

## CHAPTER LXVII.

### WHITE-JACKET ARRAIGNED AT THE MAST.

When with five hundred others I made one of the compelled spectators at the scourging of poor Rose-water, I little thought what Fate had ordained for myself the next day.

Poor mulatto! thought I, one of an oppressed race, they degrade you like a hound. Thank God! I am a white. Yet I had seen whites also scourged; for, black or white, all my shipmates were liable to that. Still, there is something in us, somehow, that in the most degraded condition, we snatch at a chance to deceive ourselves into a fancied superiority to others, whom we suppose lower in the scale than ourselves.

Poor Rose-water! thought I; poor mulatto! Heaven send you a release from your humiliation!

To make plain the thing about to be related, it needs to repeat what has somewhere been previously mentioned, that in tacking ship every seaman in a man-of-war has a particular station assigned him. What that station is, should be made known to him by the First Lieutenant; and when the word is passed to tack or wear, it is every seaman's duty to be found at his post. But among the various numbers and stations

given to me by the senior Lieutenant, when I first came on board the frigate, he had altogether omitted informing me of my particular place at those times, and, up to the precise period now written of, I had hardly known that I should have had any special place then at all. For the rest of the men, they seemed to me to catch hold of the first rope that offered, as in a merchant-man upon similar occasions. Indeed, I subsequently discovered, that such was the state of discipline--in this one particular, at least--that very few of the seamen could tell where their proper stations were, at tacking or wearing.

"All hands tack ship, ahoy!" such was the announcement made by the boatswain's mates at the hatchways the morning after the hard fate of Rose-water. It was just eight bells--noon, and springing from my white jacket, which I had spread between the guns for a bed on the main-deck, I ran up the ladders, and, as usual, seized hold of the main-brace, which fifty hands were streaming along forward. When main-top-sail haul! was given through the trumpet, I pulled at this brace with such heartiness and good-will, that I almost flattered myself that my instrumentality in getting the frigate round on the other tack, deserved a public vote of thanks, and a silver tankard from Congress.

But something happened to be in the way aloft when the yards swung round; a little confusion ensued; and, with anger on his brow, Captain Claret came forward to see what occasioned it. No one to let go the weather-lift of the main-yard! The rope was cast off, however, by a hand, and the yards unobstructed, came round.

When the last rope was coiled, away, the Captain desired to know of the First Lieutenant who it might be that was stationed at the weather (then the starboard) main-lift. With a vexed expression of countenance the First Lieutenant sent a midshipman for the Station Bill, when, upon glancing it over, my own name was found put down at the post in question.

At the time I was on the gun-deck below, and did not know of these proceedings; but a moment after, I heard the boatswain's mates bawling my name at all the hatch-ways, and along all three decks. It was the first time I had ever heard it so sent through the furthest recesses of the ship, and well knowing what this generally betokened to other seamen, my heart jumped to my throat, and I hurriedly asked Flute, the boatswain's-mate at the fore-hatchway, what was wanted of me.

"Captain wants ye at the mast," he replied. "Going to flog ye, I guess."

"What for?"

"My eyes! you've been chalking your face, hain't ye?"

"What am I wanted for?" I repeated.

But at that instant my name was again thundered forth by the other boatswain's mate, and Flute hurried me away, hinting that I would soon

find out what the Captain desired of me.

I swallowed down my heart in me as I touched the spar-deck, for a single instant balanced myself on my best centre, and then, wholly ignorant of what was going to be alleged against me, advanced to the dread tribunal of the frigate.

As I passed through the gangway, I saw the quarter-master rigging the gratings; the boatswain with his green bag of scourges; the master-at-arms ready to help off some one's shirt.

Again I made a desperate swallow of my whole soul in me, and found myself standing before Captain Claret. His flushed face obviously showed him in ill-humour. Among the group of officers by his side was the First Lieutenant, who, as I came aft, eyed me in such a manner, that I plainly perceived him to be extremely vexed at me for having been the innocent means of reflecting upon the manner in which he kept up the discipline of the ship.

"Why were you not at your station, sir?" asked the Captain.

"What station do you mean, sir?" said I.

It is generally the custom with man-of-war's-men to stand obsequiously touching their hat at every sentence they address to the Captain. But as this was not obligatory upon me by the Articles of War, I did not do

so upon the present occasion, and previously, I had never had the dangerous honour of a personal interview with Captain Claret.

