock of the salt water after laying idle ashore; and also by way of tapering off, as I mentioned a little while ago. But I wondered that they never carried any pies and tarts to sea with them, instead of spirits and cigars.

Ned, for that was the man's name, split open the box with a blow of his fist, and then handed it round along the windlass, just like a waiter at a party, every one helping himself. But I was a member of an Anti-Smoking Society that had been organized in our village by the Principal of the Sunday School there, in conjunction with the Temperance Association. So I did not smoke any then, though I did afterward upon the voyage, I am sorry to say. Notwithstanding I declined; with a good deal of unnecessary swearing, Ned assured me that the cigars were real genuine Havannas; for he had been in Havanna, he said, and had them made there under his own eye. According to his account, he was very particular about his cigars and other things, and never made any importations, for they were unsafe; but always made a voyage himself direct to the place where any foreign thing was to be had that he wanted. He went to Havre for his woolen shirts, to Panama for his hats,

to China for his silk handkerchiefs, and direct to Calcutta for his cheroots; and as a great joker in the watch used to say, no doubt he would at last have occasion to go to Russia for his halter; the wit of which saying was presumed to be in the fact, that the Russian hemp is the best; though that is not wit which needs explaining.

By dint of the spirits which, besides stimulating my fainting strength, united with the cool air of the sea to give me an appetite for our hard biscuit; and also by dint of walking briskly up and down the deck before the windlass, I had now recovered in good part from my sickness, and finding the sailors all very pleasant and sociable, at least among themselves, and seated smoking together like old cronies, and nothing on earth to do but sit the watch out, I began to think that they were a pretty good set of fellows after all, barring their swearing and another ugly way of talking they had; and I thought I had misconceived their true characters; for at the outset I had deemed them such a parcel of wicked hard-hearted rascals that it would be a severe affliction to associate with them.

Yes, I now began to look on them with a sort of incipient love; but more with an eye of pity and compassion, as men of naturally gentle and kind dispositions, whom only hardships, and neglect, and ill-usage had made outcasts from good society; and not as villains who loved wickedness for the sake of it, and would persist in wickedness, even in Paradise, if they ever got there. And I called to mind a sermon I had once heard in a church in behalf of sailors, when the preacher called them strayed lambs

from the fold, and compared them to poor lost children, babes in the wood, orphans without fathers or mothers.

And I remembered reading in a magazine, called the Sailors' Magazine, with a sea-blue cover, and a ship painted on the back, about pious seamen who never swore, and paid over all their wages to the poor heathen in India; and how that when they were too old to go to sea, these pious old sailors found a delightful home for life in the Hospital, where they had nothing to do, but prepare themselves for their latter end. And I wondered whether there were any such good sailors among my ship-mates; and observing that one of them laid on deck apart from the rest, I thought to be sure he must be one of them: so I did not disturb his devotions: but I was afterward shocked at discovering that he was only fast asleep, with one of the brown jugs by his side.

I forgot to mention by the way, that every once in a while, the men went into one corner, where the chief mate could not see them, to take a "swig at the halyards," as they called it; and this swigging at the halyards it was, that enabled them "to taper off" handsomely, and no doubt it was this, too, that had something to do with making them so pleasant and sociable that night, for they were seldom so pleasant and sociable afterward, and never treated me so kindly as they did then. Yet this might have been owing to my being something of a stranger to them, then; and our being just out of port. But that very night they turned about, and taught me a bitter lesson; but all in good time.

I have said, that seeing how agreeable they were getting, and how friendly their manner was, I began to feel a sort of compassion for them, grounded on their sad conditions as amiable outcasts; and feeling so warm an interest in them, and being full of pity, and being truly desirous of benefiting them to the best of my poor powers, for I knew they were but poor indeed, I made bold to ask one of them, whether he was ever in the habit of going to church, when he was ashore, or dropping in at the Floating Chapel I had seen lying off the dock in the East River at New York; and whether he would think it too much of a liberty, if I asked him, if he had any good books in his chest. He stared a little at first, but marking what good language I used, seeing my civil bearing toward him, he seemed for a moment to be filled with a certain involuntary respect for me, and answered, that he had been to church once, some ten or twelve years before, in London, and on a week-day had helped to move the Floating Chapel round the Battery, from the North River; and that was the only time he had seen it. For his books, he said he did not know what I meant by good books; but if I wanted the Newgate Calendar, and Pirate's Own, he could lend them to me.

When I heard this poor sailor talk in this manner, showing so plainly his ignorance and absence of proper views of religion, I pitied him more and more, and contrasting my own situation with his, I was grateful that I was different from him; and I thought how pleasant it was, to feel wiser and better than he could feel; though I was willing to confess to myself, that it was not altogether my own good endeavors, so much as my education, which I had received from others, that had made me the

upright and sensible boy I at that time thought myself to be. And it was now, that I began to feel a good degree of complacency and satisfaction in surveying my own character; for, before this, I had previously associated with persons of a very discreet life, so that there was little opportunity to magnify myself, by comparing myself with my neighbors.

Thinking that my superiority to him in a moral way might sit uneasily upon this sailor, I thought it would soften the matter down by giving him a chance to show his own superiority to me, in a minor thing; for I was far from being vain and conceited.

Having observed that at certain intervals a little bell was rung on the quarter-deck by the man at the wheel; and that as soon as it was heard, some one of the sailors forward struck a large bell which hung on the fore-castle; and having observed that how many times soever the man astern rang his bell, the man forward struck his--tit for tat,--I inquired of this Floating Chapel sailor, what all this ringing meant; and whether, as the big bell hung right over the scuttle that went down to the place where the watch below were sleeping, such a ringing every little while would not tend to disturb them and beget unpleasant dreams; and in asking these questions I was particular to address him in a civil and condescending way, so as to show him very plainly that I did not deem myself one whit better than he was, that is, taking all things together, and not going into particulars. But to my great surprise and mortification, he in the rudest land of manner laughed aloud in my face,

and called me a "Jimmy Dux," though that was not my real name, and he must have known it; and also the "son of a farmer," though as I have previously related, my father was a great merchant and French importer in Broad-street in New York. And then he began to laugh and joke about me, with the other sailors, till they all got round me, and if I had not felt so terribly angry, I should certainly have felt very much like a fool. But my being so angry prevented me from feeling foolish, which is very lucky for people in a passion.