

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE GUNNER UNDER HATCHES.

Among such a crowd of marked characters as were to be met with on board our frigate, many of whom moved in mysterious circles beneath the lowermost deck, and at long intervals flitted into sight like apparitions, and disappeared again for whole weeks together, there were some who inordinately excited my curiosity, and whose names, callings, and precise abodes I industriously sought out, in order to learn something satisfactory concerning them.

While engaged in these inquiries, often fruitless, or but partially gratified, I could not but regret that there was no public printed Directory for the Neversink, such as they have in large towns, containing an alphabetic list of all the crew, and where they might be found. Also, in losing myself in some remote, dark corner of the bowels of the frigate, in the vicinity of the various store-rooms, shops, and warehouses, I much lamented that no enterprising tar had yet thought of compiling a Hand-book of the Neversink, so that the tourist might have a reliable guide.

Indeed, there were several parts of the ship under hatches shrouded in mystery, and completely inaccessible to the sailor.

Wondrous old doors, barred and bolted in dingy bulkheads, must have opened into regions full of interest to a successful explorer.

They looked like the gloomy entrances to family vaults of buried dead; and when I chanced to see some unknown functionary insert his key, and enter these inexplicable apartments with a battle-lantern, as if on solemn official business, I almost quaked to dive in with him, and satisfy myself whether these vaults indeed contained the mouldering relics of by-gone old Commodores and Post-captains. But the habitations of the living commodore and captain--their spacious and curtained cabins--were themselves almost as sealed volumes, and I passed them in hopeless wonderment, like a peasant before a prince's palace. Night and day armed sentries guarded their sacred portals, cutlass in hand; and had I dared to cross their path, I would infallibly have been cut down, as if in battle. Thus, though for a period of more than a year I was an inmate of this floating box of live-oak, yet there were numberless things in it that, to the last, remained wrapped in obscurity, or concerning which I could only lose myself in vague speculations. I was as a Roman Jew of the Middle Ages, confined to the Jews' quarter of the town, and forbidden to stray beyond my limits. Or I was as a modern traveller in the same famous city, forced to quit it at last without gaining ingress to the most mysterious haunts--the innermost shrine of the Pope, and the dungeons and cells of the Inquisition.

But among all the persons and things on board that puzzled me, and filled me most with strange emotions of doubt, misgivings and mystery,

was the Gunner--a short, square, grim man, his hair and beard grizzled and singed, as if with gunpowder. His skin was of a flecky brown, like the stained barrel of a fowling-piece, and his hollow eyes burned in his head like blue-lights. He it was who had access to many of those mysterious vaults I have spoken of. Often he might be seen groping his way into them, followed by his subalterns, the old quarter-gunners, as if intent upon laying a train of powder to blow up the ship. I remembered Guy Fawkes and the Parliament-house, and made earnest inquiry whether this gunner was a Roman Catholic. I felt relieved when informed that he was not.

A little circumstance which one of his mates once told me heightened the gloomy interest with which I regarded his chief. He told me that, at periodical intervals, his master the Gunner, accompanied by his phalanx, entered into the great Magazine under the Gun-room, of which he had sole custody and kept the key, nearly as big as the key of the Bastile, and provided with lanterns, something like Sir Humphrey Davy's Safety-lamp for coal mines, proceeded to turn, end for end, all the kegs of powder and packages of cartridges stored in this innermost explosive vault, lined throughout with sheets of copper. In the vestibule of the Magazine, against the panelling, were several pegs for slippers, and, before penetrating further than that vestibule, every man of the gunner's gang silently removed his shoes, for fear that the nails in their heels might possibly create a spark, by striking against the coppered floor within. Then, with slippared feet and with hushed whispers, they stole into the heart of the place.

This turning of the powder was to preserve its inflammability. And surely it was a business full of direful interest, to be buried so deep below the sun, handling whole barrels of powder, any one of which, touched by the smallest spark, was powerful enough to blow up a whole street of warehouses.

The gunner went by the name of Old Combustibles, though I thought this an undignified name for so momentous a personage, who had all our lives in his hand.

While we lay in Callao, we received from shore several barrels of powder. So soon as the launch came alongside with them, orders were given to extinguish all lights and all fires in the ship; and the master-at-arms and his corporals inspected every deck to see that this order was obeyed; a very prudent precaution, no doubt, but not observed at all in the Turkish navy. The Turkish sailors will sit on their gun-carriages, tranquilly smoking, while kegs of powder are being rolled under their ignited pipe-bowls. This shows the great comfort there is in the doctrine of these Fatalists, and how such a doctrine, in some things at least, relieves men from nervous anxieties. But we all are Fatalists at bottom. Nor need we so much marvel at the heroism of that army officer, who challenged his personal foe to bestride a barrel of powder with him--the match to be placed between them--and be blown up in good company, for it is pretty certain that the whole earth itself is a vast hogshead, full of inflammable materials, and which we

are always bestriding; at the same time, that all good Christians believe that at any minute the last day may come and the terrible combustion of the entire planet ensue.

As if impressed with a befitting sense of the awfulness of his calling, our gunner always wore a fixed expression of solemnity, which was heightened by his grizzled hair and beard. But what imparted such a sinister look to him, and what wrought so upon my imagination concerning this man, was a frightful scar crossing his left cheek and forehead. He had been almost mortally wounded, they said, with a sabre-cut, during a frigate engagement in the last war with Britain.

He was the most methodical, exact, and punctual of all the forward officers. Among his other duties, it pertained to him, while in harbour, to see that at a certain hour in the evening one of the great guns was discharged from the fore-castle, a ceremony only observed in a flag-ship. And always at the precise moment you might behold him blowing his match, then applying it; and with that booming thunder in his ear, and the smell of the powder in his hair, he retired to his hammock for the night. What dreams he must have had!

The same precision was observed when ordered to fire a gun to bring to some ship at sea; for, true to their name, and preserving its applicability, even in times of peace, all men-of-war are great bullies on the high seas. They domineer over the poor merchantmen, and with a hissing hot ball sent bowling across the ocean, compel them to stop

their headway at pleasure.

It was enough to make you a man of method for life, to see the gunner superintending his subalterns, when preparing the main-deck batteries for a great national salute. While lying in harbour, intelligence reached us of the lamentable casualty that befell certain high officers of state, including the acting Secretary of the Navy himself, some other member of the President's cabinet, a Commodore, and others, all engaged in experimenting upon a new-fangled engine of war. At the same time with the receipt of this sad news, orders arrived to fire minute-guns for the deceased head of the naval department. Upon this occasion the gunner was more than usually ceremonious, in seeing that the long twenty-fours were thoroughly loaded and rammed down, and then accurately marked with chalk, so as to be discharged in undeviating rotation, first from the larboard side, and then from the starboard.

But as my ears hummed, and all my bones danced in me with the reverberating din, and my eyes and nostrils were almost suffocated with the smoke, and when I saw this grim old gunner firing away so solemnly, I thought it a strange mode of honouring a man's memory who had himself been slaughtered by a cannon. Only the smoke, that, after rolling in at the port-holes, rapidly drifted away to leeward, and was lost to view, seemed truly emblematical touching the personage thus honoured, since that great non-combatant, the Bible, assures us that our life is but a vapour, that quickly passeth away.