He quickly noticed my omission of the homage usually rendered him, and instinct told me, that to a certain extent, it set his heart against me.

"What station, sir, do you mean?" said I.

"You pretend ignorance," he replied; "it will not help you, sir."

Glancing at the Captain, the First Lieutenant now produced the Station Bill, and read my name in connection with that of the starboard main-lift.

"Captain Claret," said I, "it is the first time I ever heard of my being assigned to that post."

"How is this, Mr. Bridewell?" he said, turning to the First Lieutenant, with a fault-finding expression.

"It is impossible, sir," said that officer, striving to hide his vexation, "but this man must have known his station."

"I have never known it before this moment, Captain Claret," said I.

"Do you contradict my officer?" he returned. "I shall flog you."

I had now been on board the frigate upward of a year, and remained unscourged; the ship was homeward-bound, and in a few weeks, at most, I would be a free man. And now, after making a hermit of myself in some things, in order to avoid the possibility of the scourge, here it was hanging over me for a thing utterly unforeseen, for a crime of which I was as utterly innocent. But all that was as naught. I saw that my case was hopeless; my solemn disclaimer was thrown in my teeth, and the boatswain's mate stood curling his fingers through the cat.

There are times when wild thoughts enter a man's heart, when he seems almost irresponsible for his act and his deed. The Captain stood on the weather-side of the deck. Sideways, on an unobstructed line with him, was the opening of the lee-gangway, where the side-ladders are suspended in port. Nothing but a slight bit of sennet-stuff served to rail in this opening, which was cut right down to the level of the Captain's feet, showing the far sea beyond. I stood a little to windward of him, and, though he was a large, powerful man, it was certain that a sudden rush against him, along the slanting deck, would infallibly pitch him headforemost into the ocean, though he who so rushed must needs go over with him. My blood seemed clotting in my veins; I felt icy cold at the tips of my fingers, and a dimness was before my eyes. But through that dimness the boatswain's mate, scourge in hand, loomed like a giant, and Captain Claret, and the blue sea seen through the opening at the gangway, showed with an awful vividness. I cannot analyse my heart, though it then stood still within me. But the

thing that swayed me to my purpose was not altogether the thought that Captain Claret was about to degrade me, and that I had taken an oath with my soul that he should not. No, I felt my man's manhood so bottomless within me, that no word, no blow, no scourge of Captain Claret could cut me deep enough for that. I but swung to an instinct in me--the instinct diffused through all animated nature, the same that prompts even a worm to turn under the heel. Locking souls-with him, I meant to drag Captain Claret from this earthly tribunal of his to that of Jehovah and let Him decide between us. No other way could I escape the scourge.

Nature has not implanted any power in man that was not meant to be exercised at times, though too often our powers have been abused. The privilege, inborn and inalienable, that every man has of dying himself, and inflicting death upon another, was not given to us without a purpose. These are the last resources of an insulted and unendurable existence.

"To the gratings, sir!" said Captain Claret; "do you hear?"

My eye was measuring the distance between him and the sea.

"Captain Claret," said a voice advancing from the crowd. I turned to see who this might be, that audaciously interposed at a juncture like this. It was the same remarkably handsome and gentlemanly corporal of marines, Colbrook, who has been previously alluded to, in the chapter

describing killing time in a man-of-war.

"I know that man," said Colbrook, touching his cap, and speaking in a mild, firm, but extremely deferential manner; "and I know that he would not be found absent from his station, if he knew where it was."

This speech was almost unprecedented. Seldom or never before had a marine dared to speak to the Captain of a frigate in behalf of a seaman at the mast. But there was something so unostentatiously commanding in the calm manner of the man, that the Captain, though astounded, did not in any way reprimand him. The very unusualness of his interference seemed Colbrook's protection.

Taking heart, perhaps, from Colbrook's example, Jack Chase interposed, and in a manly but carefully respectful manner, in substance repeated the corporal's remark, adding that he had never found me wanting in the top.

The Captain looked from Chase to Colbrook, and from Colbrook to Chase--one the foremost man among the seamen, the other the foremost man among the soldiers--then all round upon the packed and silent crew, and, as if a slave to Fate, though supreme Captain of a frigate, he turned to the First Lieutenant, made some indifferent remark, and saying to me you may go, sauntered aft into his cabin; while I, who, in the desperation of my soul, had but just escaped being a murderer and a suicide, almost burst into tears of thanks-giving where I stood.