

## CHAPTER XIII.

### A MAN-OF-WAR HERMIT IN A MOB.

The allusion to the poet Lemsford in a previous chapter, leads me to speak of our mutual friends, Nord and Williams, who, with Lemsford himself, Jack Chase, and my comrades of the main-top, comprised almost the only persons with whom I unreservedly consorted while on board the frigate. For I had not been long on board ere I found that it would not do to be intimate with everybody. An indiscriminate intimacy with all hands leads to sundry annoyances and scrapes, too often ending with a dozen at the gang-way. Though I was above a year in the frigate, there were scores of men who to the last remained perfect strangers to me, whose very names I did not know, and whom I would hardly be able to recognise now should I happen to meet them in the streets.

In the dog-watches at sea, during the early part of the evening, the main-deck is generally filled with crowds of pedestrians, promenading up and down past the guns, like people taking the air in Broadway. At such times, it is curious to see the men nodding to each other's recognitions (they might not have seen each other for a week); exchanging a pleasant word with a friend; making a hurried appointment to meet him somewhere aloft on the morrow, or passing group after group without deigning the slightest salutation. Indeed, I was not at all

singular in having but comparatively few acquaintances on board, though certainly carrying my fastidiousness to an unusual extent.

My friend Nord was a somewhat remarkable character; and if mystery includes romance, he certainly was a very romantic one. Before seeking an introduction to him through Lemsford, I had often marked his tall, spare, upright figure stalking like Don Quixote among the pigmies of the Afterguard, to which he belonged. At first I found him exceedingly reserved and taciturn; his saturnine brow wore a scowl; he was almost repelling in his demeanour. In a word, he seemed desirous of hinting, that his list of man-of-war friends was already made up, complete, and full; and there was no room for more. But observing that the only man he ever consorted with was Lemsford, I had too much magnanimity, by going off in a pique at his coldness, to let him lose forever the chance of making so capital an acquaintance as myself. Besides, I saw it in his eye, that the man had been a reader of good books; I would have staked my life on it, that he seized the right meaning of Montaigne. I saw that he was an earnest thinker; I more than suspected that he had been bolted in the mill of adversity. For all these things, my heart yearned toward him; I determined to know him.

At last I succeeded; it was during a profoundly quiet midnight watch, when I perceived him walking alone in the waist, while most of the men were dozing on the carronade-slides.

That night we scoured all the prairies of reading; dived into the

bosoms of authors, and tore out their hearts; and that night White-Jacket learned more than he has ever done in any single night since.

The man was a marvel. He amazed me, as much as Coleridge did the troopers among whom he enlisted. What could have induced such a man to enter a man-of-war, all my sapience cannot fathom. And how he managed to preserve his dignity, as he did, among such a rabble rout was equally a mystery. For he was no sailor; as ignorant of a ship, indeed, as a man from the sources of the Niger. Yet the officers respected him; and the men were afraid of him. This much was observable, however, that he faithfully discharged whatever special duties devolved upon him; and was so fortunate as never to render himself liable to a reprimand. Doubtless, he took the same view of the thing that another of the crew did; and had early resolved, so to conduct himself as never to run the risk of the scourge. And this it must have been--added to whatever incommunicable grief which might have been his--that made this Nord such a wandering recluse, even among our man-of-war mob. Nor could he have long swung his hammock on board, ere he must have found that, to insure his exemption from that thing which alone affrighted him, he must be content for the most part to turn a man-hater, and socially expatriate himself from many things, which might have rendered his situation more tolerable. Still more, several events that took place must have horrified him, at times, with the thought that, however he might isolate and entomb himself, yet for all this, the improbability of his being overtaken by what he most dreaded never advanced to the

infallibility of the impossible.

In my intercourse with Nord, he never made allusion to his past career--a subject upon which most high-bred castaways in a man-of-war are very diffuse; relating their adventures at the gaming-table; the recklessness with which they have run through the amplest fortunes in a single season; their alms-givings, and gratuities to porters and poor relations; and above all, their youthful indiscretions, and the broken-hearted ladies they have left behind. No such tales had Nord to tell. Concerning the past, he was barred and locked up like the specie vaults of the Bank of England. For anything that dropped from him, none of us could be sure that he had ever existed till now. Altogether, he was a remarkable man.

My other friend, Williams, was a thorough-going Yankee from Maine, who had been both a peddler and a pedagogue in his day. He had all manner of stories to tell about nice little country frolics, and would run over an endless list of his sweethearts. He was honest, acute, witty, full of mirth and good humour--a laughing philosopher. He was invaluable as a pill against the spleen; and, with the view of extending the advantages of his society to the saturnine Nord, I introduced them to each other; but Nord cut him dead the very same evening, when we sallied out from between the guns for a walk on the main-deck.