

CHAPTER XXVII.

SOME THOUGHTS GROWING OUT OF MAD JACK'S COUNTERMANDING HIS SUPERIOR'S ORDER.

In time of peril, like the needle to the loadstone, obedience, irrespective of rank, generally flies to him who is best fitted to command. The truth of this seemed evinced in the case of Mad Jack, during the gale, and especially at that perilous moment when he countermanded the Captain's order at the helm. But every seaman knew, at the time, that the Captain's order was an unwise one in the extreme; perhaps worse than unwise.

These two orders given, by the Captain and his Lieutenant, exactly contrasted their characters. By putting the helm hard up, the Captain was for scudding; that is, for flying away from the gale. Whereas, Mad Jack was for running the ship into its teeth. It is needless to say that, in almost all cases of similar hard squalls and gales, the latter step, though attended with more appalling appearances is, in reality, the safer of the two, and the most generally adopted.

Scudding makes you a slave to the blast, which drives you headlong before it; but running up into the wind's eye enables you, in a degree, to hold it at bay. Scudding exposes to the gale your stern, the weakest part of your hull; the contrary course presents to it your

bows, your strongest part. As with ships, so with men; he who turns his back to his foe gives him an advantage. Whereas, our ribbed chests, like the ribbed bows of a frigate, are as bulkheads to dam off an onset.

That night, off the pitch of the Cape, Captain Claret was hurried forth from his disguises, and, at a manhood-testing conjuncture, appeared in his true colours. A thing which every man in the ship had long suspected that night was proved true. Hitherto, in going about the ship, and casting his glances among the men, the peculiarly lustreless repose of the Captain's eye--his slow, even, unnecessarily methodical step, and the forced firmness of his whole demeanour--though, to a casual observer, expressive of the consciousness of command and a desire to strike subjection among the crew--all this, to some minds, had only been deemed indications of the fact that Captain Claret, while carefully shunning positive excesses, continually kept himself in an uncertain equilibrio between soberness and its reverse; which equilibrio might be destroyed by the first sharp vicissitude of events.

And though this is only a surmise, nevertheless, as having some knowledge of brandy and mankind, White-Jacket will venture to state that, had Captain Claret been an out-and-out temperance man, he would never have given that most imprudent order to hard up the helm. He would either have held his peace, and stayed in his cabin, like his gracious majesty the Commodore, or else have anticipated Mad Jack's order, and thundered forth "Hard down the helm!"

To show how little real sway at times have the severest restrictive laws, and how spontaneous is the instinct of discretion in some minds, it must here be added, that though Mad Jack, under a hot impulse, had countermanded an order of his superior officer before his very face, yet that severe Article of War, to which he thus rendered himself obnoxious, was never enforced against him. Nor, so far as any of the crew ever knew, did the Captain even venture to reprimand him for his temerity.

It has been said that Mad Jack himself was a lover of strong drink. So he was. But here we only see the virtue of being placed in a station constantly demanding a cool head and steady nerves, and the misfortune of filling a post that does not at all times demand these qualities. So exact and methodical in most things was the discipline of the frigate, that, to a certain extent, Captain Claret was exempted from personal interposition in many of its current events, and thereby, perhaps, was he lulled into security, under the enticing lee of his decanter.

But as for Mad Jack, he must stand his regular watches, and pace the quarter-deck at night, and keep a sharp eye to windward. Hence, at sea, Mad Jack tried to make a point of keeping sober, though in very fine weather he was sometimes betrayed into a glass too many. But with Cape Horn before him, he took the temperance pledge outright, till that perilous promontory should be far astern.

The leading incident of the gale irresistibly invites the question, Are there incompetent officers in the American navy?--that is, incompetent to the due performance of whatever duties may devolve upon them. But in that gallant marine, which, during the late war, gained so much of what is called glory, can there possibly be to-day incompetent officers?

