

CHAPTER XXIII.

THEATRICALS IN A MAN-OF-WAR.

The Neversink had summered out her last Christmas on the Equator; she was now destined to winter out the Fourth of July not very far from the frigid latitudes of Cape Horn.

It is sometimes the custom in the American Navy to celebrate this national holiday by doubling the allowance of spirits to the men; that is, if the ship happen to be lying in harbour. The effects of this patriotic plan may be easily imagined: the whole ship is converted into a dram-shop; and the intoxicated sailors reel about, on all three decks, singing, howling, and fighting. This is the time that, owing to the relaxed discipline of the ship, old and almost forgotten quarrels are revived, under the stimulus of drink; and, fencing themselves up between the guns--so as to be sure of a clear space with at least three walls--the combatants, two and two, fight out their hate, cribbed and cabined like soldiers duelling in a sentry-box. In a word, scenes ensue which would not for a single instant be tolerated by the officers upon any other occasion. This is the time that the most venerable of quarter-gunners and quarter-masters, together with the smallest apprentice boys, and men never known to have been previously intoxicated during the cruise--this is the time that they all roll together in the same muddy trough of drunkenness.

In emulation of the potentates of the Middle Ages, some Captains augment the din by authorising a grand jail-delivery of all the prisoners who, on that auspicious Fourth of the month, may happen to be confined in the ship's prison--"the brig."

But from scenes like these the Neversink was happily delivered. Besides that she was now approaching a most perilous part of the ocean--which would have made it madness to intoxicate the sailors--her complete destitution of grog, even for ordinary consumption, was an obstacle altogether insuperable, even had the Captain felt disposed to indulge his man-of-war's-men by the most copious libations.

For several days previous to the advent of the holiday, frequent conferences were held on the gun-deck touching the melancholy prospects before the ship.

"Too bad--too bad!" cried a top-man, "Think of it, shipmates--a Fourth of July without grog!"

"I'll hoist the Commodore's pennant at half-mast that day," sighed the signal-quarter-master.

"And I'll turn my best uniform jacket wrong side out, to keep company with the pennant, old Ensign," sympathetically responded an after-guard's-man.

"Ay, do!" cried a fore-castle-man. "I could almost pipe my eye to think on't."

"No grog on de day dat tried men's souls!" blubbered Sunshine, the galley-cook.

"Who would be a Jankee now?" roared a Hollander of the fore-top, more Dutch than sour-crust.

"Is this the riglar fruits of liberty?" touchingly inquired an Irish waister of an old Spanish sheet-anchor-man.

You will generally observe that, of all Americans, your foreign-born citizens are the most patriotic--especially toward the Fourth of July.

But how could Captain Claret, the father of his crew, behold the grief of his ocean children with indifference? He could not. Three days before the anniversary--it still continuing very pleasant weather for these latitudes--it was publicly announced that free permission was given to the sailors to get up any sort of theatricals they desired, wherewith to honour the Fourth.

Now, some weeks prior to the Neversink's sailing from home--nearly three years before the time here spoken of--some of the seamen had clubbed together, and made up a considerable purse, for the purpose of

purchasing a theatrical outfit having in view to diversify the monotony of lying in foreign harbours for weeks together, by an occasional display on the boards--though if ever there w-as a continual theatre in the world, playing by night and by day, and without intervals between the acts, a man-of-war is that theatre, and her planks are the boards indeed.

The sailors who originated this scheme had served in other American frigates, where the privilege of having theatricals was allowed to the crew. What was their chagrin, then, when, upon making an application to the Captain, in a Peruvian harbour, for permission to present the much-admired drama of "The Ruffian Boy," under the Captain's personal patronage, that dignitary assured them that there were already enough ruffian boys on board, without conjuring up any more from the green-room.

The theatrical outfit, therefore, was stowed down in the bottom of the sailors' bags, who little anticipated then that it would ever be dragged out while Captain Claret had the sway.

But immediately upon the announcement that the embargo was removed, vigorous preparations were at once commenced to celebrate the Fourth with unwonted spirit. The half-deck was set apart for the theatre, and the signal-quarter-master was commanded to loan his flags to decorate it in the most patriotic style.

