

CHAPTER XLIV.

A KNAVE IN OFFICE IN A MAN-OF-WAR.

The last smuggling story now about to be related also occurred while we lay in Rio. It is the more particularly presented, since it furnishes the most curious evidence of the almost incredible corruption pervading nearly all ranks in some men-of-war.

For some days, the number of intoxicated sailors collared and brought up to the mast by the master-at-arms, to be reported to the deck-officers--previous to a flogging at the gangway--had, in the last degree, excited the surprise and vexation of the Captain and senior officers. So strict were the Captain's regulations concerning the suppression of grog-smuggling, and so particular had he been in charging the matter upon all the Lieutenants, and every understrapper official in the frigate, that he was wholly at a loss how so large a quantity of spirits could have been spirited into the ship, in the face of all these checks, guards, and precautions.

Still additional steps were adopted to detect the smugglers; and Bland, the master-at-arms, together with his corporals, were publicly harangued at the mast by the Captain in person, and charged to exert their best powers in suppressing the traffic. Crowds were present at the time, and saw the master-at-arms touch his cap in obsequious

homage, as he solemnly assured the Captain that he would still continue to do his best; as, indeed, he said he had always done. He concluded with a pious ejaculation expressive of his personal abhorrence of smuggling and drunkenness, and his fixed resolution, so help him Heaven, to spend his last wink in sitting up by night, to spy out all deeds of darkness.

"I do not doubt you, master-at-arms," returned the Captain; "now go to your duty." This master-at-arms was a favourite of the Captain's.

The next morning, before breakfast, when the market-boat came off (that is, one of the ship's boats regularly deputed to bring off the daily fresh provisions for the officers)--when this boat came off, the master-at-arms, as usual, after carefully examining both her and her crew, reported them to the deck-officer to be free from suspicion. The provisions were then hoisted out, and among them came a good-sized wooden box, addressed to "Mr. ---- Purser of the United States ship Neversink." Of course, any private matter of this sort, destined for a gentleman of the ward-room, was sacred from examination, and the master-at-arms commanded one of his corporals to carry it down into the Purser's state-room. But recent occurrences had sharpened the vigilance of the deck-officer to an unwonted degree, and seeing the box going down the hatchway, he demanded what that was, and whom it was for.

"All right, sir," said the master-at-arms, touching his cap; "stores for the Purser, sir."

"Let it remain on deck," said the Lieutenant. "Mr. Montgomery!" calling a midshipman, "ask the Purser whether there is any box coming off for him this morning."

"Ay, ay, sir," said the middy, touching his cap.

Presently he returned, saying that the Purser was ashore.

"Very good, then; Mr. Montgomery, have that box put into the 'brig,' with strict orders to the sentry not to suffer any one to touch it."

"Had I not better take it down into my mess, sir, till the Purser comes off?" said the master-at-arms, deferentially.

"I have given my orders, sir!" said the Lieutenant, turning away.

When the Purser came on board, it turned out that he knew nothing at all about the box. He had never so much as heard of it in his life. So it was again brought up before the deck-officer, who immediately summoned the master-at-arms.

"Break open that box!"

"Certainly, sir!" said the master-at-arms; and, wrenching off the cover, twenty-five brown jugs like a litter of twenty-five brown pigs,

were found snugly nestled in a bed of straw.

"The smugglers are at work, sir," said the master-at-arms, looking up.

"Uncork and taste it," said the officer.

The master-at-arms did so; and, smacking his lips after a puzzled fashion, was a little doubtful whether it was American whisky or Holland gin; but he said he was not used to liquor.

"Brandy; I know it by the smell," said the officer; "return the box to the brig."

"Ay, ay, sir," said the master-at-arms, redoubling his activity.

The affair was at once reported to the Captain, who, incensed at the audacity of the thing, adopted every plan to detect the guilty parties. Inquiries were made ashore; but by whom the box had been brought down to the market-boat there was no finding out. Here the matter rested for a time.

Some days after, one of the boys of the mizzen-top was flogged for drunkenness, and, while suspended in agony at the gratings, was made to reveal from whom he had procured his spirits. The man was called, and turned out to be an old superannuated marine, one Scriggs, who did the cooking for the marine-sergeants and masters-at-arms' mess. This marine

was one of the most villainous-looking fellows in the ship, with a squinting, pick-lock, gray eye, and hang-dog gallows gait. How such a most unmartial vagabond had insinuated himself into the honourable marine corps was a perfect mystery. He had always been noted for his personal uncleanliness, and among all hands, fore and aft, had the reputation of being a notorious old miser, who denied himself the few comforts, and many of the common necessaries of a man-of-war life.