As in the camp ashore, so on the quarter-deck at sea--the trumpets of one victory drown the muffled drums of a thousand defeats. And, in degree, this holds true of those events of war which are neuter in their character, neither making renown nor disgrace. Besides, as a long array of ciphers, led by but one solitary numeral, swell, by mere force of aggregation, into an immense arithmetical sum, even so, in some brilliant actions, do a crowd of officers, each inefficient in himself, aggregate renown when banded together, and led by a numeral Nelson or a Wellington. And the renown of such heroes, by outliving themselves, descends as a heritage to their subordinate survivors. One large brain and one large heart have virtue sufficient to magnetise a whole fleet or an army. And if all the men who, since the beginning of the world, have mainly contributed to the warlike successes or reverses of nations, were now mustered together, we should be amazed to behold but a handful of heroes. For there is no heroism in merely running in and out a gun at a port-hole, enveloped in smoke or vapour, or in firing off muskets in platoons at the word of command. This kind of merely manual valour is often born of trepidation at the heart. There may be men, individually craven, who, united, may display even temerity. Yet it would be false to deny that, in some in-stances, the lowest privates

have acquitted themselves with even more gallantry than their commodores. True heroism is not in the hand, but in the heart and the head.

But are there incompetent officers in the gallant American navy? For an American, the question is of no grateful cast. White Jacket must again evade it, by referring to an historical fact in the history of a kindred marine, which, from its long standing and magnitude, furnishes many more examples of all kinds than our own. And this is the only reason why it is ever referred to in this narrative. I thank God I am free from all national invidiousness.

It is indirectly on record in the books of the English Admiralty, that in the year 1808--after the death of Lord Nelson--when Lord Collingwood commanded on the Mediterranean station, and his broken health induced him to solicit a furlough, that out of a list of upward of one hundred admirals, not a single officer was found who was deemed qualified to relieve the applicant with credit to the country. This fact Collingwood sealed with his life; for, hopeless of being recalled, he shortly after died, worn out, at his post. Now, if this was the case in so renowned a marine as England's, what must be inferred with respect to our own? But herein no special disgrace is involved. For the truth is, that to be an accomplished and skillful naval generalissimo needs natural capabilities of an uncommon order. Still more, it may safely be asserted, that, worthily to command even a frigate, requires a degree of natural heroism, talent, judgment, and integrity, that is denied to

mediocrity. Yet these qualifications are not only required, but demanded; and no one has a right to be a naval captain unless he possesses them.

Regarding Lieutenants, there are not a few Selvagees and Paper Jacks in the American navy. Many Commodores know that they have seldom taken a line-of-battle ship to sea, without feeling more or less nervousness when some of the Lieutenants have the deck at night.

According to the last Navy Register (1849), there are now 68 Captains in the American navy, collectively drawing about \$300,000 annually from the public treasury; also, 297 Commanders, drawing about \$200,000; and 377 Lieutenants, drawing about half a million; and 451 Midshipmen (including Passed-midshipmen), also drawing nearly half a million. Considering the known facts, that some of these officers are seldom or never sent to sea, owing to the Navy Department being well aware of their inefficiency; that others are detailed for pen-and-ink work at observatories, and solvers of logarithms in the Coast Survey; while the really meritorious officers, who are accomplished practical seamen, are known to be sent from ship to ship, with but small interval of a furlough; considering all this, it is not too much to say, that no small portion of the million and a half of money above mentioned is annually paid to national pensioners in disguise, who live on the navy without serving it.

Nothing like this can be even insinuated against the "forward

officers"--Boatswains, Gunners, etc.; nor against the petty officers--Captains of the Tops, etc.; nor against the able seamen in the navy. For if any of these are found wanting, they are forthwith disgraced or discharged.

True, all experience teaches that, whenever there is a great national establishment, employing large numbers of officials, the public must be reconciled to support many incompetent men; for such is the favouritism and nepotism always prevailing in the purlieus of these establishments, that some incompetent persons are always admitted, to the exclusion of many of the worthy.

Nevertheless, in a country like ours, boasting of the political equality of all social conditions, it is a great reproach that such a thing as a common seaman rising to the rank of a commissioned officer in our navy, is nowadays almost unheard-of. Yet, in former times, when officers have so risen to rank, they have generally proved of signal usefulness in the service, and sometimes have reflected solid honour upon the country. Instances in point might be mentioned.

Is it not well to have our institutions of a piece? Any American landsman may hope to become President of the Union--commodore of our squadron of states. And every American sailor should be placed in such a position, that he might freely aspire to command a squadron of frigates.