CHAPTER XLVI.

THE COMMODORE ON THE POOP, AND ONE OF "THE PEOPLE" UNDER THE HANDS OF THE SURGEON.

A day or two after the publication of Lemsford's "Songs of the Sirens," a sad accident befell a mess-mate of mine, one of the captains of the mizzen-top. He was a fine little Scot, who, from the premature loss of the hair on the top of his head, always went by the name of Baldy. This baldness was no doubt, in great part, attributable to the same cause that early thins the locks of most man-of-war's-men--namely, the hard, unyielding, and ponderous man-of-war and navy-regulation tarpaulin hat, which, when new, is stiff enough to sit upon, and indeed, in lieu of his thumb, sometimes serves the common sailor for a bench.

Now, there is nothing upon which the Commodore of a squadron more prides himself than upon the celerity with which his men can handle the sails, and go through with all the evolutions pertaining thereto. This is especially manifested in harbour, when other vessels of his squadron are near, and perhaps the armed ships of rival nations.

Upon these occasions, surrounded by his post-captain sa-traps--each of whom in his own floating island is king--the Commodore domineers over all--emperor of the whole oaken archipelago; yea, magisterial and

magnificent as the Sultan of the Isles of Sooloo.

But, even as so potent an emperor and Caesar to boot as the great Don of Germany, Charles the Fifth, was used to divert himself in his dotage by watching the gyrations of the springs and cogs of a long row of clocks, even so does an elderly Commodore while away his leisure in harbour, by what is called "exercising guns," and also "exercising yards and sails;" causing the various spars of all the ships under his command to be "braced," "topped," and "cock billed" in concert, while the Commodore himself sits, something like King Canute, on an arm-chest on the poop of his flag-ship.

But far more regal than any descendant of Charlemagne, more haughty than any Mogul of the East, and almost mysterious and voiceless in his authority as the Great Spirit of the Five Nations, the Commodore deigns not to verbalise his commands; they are imparted by signal.

And as for old Charles the Fifth, again, the gay-pranked, coloured suits of cards were invented, to while away his dotage, even so, doubtless, must these pretty little signals of blue and red spotted bunting have been devised to cheer the old age of all Commodores.

By the Commodore's side stands the signal-midshipman, with a sea-green bag swung on his shoulder (as a sportsman bears his game-bag), the signal-book in one hand, and the signal spy-glass in the other. As this signal-book contains the Masonic signs and tokens of the navy, and

would there-fore be invaluable to an enemy, its binding is always bordered with lead, so as to insure its sinking in case the ship should be captured. Not the only book this, that might appropriately be bound in lead, though there be many where the author, and not the bookbinder, furnishes the metal.

As White-Jacket understands it, these signals consist of variously-coloured flags, each standing for a certain number. Say there are ten flags, representing the cardinal numbers--the red flag, No. 1; the blue flag, No. 2; the green flag, No. 3, and so forth; then, by mounting the blue flag over the red, that would stand for No. 21: if the green flag were set underneath, it would then stand for 213. How easy, then, by endless transpositions, to multiply the various numbers that may be exhibited at the mizzen-peak, even by only three or four of these flags.

To each number a particular meaning is applied. No. 100, for instance, may mean, "Beat to quarters." No. 150, "All hands to grog." No. 2000, "Strike top-gallant-yards." No. 2110, "See anything to windward?" No. 2800, "No."

And as every man-of-war is furnished with a signal-book, where all these things are set down in order, therefore, though two American frigates--almost perfect strangers to each other--came from the opposite Poles, yet at a distance of more than a mile they could carry on a very liberal conversation in the air.

When several men-of-war of one nation lie at anchor in one port, forming a wide circle round their lord and master, the flag-ship, it is a very interesting sight to see them all obeying the Commodore's orders, who meanwhile never opens his lips.

Thus was it with us in Rio, and hereby hangs the story of my poor messmate Bally.

One morning, in obedience to a signal from our flag-ship, the various vessels belonging to the American squadron then in harbour simultaneously loosened their sails to dry. In the evening, the signal was set to furl them. Upon such occasions, great rivalry exists between the First Lieutenants of the different ships; they vie with each other who shall first have his sails stowed on the yards. And this rivalry is shared between all the officers of each vessel, who are respectively placed over the different top-men; so that the main-mast is all eagerness to vanquish the fore-mast, and the mizzen-mast to vanquish them both. Stimulated by the shouts of their officers, the sailors throughout the squadron exert themselves to the utmost.