As the stage-struck portion of the crew had frequently during the cruise rehearsed portions of various plays, to while away the tedium of the night-watches, they needed no long time now to perfect themselves in their parts.

Accordingly, on the very next morning after the indulgence had been granted by the Captain, the following written placard, presenting a broadside of staring capitals, was found tacked against the main-mast on the gun-deck. It was as if a Drury-Lane bill had been posted upon the London Monument.

CAPE HORN THEATRE.

* * * * *

Grand Celebration of the Fourth of July.

DAY PERFORMANCE.

UNCOMMON ATTRACTION.

THE OLD WAGON PAID OFF!

JACK CHASE. . . . PERCY ROYAL-MAST.

STARS OF THE FIRST MAGNITUDE.

For this time only.

THE TRUE YANKEE SAILOR.

The managers of the Cape Horn Theatre beg leave to inform the inhabitants of the Pacific and Southern Oceans that, on the afternoon of the Fourth of July, 184-- , they will

have the honour to present the admired drama of

THE OLD WAGON PAID OFF!

Commodore Bougee Tom Brown, of the Fore-top.

Captain Spy-glass Ned Brace, of the After-Guard.

Commodore's Cockswain. . . Joe Bunk, of the Launch.

Old Luff Quarter-master Coffin.

Mayor Seafull, of the Forecastle.

PERCY ROYAL-MAST JACK CHASE.

Mrs. Lovelorn Long-locks, of the After-Guard.

Toddy Moll Frank Jones.

Gin and Sugar Sall. . . . Dick Dash.

Sailors, Mariners, Bar-keepers, Crimps, Aldermen,

Police-officer's, Soldiers, Landsmen generally.

* * * * *

Long live the Commodore! :: Admission Free.

* * * * *

To conclude with the much-admired song by Dibdin,

altered to suit all American Tars, entitled

THE TRUE YANKEE SAILOR.

True Yankee Sailor (in costume), Patrick Flinegan,

Captain of the Head.

Performance to commence with "Hail Columbia," by the Brass

Band. Ensign rises at three bells, P.M. No sailor permitted to enter in his shirt-sleeves. Good order is expected to be maintained. The Master-at-arms and Ship's Corporals to be in attendance to keep the peace.

At the earnest entreaties of the seamen, Lemsford, the gun-deck poet, had been prevailed upon to draw up this bill. And upon this one occasion his literary abilities were far from being underrated, even by the least intellectual person on board. Nor must it be omitted that, before the bill was placarded, Captain Claret, enacting the part of censor and grand chamberlain ran over a manuscript copy of "The Old Wagon Paid Off," to see whether it contained anything calculated to breed disaffection against lawful authority among the crew. He objected to some parts, but in the end let them all pass.

The morning of The Fourth--most anxiously awaited--dawned clear and fair. The breeze was steady; the air bracing cold; and one and all the sailors anticipated a gleeful afternoon. And thus was falsified the prophecies of certain old growlers averse to theatricals, who had predicted a gale of wind that would squash all the arrangements of the green-room.

As the men whose regular turns, at the time of the performance, would come round to be stationed in the tops, and at the various halyards and

running ropes about the spar-deck, could not be permitted to partake in the celebration, there accordingly ensued, during the morning, many amusing scenes of tars who were anxious to procure substitutes at their posts. Through the day, many anxious glances were cast to windward; but the weather still promised fair.

At last the people were piped to dinner; two bells struck; and soon after, all who could be spared from their stations hurried to the half-deck. The capstan bars were placed on shot-boxes, as at prayers on Sundays, furnishing seats for the audience, while a low stage, rigged by the carpenter's gang, was built at one end of the open space. The curtain was composed of a large ensign, and the bulwarks round about were draped with the flags of all nations. The ten or twelve members of the brass band were ranged in a row at the foot of the stage, their polished instruments in their hands, while the consequential Captain of the Band himself was elevated upon a gun carriage.

At three bells precisely a group of ward-room officers emerged from the after-hatchway, and seated themselves upon camp-stools, in a central position, with the stars and stripes for a canopy. That was the royal box. The sailors looked round for the Commodore but neither Commodore nor Captain honored the people with their presence.

