

CHAPTER XVII.

AWAY! SECOND, THIRD, AND FOURTH CUTTERS, AWAY!

It was the morning succeeding one of these general quarters that we picked up a life-buoy, descried floating by.

It was a circular mass of cork, about eight inches thick and four feet in diameter, covered with tarred canvas. All round its circumference there trailed a number of knotted ropes'-ends, terminating in fanciful Turks' heads. These were the life-lines, for the drowning to clutch. Inserted into the middle of the cork was an upright, carved pole, somewhat shorter than a pike-staff. The whole buoy was embossed with barnacles, and its sides festooned with sea-weeds. Dolphins were sporting and flashing around it, and one white bird was hovering over the top of the pole. Long ago, this thing must have been thrown over-board to save some poor wretch, who must have been drowned; while even the life-buoy itself had drifted away out of sight.

The forecastle-men fished it up from the bows, and the seamen thronged round it.

"Bad luck! bad luck!" cried the Captain of the Head; "we'll number one less before long."

The ship's cooper strolled by; he, to whose department it belongs to see that the ship's life-buoys are kept in good order.

In men-of-war, night and day, week in and week out, two life-buoys are kept depending from the stern; and two men, with hatchets in their hands, pace up and down, ready at the first cry to cut the cord and drop the buoys overboard. Every two hours they are regularly relieved, like sentinels on guard. No similar precautions are adopted in the merchant or whaling service.

Thus deeply solicitous to preserve human life are the regulations of men-of-war; and seldom has there been a better illustration of this solicitude than at the battle of Trafalgar, when, after "several thousand" French seamen had been destroyed, according to Lord Collingwood, and, by the official returns, sixteen hundred and ninety Englishmen were killed or wounded, the Captains of the surviving ships ordered the life-buoy sentries from their death-dealing guns to their vigilant posts, as officers of the Humane Society.

"There, Bungs!" cried Scrimmage, a sheet-anchor-man,[2] "there's a good pattern for you; make us a brace of life-buoys like that; something that will save a man, and not fill and sink under him, as those leaky quarter-casks of yours will the first time there's occasion to drop 'ern. I came near pitching off the bowsprit the other day; and, when I scrambled inboard again, I went aft to get a squint at 'em. Why, Bungs, they are all open between the staves. Shame on you! Suppose you

yourself should fall over-board, and find yourself going down with buoys under you of your own making--what then?"

[FOOTNOTE-2] In addition to the Bower-anchors carried on her bows, a frigate carries large anchors in her fore-chains, called Sheet-anchors. Hence, the old seamen stationed in that part of a man-of-war are called sheet-anchor-man.

"I never go aloft, and don't intend to fall overboard," replied Bungs.

"Don't believe it!" cried the sheet-anchor-man; "you lopers that live about the decks here are nearer the bottom of the sea than the light hand that looses the main-royal. Mind your eye, Bungs--mind your eye!"

"I will," retorted Bungs; "and you mind yours!"

Next day, just at dawn, I was startled from my hammock by the cry of "All hands about ship and shorten sail!" Springing up the ladders, I found that an unknown man had fallen overboard from the chains; and darting a glance toward the poop, perceived, from their gestures, that the life-sentries there had cut away the buoys.

It was blowing a fresh breeze; the frigate was going fast through the water. But the one thousand arms of five hundred men soon tossed her about on the other tack, and checked her further headway.

"Do you see him?" shouted the officer of the watch through his trumpet, hailing the main-mast-head. "Man or buoy, do you see either?"

"See nothing, sir," was the reply.

"Clear away the cutters!" was the next order. "Bugler! call away the second, third, and fourth cutters' crews. Hands by the tackles!"

In less than three minutes the three boats were down; More hands were wanted in one of them, and, among others, I jumped in to make up the deficiency.

"Now, men, give way! and each man look out along his oar, and look sharp!" cried the officer of our boat. For a time, in perfect silence, we slid up and down the great seething swells of the sea, but saw nothing.

"There, it's no use," cried the officer; "he's gone, whoever he is. Pull away, men--pull away! they'll be recalling us soon."

"Let him drown!" cried the strokesman; "he's spoiled my watch below for me."

"Who the devil is he?" cried another.

"He's one who'll never have a coffin!" replied a third.

"No, no! they'll never sing out, 'All hands bury the dead!' for him, my hearties!" cried a fourth.

"Silence," said the officer, "and look along your oars." But the sixteen oarsmen still continued their talk; and, after pulling about for two or three hours, we spied the recall-signal at the frigate's fore-t'-gallant-mast-head, and returned on board, having seen no sign even of the life-buoys.

The boats were hoisted up, the yards braced forward, and away we bowled--one man less.

"Muster all hands!" was now the order; when, upon calling the roll, the cooper was the only man missing.

"I told you so, men," cried the Captain of the Head; "I said we would lose a man before long."

"Bungs, is it?" cried Scrimmage, the sheet-anchor-man; "I told him his buoys wouldn't save a drowning man; and now he has proved it!"