Seeing no escape, Scriggs fell on his knees before the Captain, and confessed the charge of the boy. Observing the fellow to be in an agony of fear at the sight of the boat-swain's mates and their lashes, and all the striking parade of public punishment, the Captain must have thought this a good opportunity for completely pumping him of all his secrets. This terrified marine was at length forced to reveal his having been for some time an accomplice in a complicated system of underhand villainy, the head of which was no less a personage than the indefatigable chief of police, the master-at-arms himself. It appeared that this official had his confidential agents ashore, who supplied him with spirits, and in various boxes, packages, and bundles--addressed to the Purser and others--brought them down to the frigate's boats at the landing. Ordinarily, the appearance of these things for the Purser and other ward-room gentlemen occasioned no surprise; for almost every day some bundle or other is coming off for them, especially for the Purser; and, as the master-at-arms was always present on these occasions, it was an easy matter for him to hurry the smuggled liquor out of sight, and, under pretence of carrying the box or bundle down to the Purser's

room, hide it away upon his own premises.

The miserly marine, Scriggs, with the pick-lock eye, was the man who clandestinely sold the spirits to the sailors, thus completely keeping the master-at-arms in the background. The liquor sold at the most exorbitant prices; at one time reaching twelve dollars the bottle in cash, and thirty dollars a bottle in orders upon the Purser, to be honored upon the frigate's arrival home. It may seem incredible that such prices should have been given by the sailors; but when some man-of-war's-men crave liquor, and it is hard to procure, they would almost barter ten years of their life-time for but one solitary "tot" if they could.

The sailors who became intoxicated with the liquor thus smuggled on board by the master-at-arms, were, in almost numberless instances, officially seized by that functionary and scourged at the gangway. In a previous place it has been shown how conspicuous a part the master-at-arms enacts at this scene.

The ample profits of this iniquitous business were divided, between all the parties concerned in it; Scriggs, the marine, coming in for one third. His cook's mess-chest being brought on deck, four canvas bags of silver were found in it, amounting to a sum something short of as many hundred dollars.

The guilty parties were scourged, double-ironed, and for several weeks

were confined in the "brig" under a sentry; all but the master-at-arms, who was merely cashiered and imprisoned for a time; with bracelets at his wrists. Upon being liberated, he was turned adrift among the ship's company; and by way of disgracing him still more, was thrust into the waist, the most inglorious division of the ship.

Upon going to dinner one day, I found him soberly seated at my own mess; and at first I could not but feel some very serious scruples about dining with him. Nevertheless, he was a man to study and digest; so, upon a little reflection; I was not displeased at his presence. It amazed me, however, that he had wormed himself into the mess, since so many of the other messes had declined the honour, until at last, I ascertained that he had induced a mess-mate of ours, a distant relation of his, to prevail upon the cook to admit him.

Now it would not have answered for hardly any other mess in the ship to have received this man among them, for it would have torn a huge rent in their reputation; but our mess, A. No. 1--the Forty-two-pounder Club--was composed of so fine a set of fellows; so many captains of tops, and quarter-masters--men of undeniable mark on board ship--of long-established standing and consideration on the gun-deck; that, with impunity, we could do so many equivocal things, utterly inadmissible for messes of inferior pretension. Besides, though we all abhorred the monster of Sin itself, yet, from our social superiority, highly rarified education in our lofty top, and large and liberal sweep of the aggregate of things, we were in a good degree free from those useless,

personal prejudices, and galling hatreds against conspicuous sinners, not Sin--which so widely prevail among men of warped understandings and unchristian and uncharitable hearts. No; the superstitions and dogmas concerning Sin had not laid their withering maxims upon our hearts. We perceived how that evil was but good disguised, and a knave a saint in his way; how that in other planets, perhaps, what we deem wrong, may there be deemed right; even as some substances, without undergoing any mutations in themselves utterly change their colour, according to the light thrown upon them. We perceived that the anticipated millennium must have begun upon the morning the first words were created; and that, taken all in all, our man-of-war world itself was as eligible a round-sterned craft as any to be found in the Milky Way. And we fancied that though some of us, of the gun-deck, were at times condemned to sufferings and blights, and all manner of tribulation and anguish, yet, no doubt, it was only our misapprehension of these things that made us take them for woeful pains instead of the most agreeable pleasures. I have dreamed of a sphere, says Pinzella, where to break a man on the wheel is held the most exquisite of delights you can confer upon him; where for one gentleman in any way to vanquish another is accounted an everlasting dishonour; where to tumble one into a pit after death, and then throw cold clods upon his upturned face, is a species of contumely, only inflicted upon the most notorious criminals.

