

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE JACKET ALOFT.

Again must I call attention to my white jacket, which, about this time came near being the death of me.

I am of a meditative humour, and at sea used often to mount aloft at night, and seating myself on one of the upper yards, tuck my jacket about me and give loose to reflection. In some ships in which I have done this, the sailors used to fancy that I must be studying astronomy--which, indeed, to some extent, was the case--and that my object in mounting aloft was to get a nearer view of the stars, supposing me, of course, to be short-sighted. A very silly conceit of theirs, some may say, but not so silly after all; for surely the advantage of getting nearer an object by two hundred feet is not to be underrated. Then, to study the stars upon the wide, boundless sea, is divine as it was to the Chaldean Magi, who observed their revolutions from the plains.

And it is a very fine feeling, and one that fuses us into the universe of things, and mates us a part of the All, to think that, wherever we ocean-wanderers rove, we have still the same glorious old stars to keep

us company; that they still shine onward and on, forever beautiful and bright, and luring us, by every ray, to die and be glorified with them.

Ay, ay! we sailors sail not in vain, We expatriate ourselves to nationalise with the universe; and in all our voyages round the world, we are still accompanied by those old circumnavigators, the stars, who are shipmates and fellow-sailors of ours--sailing in heaven's blue, as we on the azure main. Let genteel generations scoff at our hardened hands, and finger-nails tipped with tar--did they ever clasp truer palms than ours? Let them feel of our sturdy hearts beating like sledge-hammers in those hot smithies, our bosoms; with their amber-headed canes, let them feel of our generous pulses, and swear that they go off like thirty-two-pounders.

Oh, give me again the rover's life--the joy, the thrill, the whirl! Let me feel thee again, old sea! let me leap into thy saddle once more. I am sick of these terra firma toils and cares; sick of the dust and reek of towns. Let me hear the clatter of hailstones on icebergs, and not the dull tramp of these plodders, plodding their dull way from their cradles to their graves. Let me snuff thee up, sea-breeze! and whinny in thy spray. Forbid it, sea-gods! intercede for me with Neptune, O sweet Amphitrite, that no dull clod may fall on my coffin! Be mine the tomb that swallowed up Pharaoh and all his hosts; let me lie down with Drake, where he sleeps in the sea.

But when White-Jacket speaks of the rover's life, he means not life in

a man-of-war, which, with its martial formalities and thousand vices, stabs to the heart the soul of all free-and-easy honourable rovers.

I have said that I was wont to mount up aloft and muse; and thus was it with me the night following the loss of the cooper. Ere my watch in the top had expired, high up on the main-royal-yard I reclined, the white jacket folded around me like Sir John Moore in his frosted cloak.

Eight bells had struck, and my watchmates had hied to their hammocks, and the other watch had gone to their stations, and the top below me was full of strangers, and still one hundred feet above even them I lay entranced; now dozing, now dreaming; now thinking of things past, and anon of the life to come. Well-timed was the latter thought, for the life to come was much nearer overtaking me than I then could imagine. Perhaps I was half conscious at last of a tremulous voice hailing the main-royal-yard from the top. But if so, the consciousness glided away from me, and left me in Lethe. But when, like lightning, the yard dropped under me, and instinctively I clung with both hands to the "tie," then I came to myself with a rush, and felt something like a choking hand at my throat. For an instant I thought the Gulf Stream in my head was whirling me away to eternity; but the next moment I found myself standing; the yard had descended to the cup; and shaking myself in my jacket, I felt that I was unharmed and alive.

Who had done this? who had made this attempt on my life? thought I, as

I ran down the rigging.

"Here it comes!--Lord! Lord! here it comes! See, see! it is white as a hammock."

"Who's coming?" I shouted, springing down into the top; "who's white as a hammock?"

"Bless my soul, Bill it's only White-Jacket--that infernal White-Jacket again!"

It seems they had spied a moving white spot there aloft, and, sailor-like, had taken me for the ghost of the cooper; and after hailing me, and bidding me descend, to test my corporeality, and getting no answer, they had lowered the halyards in affright.

In a rage I tore off the jacket, and threw it on the deck.

"Jacket," cried I, "you must change your complexion! you must hie to the dyers and be dyed, that I may live. I have but one poor life, White-Jacket, and that life I cannot spare. I cannot consent to die for you, but be dyed you must for me. You can dye many times without injury; but I cannot die without irreparable loss, and running the eternal risk."

So in the morning, jacket in hand, I repaired to the First Lieutenant,

and related the narrow escape I had had during the night. I enlarged upon the general perils I ran in being taken for a ghost, and earnestly besought him to relax his commands for once, and give me an order on Brush, the captain of the paint-room, for some black paint, that my jacket might be painted of that colour.

"Just look at it, sir," I added, holding it lip; "did you ever see anything whiter? Consider how it shines of a night, like a bit of the Milky Way. A little paint, sir, you cannot refuse."

"The ship has no paint to spare," he said; "you must get along without it."

"Sir, every rain gives me a soaking; Cape Horn is at hand--six brushes-full would make it waterproof; and no longer would I be in peril of my life!"

"Can't help it, sir; depart!"

I fear it will not be well with me in the end; for if my own sins are to be forgiven only as I forgive that hard-hearted and unimpressible First Lieutenant, then pardon there is none for me.

What! when but one dab of paint would make a man of a ghost, and it Mackintosh of a herring-net--to refuse it I am full. I can say no more.