At the call of a bugle the band struck up Hail Columbia, the whole audience keeping time, as at Drury Lane, when God Save The King is played after a great national victory.

At the discharge of a marine's musket the curtain rose, and four sailors, in the picturesque garb of Maltese mariners, staggered on the stage in a feigned state of intoxication. The truthfulness of the representation was much heightened by the roll of the ship.

"The Commodore," "Old Luff," "The Mayor," and "Gin and Sugar Sall," were played to admiration, and received great applause. But at the first appearance of that universal favourite, Jack Chase, in the chivalric character of Percy Royal-Mast, the whole audience simultaneously rose to their feet, and greeted him with three hearty cheers, that almost took the main-top-sail aback.

Matchless Jack, in full fig, bowed again and again, with true quarter-deck grace and self possession; and when five or six untwisted strands of rope and bunches of oakum were thrown to him, as substitutes for bouquets, he took them one by one, and gallantly hung them from the buttons of his jacket.

"Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!--go on! go on!--stop hollering--hurrah!--go on!--stop hollering--hurrah!" was now heard on all sides, till at last, seeing no end to the enthusiasm of his ardent admirers, Matchless Jack stepped forward, and, with his lips moving in pantomime, plunged into the thick of the part. Silence soon followed, but was fifty times broken by uncontrollable bursts of applause. At length, when that heart-thrilling scene came on, where Percy Royal-Mast rescues fifteen

oppressed sailors from the watch-house, in the teeth of a posse of constables, the audience leaped to their feet, overturned the capstan bars, and to a man hurled their hats on the stage in a delirium of delight. Ah Jack, that was a ten-stroke indeed!

The commotion was now terrific; all discipline seemed gone for ever; the Lieutenants ran in among the men, the Captain darted from his cabin, and the Commodore nervously questioned the armed sentry at his door as to what the deuce the people were about. In the midst of all this, the trumpet of the officer-of-the-deck, commanding the top-gallant sails to be taken in, was almost completely drowned. A black squall was coming down on the weather-bow, and the boat-swain's mates bellowed themselves hoarse at the main-hatchway. There is no knowing what would have ensued, had not the bass drum suddenly been heard, calling all hands to quarters, a summons not to be withstood. The sailors pricked their ears at it, as horses at the sound of a cracking whip, and confusedly stumbled up the ladders to their stations. The next moment all was silent but the wind, howling like a thousand devils in the cordage.

"Stand by to reef all three top-sails!--settle away the halyards!--haul out--so: make fast!--aloft, top-men! and reef away!"

Thus, in storm and tempest terminated that day's theatricals. But the sailors never recovered from the disappointment of not having the "True Yankee Sailor" sung by the Irish Captain of the Head.

And here White-jacket must moralize a bit. The unwonted spectacle of the row of gun-room officers mingling with "the people" in applauding a mere seaman like Jack Chase, filled me at the time with the most pleasurable emotions. It is a sweet thing, thought I, to see these officers confess a human brotherhood with us, after all; a sweet thing to mark their cordial appreciation of the manly merits of my matchless Jack. Ah! they are noble fellows all round, and I do not know but I have wronged them sometimes in my thoughts.

Nor was it without similar pleasurable feelings that I witnessed the temporary rupture of the ship's stern discipline, consequent upon the tumult of the theatricals. I thought to myself, this now is as it should be. It is good to shake off, now and then, this iron yoke round our necks. And after having once permitted us sailors to be a little noisy, in a harmless way--somewhat merrily turbulent--the officers cannot, with any good grace, be so excessively stern and unyielding as before. I began to think a man-of-war a man-of-peace-and-good-will, after all. But, alas! disappointment came.

Next morning the same old scene was enacted at the gang-way. And beholding the row of uncompromising-looking-officers there assembled with the Captain, to witness punishment--the same officers who had been so cheerfully disposed over night--an old sailor touched my shoulder and said, "See, White-Jacket, all round they have shipped their quarter-deck faces again. But this is the way."

I afterward learned that this was an old man-of-war's-man's phrase, expressive of the facility with which a sea-officer falls back upon all the severity of his dignity, after a temporary suspension of it.