

## CHAPTER XVI.

### GENERAL TRAINING IN A MAN-OF-WAR.

To a quiet, contemplative character, averse to uproar, undue exercise of his bodily members, and all kind of useless confusion, nothing can be more distressing than a proceeding in all men-of-war called "general quarters." And well may it be so called, since it amounts to a general drawing and quartering of all the parties concerned.

As the specific object for which a man-of-war is built and put into commission is to fight and fire off cannon, it is, of course, deemed indispensable that the crew should be duly instructed in the art and mystery involved. Hence these "general quarters," which is a mustering of all hands to their stations at the guns on the several decks, and a sort of sham-fight with an imaginary foe.

The summons is given by the ship's drummer, who strikes a peculiar beat--short, broken, rolling, shuffling--like the sound made by the march into battle of iron-heeled grenadiers. It is a regular tune, with a fine song composed to it; the words of the chorus, being most artistically arranged, may give some idea of the air:

"Hearts of oak are our ships, jolly tars are our men,

We always are ready, steady, boys, steady,

To fight and to conquer, again and again."

In warm weather this pastime at the guns is exceedingly unpleasant, to say the least, and throws a quiet man into a violent passion and perspiration. For one, I ever abominated it.

I have a heart like Julius Caesar, and upon occasions would fight like Caius Marcius Coriolanus. If my beloved and for ever glorious country should be ever in jeopardy from invaders, let Congress put me on a war-horse, in the van-guard, and then see how I will acquit myself. But to toil and sweat in a fictitious encounter; to squander the precious breath of my precious body in a ridiculous fight of shams and pretensions; to hurry about the decks, pretending to carry the killed and wounded below; to be told that I must consider the ship blowing up, in order to exercise myself in presence of mind, and prepare for a real explosion; all this I despise, as beneath a true tar and man of valour.

These were my sentiments at the time, and these remain my sentiments still; but as, while on board the frigate, my liberty of thought did not extend to liberty of expression, I was obliged to keep these sentiments to myself; though, indeed, I had some thoughts of addressing a letter, marked Private and Confidential, to his Honour the Commodore, on the subject.

My station at the batteries was at one of the thirty-two-pound carronades, on the starboard side of the quarter-deck.[1]

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[Footnote-1] For the benefit of a Quaker reader here and there, a word or two in explanation of a carronade may not be amiss. The carronade is a gun comparatively short and light for its calibre. A carronade throwing a thirty-two-pound shot weighs considerably less than a long-gun only throwing a twenty-four-pound shot. It further differs from a long-gun, in working with a joint and bolt underneath, instead of the short arms or trunnions at the sides. Its carriage, likewise, is quite different from that of a long-gun, having a sort of sliding apparatus, something like an extension dining-table; the goose on it, however, is a tough one, and villainously stuffed with most indigestible dumplings. Point-blank, the range of a carronade does not exceed one hundred and fifty yards, much less than the range of a long-gun. When of large calibre, however, it throws within that limit, Paixhan shot, all manner of shells and combustibles, with great effect, being a very destructive engine at close quarters. This piece is now very generally found mounted in the batteries of the English and American navies. The quarter-deck armaments of most modern frigates wholly consist of carronades. The name is derived from the village of Carron, in Scotland, at whose celebrated founderies this iron Attila was first cast.

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I did not fancy this station at all; for it is well known on shipboard that, in time of action, the quarter-deck is one of the most dangerous posts of a man-of-war. The reason is, that the officers of the highest rank are there stationed; and the enemy have an ungentlemanly way of target-shooting at their buttons. If we should chance to engage a ship, then, who could tell but some bungling small-arm marks-man in the enemy's tops might put a bullet through me instead of the Commodore? If they hit him, no doubt he would not feel it much, for he was used to that sort of thing, and, indeed, had a bullet in him already. Whereas, I was altogether unaccustomed to having blue pills playing round my head in such an indiscriminate way. Besides, ours was a flag-ship; and every one knows what a peculiarly dangerous predicament the quarter-deck of Nelson's flag-ship was in at the battle of Trafalgar; how the lofty tops of the enemy were full of soldiers, peppering away at the English Admiral and his officers. Many a poor sailor, at the guns of that quarter-deck, must have received a bullet intended for some wearer of an epaulet.