But whatever we mess-mates thought, in whatever circumstances we found ourselves, we never forgot that our frigate, had as it was, was

homeward-bound. Such, at least, were our reveries at times, though sorely jarred, now and then, by events that took our philosophy aback. For after all, philosophy--that is, the best wisdom that has ever in any way been revealed to our man-of-war world--is but a slough and a mire, with a few tufts of good footing here and there.

But there was one man in the mess who would have naught to do with our philosophy--a churlish, ill-tempered, unphilosophical, superstitious old bear of a quarter-gunner; a believer in Tophet, for which he was accordingly preparing himself. Priming was his name; but methinks I have spoken of him before.

Besides, this Bland, the master-at-arms, was no vulgar, dirty knave. In him--to modify Burke's phrase--vice seemed, but only seemed, to lose half its seeming evil by losing all its apparent grossness. He was a neat and gentlemanly villain, and broke his biscuit with a dainty hand. There was a fine polish about his whole person, and a pliant, insinuating style in his conversation, that was, socially, quite irresistible. Save my noble captain, Jack Chase, he proved himself the most entertaining, I had almost said the most companionable man in the mess. Nothing but his mouth, that was somewhat small, Moorish-arched, and wickedly delicate, and his snaky, black eye, that at times shone like a dark-lantern in a jeweller-shop at midnight, betokened the accomplished scoundrel within. But in his conversation there was no trace of evil; nothing equivocal; he studiously shunned an indelicacy, never swore, and chiefly abounded in passing puns and witticisms,

varied with humorous contrasts between ship and shore life, and many agreeable and racy anecdotes, very tastefully narrated. In short--in a merely psychological point of view, at least--he was a charming blackleg. Ashore, such a man might have been an irreproachable mercantile swindler, circulating in polite society.

But he was still more than this. Indeed, I claim for this master-at-arms a lofty and honourable niche in the Newgate Calendar of history. His intrepidity, coolness, and wonderful self-possession in calmly resigning himself to a fate that thrust him from an office in which he had tyrannised over five hundred mortals, many of whom hated and loathed him, passed all belief; his intrepidity, I say, in now fearlessly gliding among them, like a disarmed swordfish among ferocious white-sharks; this, surely, bespoke no ordinary man. While in office, even, his life had often been secretly attempted by the seamen whom he had brought to the gangway. Of dark nights they had dropped shot down the hatchways, destined "to damage his pepper-box," as they phrased it; they had made ropes with a hangman's noose at the end and tried to lasso him in dark corners. And now he was adrift among them, under notorious circumstances of superlative villainy, at last dragged to light; and yet he blandly smiled, politely offered his cigar-holder to a perfect stranger, and laughed and chatted to right and left, as if springy, buoyant, and elastic, with an angelic conscience, and sure of kind friends wherever he went, both in this life and the life to come.

While he was lying ironed in the "brig," gangs of the men were

sometimes overheard whispering about the terrible reception they would give him when he should be set at large. Nevertheless, when liberated, they seemed confounded by his erect and cordial assurance, his gentlemanly sociability and fearless companionableness. From being an implacable policeman, vigilant, cruel, and remorseless in his office, however polished in his phrases, he was now become a disinterested, sauntering man of leisure, winking at all improprieties, and ready to laugh and make merry with any one. Still, at first, the men gave him a wide berth, and returned scowls for his smiles; but who can forever resist the very Devil himself, when he comes in the guise of a gentleman, free, fine, and frank? Though Goethe's pious Margaret hates the Devil in his horns and harpooner's tail, yet she smiles and nods to the engaging fiend in the persuasive, winning, oily, wholly harmless Mephistopheles. But, however it was, I, for one, regarded this master-at-arms with mixed feelings of detestation, pity, admiration, and something opposed to enmity. I could not but abominate him when I thought of his conduct; but I pitied the continual gnawing which, under all his deftly-donned disguises, I saw lying at the bottom of his soul. I admired his heroism in sustaining himself so well under such reverses. And when I thought how arbitrary the Articles of War are in defining a man-of-war villain; how much undetected guilt might be sheltered by the aristocratic awning of our quarter-deck; how many florid pursers, ornaments of the ward-room, had been legally protected in defrauding the people, I could not but say to myself, Well, after all, though this man is a most wicked one indeed, yet is he even more luckless than depraved.

