

CHAPTER VIII.

SELVAGEE CONTRASTED WITH MAD-JACK.

Having glanced at the grand divisions of a man-of-war, let us now descend to specialities: and, particularly, to two of the junior lieutenants; lords and noblemen; members of that House of Peers, the gun-room. There were several young lieutenants on board; but from these two--representing the extremes of character to be found in their department--the nature of the other officers of their grade in the Neversink must be derived.

One of these two quarter-deck lords went among the sailors by a name of their own devising--Selvagee. Of course, it was intended to be characteristic; and even so it was.

In frigates, and all large ships of war, when getting under weigh, a large rope, called a messenger used to carry the strain of the cable to the capstan; so that the anchor may be weighed, without the muddy, ponderous cable, itself going round the capstan. As the cable enters the hawse-hole, therefore, something must be constantly used, to keep this travelling chain attached to this travelling messenger; something that may be rapidly wound round both, so as to bind them

together. The article used is called a selvagee. And what could be better adapted to the purpose? It is a slender, tapering, unstranded piece of rope prepared with much solicitude; peculiarly flexible; and wreathes and serpentines round the cable and messenger like an elegantly-modeled garter-snake round the twisted stalks of a vine. Indeed, Selvagee is the exact type and symbol of a tall, genteel, limber, spiraling exquisite. So much for the derivation of the name which the sailors applied to the Lieutenant.

From what sea-alcove, from what mermaid's milliner's shop, hast thou emerged, Selvagee! with that dainty waist and languid cheek? What heartless step-dame drove thee forth, to waste thy fragrance on the salt sea-air?

Was it you, Selvagee! that, outward-bound, off Cape Horn, looked at Hermit Island through an opera-glass? Was it you, who thought of proposing to the Captain that, when the sails were furled in a gale, a few drops of lavender should be dropped in their "bunts," so that when the canvas was set again, your nostrils might not be offended by its musty smell? I do not say it was you, Selvagee; I but deferentially inquire.

In plain prose, Selvagee was one of those officers whom the sight of a trim-fitting naval coat had captivated in the days of his youth. He fancied, that if a sea-officer dressed well, and conversed genteelly, he would abundantly uphold the honour of his flag, and immortalise the

tailor that made him. On that rock many young gentlemen split. For upon a frigate's quarter-deck, it is not enough to sport a coat fashioned by a Stultz; it is not enough to be well braced with straps and suspenders; it is not enough to have sweet reminiscences of Lauras and Matildas. It is a right down life of hard wear and tear, and the man who is not, in a good degree, fitted to become a common sailor will never make an officer. Take that to heart, all ye naval aspirants. Thrust your arms up to the elbow in pitch and see how you like it, ere you solicit a warrant. Prepare for white squalls, living gales and typhoons; read accounts of shipwrecks and horrible disasters; peruse the Narratives of Byron and Bligh; familiarise yourselves with the story of the English frigate Alceste and the French frigate Medusa. Though you may go ashore, now and then, at Cadiz and Palermo; for every day so spent among oranges and ladies, you will have whole months of rains and gales.

And even thus did Selvagee prove it. But with all the intrepid effeminacy of your true dandy, he still continued his Cologne-water baths, and sported his lace-bordered handkerchiefs in the very teeth of a tempest. Alas, Selvagee! there was no getting the lavender out of you.

But Selvagee was no fool. Theoretically he understood his profession; but the mere theory of seamanship forms but the thousandth part of what makes a seaman. You cannot save a ship by working out a problem in the cabin; the deck is the field of action.

Well aware of his deficiency in some things, Selvagee never took the trumpet--which is the badge of the deck officer for the time--without a tremulous movement of the lip, and an earnest inquiring eye to the windward. He encouraged those old Tritons, the Quarter-masters, to discourse with him concerning the likelihood of a squall; and often followed their advice as to taking in, or making sail. The smallest favours in that way were thankfully received. Sometimes, when all the North looked unusually lowering, by many conversational blandishments, he would endeavour to prolong his predecessor's stay on deck, after that officer's watch had expired. But in fine, steady weather, when the Captain would emerge from his cabin, Selvagee might be seen, pacing the poop with long, bold, indefatigable strides, and casting his eye up aloft with the most ostentatious fidelity.

But vain these pretences; he could not deceive. Selvagee! you know very well, that if it comes on to blow pretty hard, the First Lieutenant will be sure to interfere with his paternal authority. Every man and every boy in the frigate knows, Selvagee, that you are no Neptune.

How unenviable his situation! His brother officers do not insult him, to be sure; but sometimes their looks are as daggers. The sailors do not laugh at him outright; but of dark nights they jeer, when they hearken to that mantuamaker's voice ordering a strong pull at the main brace, or hands by the halyards! Sometimes, by way of being terrific, and making the men jump, Selvagee raps out an oath; but the soft bomb stuffed with confectioner's kisses seems to burst like a

crushed rose-bud diffusing its odours. Selvagee! Selvagee! take a main-top-man's advice; and this cruise over, never more tempt the sea.

With this gentleman of cravats and curling irons, how strongly contrasts the man who was born in a gale! For in some time of tempest--off Cape Horn or Hatteras--Mad Jack must have entered the world--such things have been--not with a silver spoon, but with a speaking-trumpet in his mouth; wrapped up in a caul, as in a main-sail--for a charmed life against shipwrecks he bears--and crying, Luff! luff, you may!--steady!--port! World ho!--here I am!

Mad Jack is in his saddle on the sea. That is his home; he would not care much, if another Flood came and overflowed the dry land; for what would it do but float his good ship higher and higher and carry his proud nation's flag round the globe, over the very capitals of all hostile states! Then would masts surmount spires; and all mankind, like the Chinese boatmen in Canton River, live in flotillas and fleets, and find their food in the sea.

Mad Jack was expressly created and labelled for a tar. Five feet nine is his mark, in his socks; and not weighing over eleven stone before dinner. Like so many ship's shrouds, his muscles and tendons are all set true, trim, and taut; he is braced up fore and aft, like a ship on the wind. His broad chest is a bulkhead, that dams off the gale; and his nose is an aquiline, that divides it in two, like a keel. His loud, lusty lungs are two belfries, full of all manner of chimes; but you

only hear his deepest bray, in the height of some tempest--like the great bell of St. Paul's, which only sounds when the King or the Devil is dead.

Look at him there, where he stands on the poop--one foot on the rail, and one hand on a shroud--his head thrown back, and his trumpet like an elephant's trunk thrown up in the air. Is he going to shoot dead with sounds, those fellows on the main-topsail-yard?

Mad Jack was a bit of a tyrant--they say all good officers are--but the sailors loved him all round; and would much rather stand fifty watches with him, than one with a rose-water sailor.

But Mad Jack, alas! has one fearful failing. He drinks. And so do we all. But Mad Jack, He only brinks brandy. The vice was inveterate; surely, like Ferdinand, Count Fathom, he must have been suckled at a puncheon. Very often, this bad habit got him into very serious scrapes. Twice was he put off duty by the Commodore; and once he came near being broken for his frolics. So far as his efficiency as a sea-officer was concerned, on shore at least, Jack might bouse away as much as he pleased; but afloat it will not do at all.

Now, if he only followed the wise example set by those ships of the desert, the camels; and while in port, drank for the thirst past, the thirst present, and the thirst to come--so that he might cross the ocean sober; Mad Jack would get along pretty well. Still better, if he

would but eschew brandy altogether; and only drink of the limpid
white-wine of the rills and the brooks.