

CHAPTER XLIX.

RUMOURS OF A WAR, AND HOW THEY WERE RECEIVED BY THE POPULATION OF THE NEVERSINK.

While lying in the harbour of Callao, in Peru, certain rumours had come to us touching a war with England, growing out of the long-vexed Northeastern Boundary Question. In Rio these rumours were increased; and the probability of hostilities induced our Commodore to authorize proceedings that closely brought home to every man on board the Neversink his liability at any time to be killed at his gun.

Among other things, a number of men were detailed to pass up the rusty cannon-balls from the shot-lockers in the hold, and scrape them clean for service. The Commodore was a very neat gentleman, and would not fire a dirty shot into his foe.

It was an interesting occasion for a tranquil observer; nor was it altogether neglected. Not to recite the precise remarks made by the seamen while pitching the shot up the hatchway from hand to hand, like schoolboys playing ball ashore, it will be enough to say that, from the general drift of their discourse--jocular as it was--it was manifest that, almost to a man, they abhorred the idea of going into action.

And why should they desire a war? Would their wages be raised? Not a

cent. The prize-money, though, ought to have been an inducement. But of all the "rewards of virtue," prize-money is the most uncertain; and this the man-of-war's-man knows. What, then, has he to expect from war? What but harder work, and harder usage than in peace; a wooden leg or arm; mortal wounds, and death? Enough, however, that by far the majority of the common sailors of the Neversink were plainly concerned at the prospect of war, and were plainly averse to it.

But with the officers of the quarter-deck it was just the reverse. None of them, to be sure, in my hearing at least, verbally expressed their gratification; but it was unavoidably betrayed by the increased cheerfulness of their demeanour toward each other, their frequent fraternal conferences, and their unwonted animation for several clays in issuing their orders. The voice of Mad Jack--always a belfry to hear--now resounded like that famous bell of England, Great Tom of Oxford. As for Selvagee, he wore his sword with a jaunty air, and his servant daily polished the blade.

But why this contrast between the fore-castle and the quarter-deck, between the man-of-war's-man and his officer? Because, though war would equally jeopardize the lives of both, yet, while it held out to the sailor no promise of promotion, and what is called glory, these things fired the breast of his officers.

It is no pleasing task, nor a thankful one, to dive into the souls of some men; but there are occasions when, to bring up the mud from the

bottom, reveals to us on what soundings we are, on what coast we adjoin.

How were these officers to gain glory? How but by a distinguished slaughtering of their fellow-men. How were they to be promoted? How but over the buried heads of killed comrades and mess-mates.

This hostile contrast between the feelings with which the common seamen and the officers of the *Neversink* looked forward to this more than possible war, is one of many instances that might be quoted to show the antagonism of their interests, the incurable antagonism in which they dwell. But can men, whose interests are diverse, ever hope to live together in a harmony uncoerced? Can the brotherhood of the race of mankind ever hope to prevail in a man-of-war, where one man's bane is almost another's blessing? By abolishing the scourge, shall we do away tyranny; that tyranny which must ever prevail, where of two essentially antagonistic classes in perpetual contact, one is immeasurably the stronger? Surely it seems all but impossible. And as the very object of a man-of-war, as its name implies, is to fight the very battles so naturally averse to the seamen; so long as a man-of-war exists, it must ever remain a picture of much that is tyrannical and repelling in human nature.

Being an establishment much more extensive than the American Navy, the English armed marine furnishes a yet more striking example of this thing, especially as the existence of war produces so vast an augmentation of her naval force compared with what it is in time of

peace. It is well known what joy the news of Bonaparte's sudden return from Elba created among crowds of British naval officers, who had previously been expecting to be sent ashore on half-pay. Thus, when all the world wailed, these officers found occasion for thanksgiving. I urge it not against them as men--their feelings belonged to their profession. Had they not been naval officers, they had not been rejoicers in the midst of despair.

When shall the time come, how much longer will God postpone it, when the clouds, which at times gather over the horizons of nations, shall not be hailed by any class of humanity, and invoked to burst as a bomb? Standing navies, as well as standing armies, serve to keep alive the spirit of war even in the meek heart of peace. In its very embers and smoulderings, they nourish that fatal fire, and half-pay officers, as the priests of Mars, yet guard the temple, though no god be there.