Besides, a studied observation of Bland convinced me that he was an organic and irreclaimable scoundrel, who did wicked deeds as the cattle browse the herbage, because wicked deeds seemed the legitimate operation of his whole infernal organisation. Phrenologically, he was without a soul. Is it to be wondered at, that the devils are irreligious? What, then, thought I, who is to blame in this matter? For one, I will not take the Day of Judgment upon me by authoritatively pronouncing upon the essential criminality of any man-of-war's-man; and Christianity has taught me that, at the last day, man-of-war's-men will not be judged by the Articles of War, nor by the United States Statutes at Large, but by immutable laws, ineffably beyond the comprehension of the honourable Board of Commodores and Navy Commissioners. But though I will stand by even a man-of-war thief, and defend him from being seized up at the gangway, if I can--remembering that my Saviour once hung between two thieves, promising one life-eternal--yet I would not, after the plain conviction of a villain, again let him entirely loose to prey upon honest seamen, fore and aft all three decks. But this did Captain Claret; and though the thing may not perhaps be credited, nevertheless, here it shall be recorded.

After the master-at-arms had been adrift among the ship's company for several weeks, and we were within a few days' sail of home, he was summoned to the mast, and publicly reinstated in his office as the ship's chief of police. Perhaps Captain Claret had read the Memoirs of Vidocq, and believed in the old saying, set a rogue to catch a rogue.

Or, perhaps, he was a man of very tender feelings, highly susceptible to the soft emotions of gratitude, and could not bear to leave in disgrace a person who, out of the generosity of his heart, had, about a year previous, presented him with a rare snuff-box, fabricated from a sperm-whale's tooth, with a curious silver hinge, and cunningly wrought in the shape of a whale; also a splendid gold-mounted cane, of a costly Brazilian wood, with a gold plate, bearing the Captain's name and rank in the service, the place and time of his birth, and with a vacancy underneath--no doubt providentially left for his heirs to record his decease.

Certain it was that, some months previous to the master-at-arms' disgrace, he had presented these articles to the Captain, with his best love and compliments; and the Captain had received them, and seldom went ashore without the cane, and never took snuff but out of that box. With some Captains, a sense of propriety might have induced them to return these presents, when the generous donor had proved himself unworthy of having them retained; but it was not Captain Claret who would inflict such a cutting wound upon any officer's sensibilities, though long-established naval customs had habituated him to scourging the people upon an emergency.

Now had Captain Claret deemed himself constitutionally bound to decline all presents from his subordinates, the sense of gratitude would not have operated to the prejudice of justice. And, as some of the subordinates of a man-of-war captain are apt to invoke his good wishes

and mollify his conscience by making him friendly gifts, it would perhaps have been an excellent thing for him to adopt the plan pursued by the President of the United States, when he received a present of lions and Arabian chargers from the Sultan of Muscat. Being forbidden by his sovereign lords and masters, the imperial people, to accept of any gifts from foreign powers, the President sent them to an auctioneer, and the proceeds were deposited in the Treasury. In the same manner, when Captain Claret received his snuff-box and cane, he might have accepted them very kindly, and then sold them off to the highest bidder, perhaps to the donor himself, who in that case would never have tempted him again.

Upon his return home, Bland was paid off for his full term, not deducting the period of his suspension. He again entered the service in his old capacity.

As no further allusion will be made to this affair, it may as well be stated now that, for the very brief period elapsing between his restoration and being paid off in port by the Purser, the master-at-arms conducted himself with infinite discretion, artfully steering between any relaxation of discipline--which would have awakened the displeasure of the officers--and any unwise severity--which would have revived, in tenfold force, all the old grudges of the seamen under his command.

Never did he show so much talent and tact as when vibrating in this his

most delicate predicament; and plenty of cause was there for the exercise of his cunningest abilities; for, upon the discharge of our man-of-war's-men at home, should he then be held by them as an enemy, as free and independent citizens they would waylay him in the public streets, and take purple vengeance for all his iniquities, past, present, and possible in the future. More than once a master-at-arms ashore has been seized by night by an exasperated crew, and served as Origen served himself, or as his enemies served Abelard.

But though, under extreme provocation, the people of a man-of-war have been guilty of the maddest vengeance, yet, at other times, they are very placable and milky-hearted, even to those who may have outrageously abused them; many things in point might be related, but I forbear.

This account of the master-at-arms cannot better be concluded than by denominating him, in the vivid language of the Captain of the Fore-top, as "the two ends and middle of the thrice-laid strand of a bloody rascal," which was intended for a terse, well-knit, and all-comprehensive assertion, without omission or reservation. It was also asserted that, had Tophet itself been raked with a fine-tooth comb, such another ineffable villain could not by any possibility have been caught.