

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE NIGHT-WATCHES.

Though leaving the Cape behind us, the severe cold still continued, and one of its worst consequences was the almost incurable drowsiness induced thereby during the long night-watches. All along the decks, huddled between the guns, stretched out on the carronade slides, and in every accessible nook and corner, you would see the sailors wrapped in their monkey jackets, in a state of half-conscious torpidity, lying still and freezing alive, without the power to rise and shake themselves.

"Up--up, you lazy dogs!" our good-natured Third Lieutenant, a Virginian, would cry, rapping them with his speaking trumpet. "Get up, and stir about."

But in vain. They would rise for an instant, and as soon as his back was turned, down they would drop, as if shot through the heart.

Often I have lain thus when the fact, that if I laid much longer I would actually freeze to death, would come over me with such overpowering force as to break the icy spell, and starting to my feet, I would endeavour to go through the combined manual and pedal exercise to restore the circulation. The first fling of my benumbed arm

generally struck me in the face, instead of smiting my chest, its true destination. But in these cases one's muscles have their own way.

In exercising my other extremities, I was obliged to hold on to something, and leap with both feet; for my limbs seemed as destitute of joints as a pair of canvas pants spread to dry, and frozen stiff.

When an order was given to haul the braces--which required the strength of the entire watch, some two hundred men--a spectator would have supposed that all hands had received a stroke of the palsy. Roused from their state of enchantment, they came halting and limping across the decks, falling against each other, and, for a few moments, almost unable to handle the ropes. The slightest exertion seemed intolerable; and frequently a body of eighty or a hundred men summoned to brace the main-yard, would hang over the rope for several minutes, waiting for some active fellow to pick it up and put it into their hands. Even then, it was some time before they were able to do anything. They made all the motions usual in hauling a rope, but it was a long time before the yard budged an inch. It was to no purpose that the officers swore at them, or sent the midshipmen among them to find out who those "horse-marines" and "sogers" were. The sailors were so enveloped in monkey jackets, that in the dark night there was no telling one from the other.

"Here, you, sir!" cries little Mr. Pert eagerly catching hold of the skirts of an old sea-dog, and trying to turn him round, so as to peer

under his tarpaulin. "Who are you, sir? What's your name?"

"Find out, Milk-and-Water," was the impertinent rejoinder.

"Blast you! you old rascal; I'll have you licked for that! Tell me his name, some of you!" turning round to the bystanders.

"Gammon!" cries a voice at a distance.

"Hang me, but I know you, sir! and here's at you!" and, so saying, Mr. Pert drops the impenetrable unknown, and makes into the crowd after the bodiless voice. But the attempt to find an owner for that voice is quite as idle as the effort to discover the contents of the monkey jacket.

And here sorrowful mention must be made of something which, during this state of affairs, most sorely afflicted me. Most monkey jackets are of a dark hue; mine, as I have fifty times repeated, and say again, was white. And thus, in those long, dark nights, when it was my quarter-watch on deck, and not in the top, and others went skulking and "sogering" about the decks, secure from detection--their identity undiscoverable--my own hapless jacket for ever proclaimed the name of its wearer. It gave me many a hard job, which otherwise I should have escaped. When an officer wanted a man for any particular duty--running aloft, say, to communicate some slight order to the captains of the tops--how easy, in that mob of incognitoes, to individualise "that

white jacket," and dispatch him on the errand. Then, it would never do for me to hang back when the ropes were being pulled.

Indeed, upon all these occasions, such alacrity and cheerfulness was I obliged to display, that I was frequently held up as an illustrious example of activity, which the rest were called upon to emulate.

"Pull--pull! you lazy lubbers! Look at White-Jacket, there; pull like him!"

Oh! how I execrated my luckless garment; how often I scoured the deck with it to give it a tawny hue; how often I supplicated the inexorable Brush, captain of the paint-room, for just one brushful of his invaluable pigment. Frequently, I meditated giving it a toss overboard; but I had not the resolution. Jacketless at sea! Jacketless so near Cape Horn! The thought was unendurable. And, at least, my garment was a jacket in name, if not in utility.

At length I essayed a "swap." "Here, Bob," said I, assuming all possible suavity, and accosting a mess-mate with a sort of diplomatic assumption of superiority, "suppose I was ready to part with this 'grego' of mine, and take yours in exchange--what would you give me to boot?"

"Give you to boot?" he exclaimed, with horror; "I wouldn't take your infernal jacket for a gift!"

How I hailed every snow-squall; for then--blessings on them!--many of the men became white-jackets along with myself; and, powdered with the flakes, we all looked like millers.

We had six lieutenants, all of whom, with the exception of the First Lieutenant, by turns headed the watches. Three of these officers, including Mad Jack, were strict disciplinarians, and never permitted us to lay down on deck during the night. And, to tell the truth, though it caused much growling, it was far better for our health to be thus kept on our feet. So promenading was all the vogue. For some of us, however, it was like pacing in a dungeon; for, as we had to keep at our stations--some at the halyards, some at the braces, and elsewhere--and were not allowed to stroll about indefinitely, and fairly take the measure of the ship's entire keel, we were fain to confine ourselves to the space of a very few feet. But the worse of this was soon over. The suddenness of the change in the temperature consequent on leaving Cape Horn, and steering to the northward with a ten-knot breeze, is a noteworthy thing. To-day, you are assailed by a blast that seems to have edged itself on icebergs; but in a little more than a week, your jacket may be superfluous.

One word more about Cape Horn, and we have done with it.

Years hence, when a ship-canal shall have penetrated the Isthmus of Darien, and the traveller be taking his seat in the ears at Cape Cod for Astoria, it will be held a thing almost incredible that, for so

long a period, vessels bound to the Nor'-west Coast from New York should, by going round Cape Horn, have lengthened their voyages some thousands of miles. "In those unenlightened days" (I quote, in advance, the language of some future philosopher), "entire years were frequently consumed in making the voyage to and from the Spice Islands, the present fashionable watering-place of the beau-monde of Oregon." Such must be our national progress.

Why, sir, that boy of yours will, one of these days, be sending your grandson to the salubrious city of Jeddo to spend his summer vacations.