"Aloft, topmen! lay out! furl!" cried the First Lieutenant of the Neversink.

At the word the men sprang into the rigging, and on all three masts were soon climbing about the yards, in reckless haste, to execute their

orders.

Now, in furling top-sails or courses, the point of honour, and the hardest work, is in the bunt, or middle of the yard; this post belongs to the first captain of the top.

"What are you 'bout there, mizzen-top-men?" roared the First Lieutenant, through his trumpet. "D----n you, you are clumsy as Russian bears! don't you see the main--top-men are nearly off the yard? Bear a hand, bear a hand, or I'll stop your grog all round! You, Baldy! are you going to sleep there in the bunt?"

While this was being said, poor Baldy--his hat off, his face streaming with perspiration--was frantically exerting himself, piling up the ponderous folds of canvas in the middle of the yard; ever and anon glancing at victorious Jack Chase, hard at work at the main-top-sail-yard before him.

At last, the sail being well piled up, Baldy jumped with both feet into the bunt, holding on with one hand to the chain "tie," and in that manner was violently treading down the canvas, to pack it close.

"D----n you, Baldy, why don't you move, you crawling caterpillar;" roared the First Lieutenant.

Baldy brought his whole weight to bear on the rebellious sail, and in

his frenzied heedlessness let go his hold on the tie.

"You, Baldy! are you afraid of falling?" cried the First Lieutenant.

At that moment, with all his force, Baldy jumped down upon the sail; the bunt gasket parted; and a dark form dropped through the air. Lighting upon the top-rim, it rolled off; and the next instant, with a horrid crash of all his bones, Baldy came, like a thunderbolt, upon the deck.

Aboard of most large men-of-war there is a stout oaken platform, about four feet square, on each side of the quarter-deck. You ascend to it by three or four steps; on top, it is railed in at the sides, with horizontal brass bars. It is called the Horse Block; and there the officer of the deck usually stands, in giving his orders at sea.

It was one of these horse blocks, now unoccupied, that broke poor Baldy's fall. He fell lengthwise across the brass bars, bending them into elbows, and crushing the whole oaken platform, steps and all, right down to the deck in a thousand splinters.

He was picked up for dead, and carried below to the surgeon. His bones seemed like those of a man broken on the wheel, and no one thought he would survive the night. But with the surgeon's skillful treatment he soon promised recovery. Surgeon Cuticle devoted all his science to this case.

A curious frame-work of wood was made for the maimed man; and placed in this, with all his limbs stretched out, Baldy lay flat on the floor of the Sick-bay, for many weeks. Upon our arrival home, he was able to hobble ashore on crutches; but from a hale, hearty man, with bronzed cheeks, he was become a mere dislocated skeleton, white as foam; but ere this, perhaps, his broken bones are healed and whole in the last repose of the man-of-war's-man.

Not many days after Baldy's accident in furling sails--in this same frenzied manner, under the stimulus of a shouting officer--a seaman fell from the main-royal-yard of an English line-of-battle ship near us, and buried his ankle-bones in the deck, leaving two indentations there, as if scooped out by a carpenter's gouge.

The royal-yard forms a cross with the mast, and falling from that lofty cross in a line-of-battle ship is almost like falling from the cross of St. Paul's; almost like falling as Lucifer from the well-spring of morning down to the Phlegethon of night.

In some cases, a man, hurled thus from a yard, has fallen upon his own shipmates in the tops, and dragged them down with him to the same destruction with himself.

Hardly ever will you hear of a man-of-war returning home after a cruise, without the loss of some of her crew from aloft, whereas

similar accidents in the merchant service--considering the much greater number of men employed in it--are comparatively few.

Why mince the matter? The death of most of these man-of-war's-men lies at the door of the souls of those officers, who, while safely standing on deck themselves, scruple not to sacrifice an immortal man or two, in order to show off the excelling discipline of the ship. And thus do the people of the gun-deck suffer, that the Commodore on the poop may be glorified.