XXVI. A SAILOR A JACK OF ALL TRADES

As I began to learn my sailor duties, and show activity in running aloft, the men, I observed, treated me with a little more consideration, though not at all relaxing in a certain air of professional superiority. For the mere knowing of the names of the ropes, and familiarizing yourself with their places, so that you can lay hold of them in the darkest night; and the loosing and furling of the canvas, and reefing topsails, and hauling braces; all this, though of course forming an indispensable part of a seaman's vocation, and the business in which he is principally engaged; yet these are things which a beginner of ordinary capacity soon masters, and which are far inferior to many other matters familiar to an "able seaman."

What did I know, for instance, about striking a top-gallant-mast, and sending it down on deck in a gale of wind? Could I have turned in a dead-eye, or in the approved nautical style have clapt a seizing on the main-stay? What did I know of "passing a gammoning," "reiving a Burton," "strapping a shoe-block," "clearing a foul hawse," and innumerable other intricacies?

The business of a thorough-bred sailor is a special calling, as much of a regular trade as a carpenter's or locksmith's. Indeed, it requires considerably more adroitness, and far more versatility of talent.

In the English merchant service boys serve a long apprenticeship to the sea, of seven years. Most of them first enter the Newcastle colliers, where they see a great deal of severe coasting service. In an old copy of the Letters of Junius, belonging to my father, I remember reading, that coal to supply the city of London could be dug at Blackheath, and sold for one half the price that the people of London then paid for it; but the Government would not suffer the mines to be opened, as it would destroy the great nursery for British seamen.

A thorough sailor must understand much of other avocations. He must be a bit of an embroiderer, to work fanciful collars of hempen lace about the shrouds; he must be something of a weaver, to weave mats of rope-yarns for lashings to the boats; he must have a touch of millinery, so as to tie graceful bows and knots, such as Matthew Walker's roses, and Turk's heads; he must be a bit of a musician, in order to sing out at the halyards; he must be a sort of jeweler, to set dead-eyes in the standing rigging; he must be a carpenter, to enable him to make a jurymast out of a yard in case of emergency; he must be a sempstress, to darn and mend the sails; a ropemaker, to twist marline and Spanish foxes; a blacksmith, to make hooks and thimbles for the blocks: in short, he must be a sort of Jack of all trades, in order to master his own. And this, perhaps, in a greater or less degree, is pretty much the case with all things else; for you know nothing till you know all; which is the reason we never know anything.

A sailor, also, in working at the rigging, uses special tools peculiar

to his calling--fids, serving-mallets, toggles, prickers, marlingspikes, palms, heavers, and many more. The smaller sort he generally carries with him from ship to ship in a sort of canvas reticule.

The estimation in which a ship's crew hold the knowledge of such accomplishments as these, is expressed in the phrase they apply to one who is a clever practitioner. To distinguish such a mariner from those who merely "hand, reef, and steer," that is, run aloft, furl sails, haul ropes, and stand at the wheel, they say he is "a sailor-man" which means that he not only knows how to reef a topsail, but is an artist in the rigging.

Now, alas! I had no chance given me to become initiated in this art and mystery; no further, at least, than by looking on, and watching how that these things might be done as well as others, the reason was, that I had only shipped for this one voyage in the Highlander, a short voyage too; and it was not worth while to teach me any thing, the fruit of which instructions could be only reaped by the next ship I might belong to. All they wanted of me was the good-will of my muscles, and the use of my backbone--comparatively small though it was at that time--by way of a lever, for the above-mentioned artists to employ when wanted. Accordingly, when any embroidery was going on in the rigging, I was set to the most inglorious avocations; as in the merchant service it is a religious maxim to keep the hands always employed at something or other, never mind what, during their watch on deck.

Often furnished with a club-hammer, they swung me over the bows in a bowline, to pound the rust off the anchor: a most monotonous, and to me a most uncongenial and irksome business. There was a remarkable fatality attending the various hammers I carried over with me. Somehow they would drop out of my hands into the sea. But the supply of reserved hammers seemed unlimited: also the blessings and benedictions I received from the chief mate for my clumsiness.

At other times, they set me to picking oakum, like a convict, which hempen business disagreeably obtruded thoughts of halters and the gallows; or whittling belaying-pins, like a Down-Easter.

However, I endeavored to bear it all like a young philosopher, and whiled away the tedious hours by gazing through a port-hole while my hands were plying, and repeating Lord Byron's Address to the Ocean, which I had often spouted on the stage at the High School at home.

Yes, I got used to all these matters, and took most things coolly, in the spirit of Seneca and the stoics.

All but the "turning out" or rising from your berth when the watch was called at night--that I never fancied. It was a sort of acquaintance, which the more I cultivated, the more I shrunk from; a thankless, miserable business, truly.

Consider that after walking the deck for four full hours, you go below

to sleep: and while thus innocently employed in reposing your wearied limbs, you are started up--it seems but the next instant after closing your lids--and hurried on deck again, into the same disagreeably dark and, perhaps, stormy night, from which you descended into the forecastle.

The previous interval of slumber was almost wholly lost to me; at least the golden opportunity could not be appreciated: for though it is usually deemed a comfortable thing to be asleep, yet at the time no one is conscious that he is so enjoying himself. Therefore I made a little private arrangement with the Lancashire lad, who was in the other watch, just to step below occasionally, and shake me, and whisper in my ear--"Watch below, Buttons; watch below"--which pleasantly reminded me of the delightful fact. Then I would turn over on my side, and take another nap; and in this manner I enjoyed several complete watches in my bunk to the other sailor's one. I recommend the plan to all landsmen contemplating a voyage to sea.

But notwithstanding all these contrivances, the dreadful sequel could not be avoided. Eight bells would at last be struck, and the men on deck, exhilarated by the prospect of changing places with us, would call the watch in a most provoking but mirthful and facetious style.

As thus:--

"Starboard watch, ahoy! eight bells there, below! Tumble up, my lively

hearties; steamboat alongside waiting for your trunks: bear a hand, bear a hand with your knee-buckles, my sweet and pleasant fellows! fine shower-bath here on deck. Hurrah, hurrah! your ice-cream is getting cold!"

Whereupon some of the old croakers who were getting into their trowsers would reply with--"Oh, stop your gabble, will you? don't be in such a hurry, now. You feel sweet, don't you?" with other exclamations, some of which were full of fury.

And it was not a little curious to remark, that at the expiration of the ensuing watch, the tables would be turned; and we on deck became the wits and jokers, and those below the grizzly bears and growlers.