

CHAPTER XI.

THE PURSUIT OF POETRY UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

The feeling of insecurity concerning one's possessions in the Neversink, which the things just narrated begat in the minds of honest men, was curiously exemplified in the case of my poor friend Lemsford, a gentlemanly young member of the After-Guard. I had very early made the acquaintance of Lemsford. It is curious, how unerringly a man pitches upon a spirit, any way akin to his own, even in the most miscellaneous mob.

Lemsford was a poet; so thoroughly inspired with the divine afflatus, that not even all the tar and tumult of a man-of-war could drive it out of him.

As may readily be imagined, the business of writing verse is a very different thing on the gun-deck of a frigate, from what the gentle and sequestered Wordsworth found it at placid Rydal Mount in Westmoreland. In a frigate, you cannot sit down and meander off your sonnets, when the full heart prompts; but only, when more important duties permit: such as bracing round the yards, or reefing top-sails fore and aft. Nevertheless, every fragment of time at his command was religiously devoted by Lemsford to the Nine. At the most unseasonable hours, you would behold him, seated apart, in some corner among the guns--a

shot-box before him, pen in hand, and eyes "in a fine frenzy rolling."

"What's that 'ere born nat'ral about?"--"He's got a fit, hain't he?"

were exclamations often made by the less learned of his shipmates. Some deemed him a conjurer; others a lunatic; and the knowing ones said, that he must be a crazy Methodist. But well knowing by experience the truth of the saying, that poetry is its own exceeding great reward, Lemsford wrote on; dashing off whole epics, sonnets, ballads, and acrostics, with a facility which, under the circumstances, amazed me. Often he read over his effusions to me; and well worth the hearing they were. He had wit, imagination, feeling, and humour in abundance; and out of the very ridicule with which some persons regarded him, he made rare metrical sport, which we two together enjoyed by ourselves; or shared with certain select friends.

Still, the taunts and jeers so often levelled at my friend the poet, would now and then rouse him into rage; and at such times the haughty scorn he would hurl on his foes, was proof positive of his possession of that one attribute, irritability, almost universally ascribed to the votaries of Parnassus and the Nine.

My noble captain, Jack Chase, rather patronised Lemsford, and he would stoutly take his part against scores of adversaries. Frequently, inviting him up aloft into his top, he would beg him to recite some of his verses; to which he would pay the most heedful attention, like Maecenas listening to Virgil, with a book of Aeneid in his hand. Taking

the liberty of a well-wisher, he would sometimes gently criticise the piece, suggesting a few immaterial alterations. And upon my word, noble Jack, with his native-born good sense, taste, and humanity, was not ill qualified to play the true part of a Quarterly Review;--which is, to give quarter at last, however severe the critique.

Now Lemsford's great care, anxiety, and endless source of tribulation was the preservation of his manuscripts. He had a little box, about the size of a small dressing-case, and secured with a lock, in which he kept his papers and stationery. This box, of course, he could not keep in his bag or hammock, for, in either case, he would only be able to get at it once in the twenty-four hours. It was necessary to have it accessible at all times. So when not using it, he was obliged to hide it out of sight, where he could. And of all places in the world, a ship of war, above her hold, least abounds in secret nooks. Almost every inch is occupied; almost every inch is in plain sight; and almost every inch is continually being visited and explored. Added to all this, was the deadly hostility of the whole tribe of ship-underlings--master-at-arms, ship's corporals, and boatswain's mates,--both to the poet and his casket. They hated his box, as if it had been Pandora's, crammed to the very lid with hurricanes and gales. They hunted out his hiding-places like pointers, and gave him no peace night or day.

Still, the long twenty-four-pounders on the main-deck offered some promise of a hiding-place to the box; and, accordingly, it was often

tucked away behind the carriages, among the side tackles; its black colour blending with the ebon hue of the guns.

But Quoin, one of the quarter-gunners, had eyes like a ferret. Quoin was a little old man-of-war's man, hardly five feet high, with a complexion like a gun-shot wound after it is healed. He was indefatigable in attending to his duties; which consisted in taking care of one division of the guns, embracing ten of the aforesaid twenty-four-pounders. Ranged up against the ship's side at regular intervals, they resembled not a little a stud of sable chargers in their stall. Among this iron stud little Quoin was continually running in and out, currying them down, now and then, with an old rag, or keeping the flies off with a brush. To Quoin, the honour and dignity of the United States of America seemed indissolubly linked with the keeping his guns unspotted and glossy. He himself was black as a chimney-sweep with continually tending them, and rubbing them down with black paint. He would sometimes get outside of the port-holes and peer into their muzzles, as a monkey into a bottle. Or, like a dentist, he seemed intent upon examining their teeth. Quite as often, he would be brushing out their touch-holes with a little wisp of oakum, like a Chinese barber in Canton, cleaning a patient's ear.

Such was his solicitude, that it was a thousand pities he was not able to dwarf himself still more, so as to creep in at the touch-hole, and examining the whole interior of the tube, emerge at last from the muzzle. Quoin swore by his guns, and slept by their side. Woe betide

the man whom he found leaning against them, or in any way soiling them. He seemed seized with the crazy fancy, that his darling twenty-four-pounders were fragile, and might break, like glass retorts.

Now, from this Quoin's vigilance, how could my poor friend the poet hope to escape with his box? Twenty times a week it was pounced upon, with a "here's that d---d pillbox again!" and a loud threat, to pitch it overboard the next time, without a moment's warning, or benefit of clergy. Like many poets, Lemsford was nervous, and upon these occasions he trembled like a leaf. Once, with an inconsolable countenance, he came to me, saying that his casket was nowhere to be found; he had sought for it in his hiding-place, and it was not there.

I asked him where he had hidden it?

"Among the guns," he replied.

"Then depend upon it, Lemsford, that Quoin has been the death of it."

Straight to Quoin went the poet. But Quoin knew nothing about it. For ten mortal days the poet was not to be comforted; dividing his leisure time between cursing Quoin and lamenting his loss. The world is undone, he must have thought: no such calamity has befallen it since the Deluge;--my verses are perished.

But though Quoin, as it afterward turned out, had indeed found the box,

it so happened that he had not destroyed it; which no doubt led Lemsford to infer that a superintending Providence had interposed to preserve to posterity his invaluable casket. It was found at last, lying exposed near the galley.

Lemsford was not the only literary man on board the *Neversink*. There were three or four persons who kept journals of the cruise. One of these journalists embellished his work--which was written in a large blank account-book--with various coloured illustrations of the harbours and bays at which the frigate had touched; and also, with small crayon sketches of comical incidents on board the frigate itself. He would frequently read passages of his book to an admiring circle of the more refined sailors, between the guns. They pronounced the whole performance a miracle of art. As the author declared to them that it was all to be printed and published so soon as the vessel reached home, they vied with each other in procuring interesting items, to be incorporated into additional chapters. But it having been rumoured abroad that this journal was to be ominously entitled "*The Cruise of the Neversink, or a Paixhan shot into Naval Abuses;*" and it having also reached the ears of the Ward-room that the work contained reflections somewhat derogatory to the dignity of the officers, the volume was seized by the master-at-arms, armed with a warrant from the Captain. A few days after, a large nail was driven straight through the two covers, and clinched on the other side, and, thus everlastingly sealed, the book was committed to the deep. The ground taken by the authorities on this occasion was, perhaps, that the book was obnoxious

to a certain clause in the Articles of War, forbidding any person in the Navy to bring any other person in the Navy into contempt, which the suppressed volume undoubtedly did.