By candidly confessing my feelings on this subject, I do by no means invalidate my claims to being held a man of prodigious valour. I merely state my invincible repugnance to being shot for somebody else. If I am shot, be it with the express understanding in the shooter that I am the identical person intended so to be served. That Thracian who, with his compliments, sent an arrow into the King of Macedon, superscribed "for

Philip's right eye," set a fine example to all warriors. The hurried, hasty, indiscriminate, reckless, abandoned manner in which both sailors and soldiers nowadays fight is really painful to any serious-minded, methodical old gentleman, especially if he chance to have systematized his mind as an accountant. There is little or no skill and bravery about it. Two parties, armed with lead and old iron, envelop themselves in a cloud of smoke, and pitch their lead and old iron about in all directions. If you happen to be in the way, you are hit; possibly, killed; if not, you escape. In sea-actions, if by good or bad luck, as the case may be, a round shot, fired at random through the smoke, happens to send overboard your fore-mast, another to unship your rudder, there you lie crippled, pretty much at the mercy of your foe: who, accordingly, pronounces himself victor, though that honour properly belongs to the Law of Gravitation operating on the enemy's balls in the smoke. Instead of tossing this old lead and iron into the air, therefore, it would be much better amicably to toss up a copper and let heads win.

The carronade at which I was stationed was known as "Gun No. 5," on the First Lieutenant's quarter-bill. Among our gun's crew, however, it was known as Black Bet. This name was bestowed by the captain of the gun--a fine negro--in honour of his sweetheart, a coloured lady of Philadelphia. Of Black Bet I was rammer-and-sponger; and ram and sponge I did, like a good fellow. I have no doubt that, had I and my gun been at the battle of the Nile, we would mutually have immortalised ourselves; the ramming-pole would have been hung up in Westminster

Abbey; and I, ennobled by the king, besides receiving the illustrious honour of an autograph letter from his majesty through the perfumed right hand of his private secretary.

But it was terrible work to help run in and out of the porthole that amazing mass of metal, especially as the thing must be done in a trice. Then, at the summons of a horrid, rasping rattle, swayed by the Captain in person, we were made to rush from our guns, seize pikes and pistols, and repel an imaginary army of boarders, who, by a fiction of the officers, were supposed to be assailing all sides of the ship at once. After cutting and slashing at them a while, we jumped back to our guns, and again went to jerking our elbows.

Meantime, a loud cry is heard of "Fire! fire! fire!" in the fore-top; and a regular engine, worked by a set of Bowery-boy tars, is forthwith set to playing streams of water aloft. And now it is "Fire! fire! fire!" on the main-deck; and the entire ship is in as great a commotion as if a whole city ward were in a blaze.

Are our officers of the Navy utterly unacquainted with the laws of good health? Do they not know that this violent exercise, taking place just after a hearty dinner, as it generally does, is eminently calculated to breed the dyspepsia? There was no satisfaction in dining; the flavour of every mouthful was destroyed by the thought that the next moment the cannonading drum might be beating to quarters.

Such a sea-martinet was our Captain, that sometimes we were roused from our hammocks at night; when a scene would ensue that it is not in the power of pen and ink to describe. Five hundred men spring to their feet, dress themselves, take up their bedding, and run to the nettings and stow it; then he to their stations--each man jostling his neighbour--some aloft, some aloft; some this way, some that; and in less than five minutes the frigate is ready for action, and still as the grave; almost every man precisely where he would be were an enemy actually about to be engaged. The Gunner, like a Cornwall miner in a cave, is burrowing down in the magazine under the Ward-room, which is lighted by battle-lanterns, placed behind glazed glass bull's-eyes inserted in the bulkhead. The Powder-monkeys, or boys, who fetch and carry cartridges, are scampering to and fro among the guns; and the first and second loaders stand ready to receive their supplies.

These Powder-monkeys, as they are called, enact a curious part in time of action. The entrance to the magazine on the berth-deck, where they procure their food for the guns, is guarded by a woollen screen; and a gunner's mate, standing behind it, thrusts out the cartridges through a small arm-hole in this screen. The enemy's shot (perhaps red hot) are flying in all directions; and to protect their cartridges, the powder-monkeys hurriedly wrap them up in their jackets; and with all haste scramble up the ladders to their respective guns, like eating-house waiters hurrying along with hot cakes for breakfast.

At general quarters the shot-boxes are uncovered; showing the

grape-shot--aptly so called, for they precisely resemble bunches of the fruit; though, to receive a bunch of iron grapes in the abdomen would be but a sorry dessert; and also showing the canister-shot--old iron of various sorts, packed in a tin case, like a tea-caddy.

