

XXV. QUARTER-DECK FURNITURE

Though, for reasons hinted at above, they would not let me steer, I contented myself with learning the compass, a graphic facsimile of which I drew on a blank leaf of the "Wealth of Nations," and studied it every morning, like the multiplication table.

I liked to peep in at the binnacle, and watch the needle; and I wondered how it was that it pointed north, rather than south or west; for I do not know that any reason can be given why it points in the precise direction it does. One would think, too, that, as since the beginning of the world almost, the tide of emigration has been setting west, the needle would point that way; whereas, it is forever pointing its fixed fore-finger toward the Pole, where there are few inducements to attract a sailor, unless it be plenty of ice for mint-juleps.

Our binnacle, by the way, the place that holds a ship's compasses, deserves a word of mention. It was a little house, about the bigness of a common bird-cage, with sliding panel doors, and two drawing-rooms within, and constantly perched upon a stand, right in front of the helm. It had two chimney stacks to carry off the smoke of the lamp that burned in it by night.

It was painted green, and on two sides had Venetian blinds; and on one side two glazed sashes; so that it looked like a cool little summer

retreat, a snug bit of an arbor at the end of a shady garden lane. Had I been the captain, I would have planted vines in boxes, and placed them so as to overrun this binnacle; or I would have put canary-birds within; and so made an aviary of it. It is surprising what a different air may be imparted to the meanest thing by the dainty hand of taste. Nor must I omit the helm itself, which was one of a new construction, and a particular favorite of the captain. It was a complex system of cogs and wheels and spindles, all of polished brass, and looked something like a printing-press, or power-loom. The sailors, however, did not like it much, owing to the casualties that happened to their imprudent fingers, by catching in among the cogs and other intricate contrivances. Then, sometimes in a calm, when the sudden swells would lift the ship, the helm would fetch a lurch, and send the helmsman revolving round like Ixion, often seriously hurting him; a sort of breaking on the wheel.

The harness-cask, also, a sort of sea side-board, or rather meat-safe, in which a week's allowance of salt pork and beef is kept, deserves being chronicled. It formed part of the standing furniture of the quarter-deck. Of an oval shape, it was banded round with hoops all silver-gilt, with gilded bands secured with gilded screws, and a gilded padlock, richly chased. This formed the captain's smoking-seat, where he would perch himself of an afternoon, a tasseled Chinese cap upon his head, and a fragrant Havanna between his white and canine-looking teeth. He took much solid comfort, Captain Riga.

Then the magnificent capstan! The pride and glory of the whole ship's

company, the constant care and dandled darling of the cook, whose duty it was to keep it polished like a teapot; and it was an object of distant admiration to the steerage passengers. Like a parlor center-table, it stood full in the middle of the quarter-deck, radiant with brazen stars, and variegated with diamond-shaped veneerings of mahogany and satin wood. This was the captain's lounge, and the chief mate's secretary, in the bar-holes keeping paper and pencil for memorandums.

I might proceed and speak of the booby-hatch, used as a sort of settee by the officers, and the fife-rail round the mainmast, inclosing a little ark of canvas, painted green, where a small white dog with a blue ribbon round his neck, belonging to the dock-master's daughter, used to take his morning walks, and air himself in this small edition of the New York Bowling-Green.