

CHAPTER LII.

SOMETHING CONCERNING MIDSHIPMEN.

It was the next morning after matchless Jack's interview with the Commodore and Captain, that a little incident occurred, soon forgotten by the crew at large, but long remembered by the few seamen who were in the habit of closely scrutinising every-day proceedings. Upon the face of it, it was but a common event--at least in a man-of-war--the flogging of a man at the gangway. But the under-current of circumstances in the case were of a nature that magnified this particular flogging into a matter of no small importance. The story itself cannot here be related; it would not well bear recital: enough that the person flogged was a middle-aged man of the Waist--a forlorn, broken-down, miserable object, truly; one of those wretched landsmen sometimes driven into the Navy by their unfitness for all things else, even as others are driven into the workhouse. He was flogged at the complaint of a midshipman; and hereby hangs the drift of the thing. For though this waister was so ignoble a mortal, yet his being scourged on this one occasion indirectly proceeded from the mere wanton spite and unscrupulousness of the midshipman in question--a youth, who was apt to indulge at times in undignified familiarities with some of the men, who, sooner or later, almost always suffered from his capricious preferences.

But the leading principle that was involved in this affair is far too mischievous to be lightly dismissed.

In most cases, it would seem to be a cardinal principle with a Navy Captain that his subordinates are disintegrated parts of himself, detached from the main body on special service, and that the order of the minutest midshipman must be as deferentially obeyed by the seamen as if proceeding from the Commodore on the poop. This principle was once emphasised in a remarkable manner by the valiant and handsome Sir Peter Parker, upon whose death, on a national arson expedition on the shores of Chesapeake Bay, in 1812 or 1813, Lord Byron wrote his well-known stanzas. "By the god of war!" said Sir Peter to his sailors, "I'll make you touch your hat to a midshipman's coat, if it's only hung on a broomstick to dry!"

That the king, in the eye of the law, can do no wrong, is the well-known fiction of despotic states; but it has remained for the navies of Constitutional Monarchies and Republics to magnify this fiction, by indirectly extending it to all the quarter-deck subordinates of an armed ship's chief magistrate. And though judicially unrecognised, and unacknowledged by the officers themselves, yet this is the principle that pervades the fleet; this is the principle that is every hour acted upon, and to sustain which, thousands of seamen have been flogged at the gangway.

However childish, ignorant, stupid, or idiotic a midshipman, if he but

orders a sailor to perform even the most absurd action, that man is not only bound to render instant and unanswering obedience, but he would refuse at his peril. And if, having obeyed, he should then complain to the Captain, and the Captain, in his own mind, should be thoroughly convinced of the impropriety, perhaps of the illegality of the order, yet, in nine cases out of ten, he would not publicly reprimand the midshipman, nor by the slightest token admit before the complainant that, in this particular thing, the midshipman had done otherwise than perfectly right.

Upon a midshipman's complaining of a seaman to Lord Collingwood, when Captain of a line-of-battle ship, he ordered the man for punishment; and, in the interval, calling the midshipman aside, said to him, "In all probability, now, the fault is yours--you know; therefore, when the man is brought to the mast, you had better ask for his pardon."

Accordingly, upon the lad's public intercession, Collingwood, turning to the culprit, said, "This young gentleman has pleaded so humanely for you, that, in hope you feel a due gratitude to him for his benevolence, I will, for this time, overlook your offence." This story is related by the editor of the Admiral's "Correspondence," to show the Admiral's kindheartedness.

Now Collingood was, in reality, one of the most just, humane, and benevolent admirals that ever hoisted a flag. For a sea-officer, Collingwood was a man in a million. But if a man like him, swayed by

old usages, could thus violate the commonest principle of justice--with however good motives at bottom--what must be expected from other Captains not so eminently gifted with noble traits as Collingwood?

And if the corps of American midshipmen is mostly replenished from the nursery, the counter, and the lap of unrestrained indulgence at home: and if most of them at least, by their impotency as officers, in all important functions at sea, by their boyish and overweening conceit of their gold lace, by their overbearing manner toward the seamen, and by their peculiar aptitude to construe the merest trivialities of manner into set affronts against their dignity; if by all this they sometimes contract the ill-will of the seamen; and if, in a thousand ways, the seamen cannot but betray it--how easy for any of these midshipmen, who may happen to be unrestrained by moral principle, to resort to spiteful practices in procuring vengeance upon the offenders, in many instances to the extremity of the lash; since, as we have seen, the tacit principle in the Navy seems to be that, in his ordinary intercourse with the sailors, a midshipman can do nothing obnoxious to the public censure of his superiors.

"You fellow, I'll get you licked before long," is often heard from a midshipman to a sailor who, in some way not open to the judicial action of the Captain, has chanced to offend him.