Imagine some midnight craft sailing down on her enemy thus; twenty-four pounders levelled, matches lighted, and each captain of his gun at his post!

But if verily going into action, then would the Neversink have made still further preparations; for however alike in some things, there is always a vast difference--if you sound them--between a reality and a sham. Not to speak of the pale sternness of the men at their guns at such a juncture, and the choked thoughts at their hearts, the ship itself would here and there present a far different appearance.

Something like that of an extensive mansion preparing for a grand entertainment, when folding-doors are withdrawn, chambers converted into drawing-rooms, and every inch of available space thrown into one continuous whole. For previous to an action, every bulk-head in a man-of-war is knocked down; great guns are run out of the Commodore's parlour windows; nothing separates the ward-room officers' quarters from those of the men, but an en-sign used for a curtain. The sailors' mess-chests are tumbled down into the hold; and the hospital cots--of which all men-of-war carry a large supply--are dragged forth from the sail-room, and piled near at hand to receive the wounded; amputation-tables are ranged in the cock-pit or in the tiers,



whereon to carve the bodies of the maimed. The yards are slung in chains; fire-screens distributed here and there: hillocks of cannon-balls piled between the guns; shot-plugs suspended within easy reach from the beams; and solid masses of wads, big as Dutch cheeses, braced to the cheeks of the gun-carriages.

No small difference, also, would be visible in the wardrobe of both officers and men. The officers generally fight as dandies dance, namely, in silk stockings; inasmuch as, in case of being wounded in the leg, the silk-hose can be more easily drawn off by the Surgeon; cotton sticks, and works into the wound. An economical captain, while taking care to case his legs in silk, might yet see fit to save his best suit, and fight in his old clothes. For, besides that an old garment might much better be cut to pieces than a new one, it must be a mighty disagreeable thing to die in a stiff, tight-breasted coat, not yet worked easy under the arm-pits. At such times, a man should feel free, unencumbered, and perfectly at his ease in point of straps and suspenders. No ill-will concerning his tailor should intrude upon his thoughts of eternity. Seneca understood this, when he chose to die naked in a bath. And men-of-war's men understand it, also; for most of them, in battle, strip to the waist-bands; wearing nothing but a pair of duck trowsers, and a handkerchief round their head.

A captain combining a heedful patriotism with economy would probably "bend" his old topsails before going into battle, instead of exposing his best canvas to be riddled to pieces; for it is generally the case

that the enemy's shot flies high. Unless allowance is made for it in pointing the tube, at long-gun distance, the slightest roll of the ship, at the time of firing, would send a shot, meant for the hull, high over the top-gallant yards.

But besides these differences between a sham-fight at general quarters and a real cannonading, the aspect of the ship, at the beating of the retreat, would, in the latter case, be very dissimilar to the neatness and uniformity in the former.

Then our bulwarks might look like the walls of the houses in West Broadway in New York, after being broken into and burned out by the Negro Mob. Our stout masts and yards might be lying about decks, like tree boughs after a tornado in a piece of woodland; our dangling ropes, cut and sundered in all directions, would be bleeding tar at every yard; and strew with jagged splinters from our wounded planks, the gun-deck might resemble a carpenter's shop. Then, when all was over, and all hands would be piped to take down the hammocks from the exposed nettings (where they play the part of the cotton bales at New Orleans), we might find bits of broken shot, iron bolts and bullets in our blankets. And, while smeared with blood like butchers, the surgeon and his mates would be amputating arms and legs on the berth-deck, an underling of the carpenter's gang would be new-legging and arming the broken chairs and tables in the Commodore's cabin; while the rest of his squad would be splicing and fishing the shattered masts and yards. The scupper-holes having discharged the last rivulet of blood,

the decks would be washed down; and the galley-cooks would be going fore and aft, sprinkling them with hot vinegar, to take out the shambles' smell from the planks; which, unless some such means are employed, often create a highly offensive effluvia for weeks after a fight.

Then, upon mustering the men, and calling the quarter-bills by the light of a battle-lantern, many a wounded seaman with his arm in a sling, would answer for some poor shipmate who could never more make answer for himself:

"Tom Brown?"

"Killed, sir."

"Jack Jewel?"

"Killed, sir."

"Joe Hardy?"

"Killed, sir."

And opposite all these poor fellows' names, down would go on the quarter-bills the bloody marks of red ink--a murderer's fluid, fitly used on these occasions.