At times you will see one of these lads, not five feet high, gazing up with inflamed eye at some venerable six-footer of a forecastle man,

cursing and insulting him by every epithet deemed most scandalous and unendurable among men. Yet that man's indignant tongue is treble-knotted by the law, that suspends death itself over his head should his passion discharge the slightest blow at the boy-worm that spits at his feet.

But since what human nature is, and what it must for ever continue to be, is well enough understood for most practical purposes, it needs no special example to prove that, where the merest boys, indiscriminately snatched from the human family, are given such authority over mature men, the results must be proportionable in monstrosity to the custom that authorises this worse than cruel absurdity.

Nor is it unworthy of remark that, while the noblest-minded and most heroic sea-officers--men of the topmost stature, including Lord Nelson himself--have regarded flogging in the Navy with the deepest concern, and not without weighty scruples touching its general necessity, still, one who has seen much of midshipmen can truly say that he has seen but few midshipmen who were not enthusiastic advocates and admirers of scourging. It would almost seem that they themselves, having so recently escaped the posterior discipline of the nursery and the infant school, are impatient to recover from those smarting reminiscences by mincing the backs of full-grown American freemen.

It should not to be omitted here, that the midshipmen in the English Navy are not permitted to be quite so imperious as in the American

ships. They are divided into three (I think) probationary classes of "volunteers," instead of being at once advanced to a warrant. Nor will you fail to remark, when you see an English cutter officered by one of those volunteers, that the boy does not so strut and slap his dirk-hilt with a Bobadil air, and anticipatigly feel of the place where his warlike whiskers are going to be, and sputter out oaths so at the men, as is too often the case with the little boys wearing best-bower anchors on their lapels in the American Navy.

Yet it must be confessed that at times you see midshipmen who are noble little fellows, and not at all disliked by the crew. Besides three gallant youths, one black-eyed little lad in particular, in the Neversink, was such a one. From his diminutiveness, he went by the name of Boat Plug among the seamen. Without being exactly familiar with them, he had yet become a general favourite, by reason of his kindness of manner, and never cursing them. It was amusing to hear some of the older Tritons invoke blessings upon the youngster, when his kind tones fell on their weather-beaten ears. "Ah, good luck to you, sir!" touching their hats to the little man; "you have a soul to be saved, sir!" There was a wonderful deal of meaning involved in the latter sentence. You have a soul to be saved, is the phrase which a man-of-war's-man peculiarly applies to a humane and kind-hearted officer. It also implies that the majority of quarter-deck officers are regarded by them in such a light that they deny to them the possession of souls. Ah! but these plebeians sometimes have a sublime vengeance upon patricians. Imagine an outcast old sailor seriously cherishing the

purely speculative conceit that some bully in epaulets, who orders him to and fro like a slave, is of an organization immeasurably inferior to himself; must at last perish with the brutes, while he goes to his immortality in heaven.

But from what has been said in this chapter, it must not be inferred that a midshipman leads a lord's life in a man-of-war. Far from it. He lords it over those below him, while lorded over himself by his superiors. It is as if with one hand a school-boy snapped his fingers at a dog, and at the same time received upon the other the discipline of the usher's ferule. And though, by the American Articles of War, a Navy Captain cannot, of his own authority, legally punish a midshipman, otherwise than by suspension from duty (the same as with respect to the Ward-room officers), yet this is one of those sea-statutes which the Captain, to a certain extent, observes or disregards at his pleasure. Many instances might be related of the petty mortifications and official insults inflicted by some Captains upon their midshipmen; far more severe, in one sense, than the old-fashioned punishment of sending them to the mast-head, though not so arbitrary as sending them before the mast, to do duty with the common sailors--a custom, in former times, pursued by Captains in the English Navy.

Captain Claret himself had no special fondness for midshipmen. A tall, overgrown young midshipman, about sixteen years old, having fallen under his displeasure, he interrupted the humble apologies he was making, by saying, "Not a word, sir! I'll not hear a word! Mount the

netting, sir, and stand there till you are ordered to come down!"

The midshipman obeyed; and, in full sight of the entire ship's company, Captain Claret promenaded to and fro below his lofty perch, reading him a most aggravating lecture upon his alleged misconduct. To a lad of sensibility, such treatment must have been almost as stinging as the lash itself would have been.

It is to be remembered that, wherever these chapters treat of midshipmen, the officers known as passed-midshipmen are not at all referred to. In the American Navy, these officers form a class of young men, who, having seen sufficient service at sea as midshipmen to pass an examination before a Board of Commodores, are promoted to the rank of passed-midshipmen, introductory to that of lieutenant. They are supposed to be qualified to do duty as lieutenants, and in some cases temporarily serve as such. The difference between a passed-midshipman and a midshipman may be also inferred from their respective rates of pay. The former, upon sea-service, receives \$750 a year; the latter, \$400. There were no passed-midshipmen in the *Neversink*.