

CHAPTER LXVIII.

A MAN-OF-WAR FOUNTAIN, AND OTHER THINGS.

Let us forget the scourge and the gangway a while, and jot down in our memories a few little things pertaining to our man-of-war world. I let nothing slip, however small; and feel myself actuated by the same motive which has prompted many worthy old chroniclers, to set down the merest trifles concerning things that are destined to pass away entirely from the earth, and which, if not preserved in the nick of time, must infallibly perish from the memories of man. Who knows that this humble narrative may not hereafter prove the history of an obsolete barbarism? Who knows that, when men-of-war shall be no more, "White-Jacket" may not be quoted to show to the people in the Millennium what a man-of-war was? God hasten the time! Lo! ye years, escort it hither, and bless our eyes ere we die.

There is no part of a frigate where you will see more going and coming of strangers, and overhear more greetings and gossipings of acquaintances, than in the immediate vicinity of the scuttle-butt, just forward of the main-hatchway, on the gun-deck.

The scuttle-butt is a goodly, round, painted cask, standing on end, and with its upper head removed, showing a narrow, circular shelf within, where rest a number of tin cups for the accommodation of drinkers.

Central, within the scuttle-butt itself, stands an iron pump, which, connecting with the immense water-tanks in the hold, furnishes an unfailing supply of the much-admired Pale Ale, first brewed in the brooks of the garden of Eden, and stamped with the brand of our old father Adam, who never knew what wine was. We are indebted to the old vintner Noah for that. The scuttle-butt is the only fountain in the ship; and here alone can you drink, unless at your meals. Night and day an armed sentry paces before it, bayonet in hand, to see that no water is taken away, except according to law. I wonder that they station no sentries at the port-holes, to see that no air is breathed, except according to Navy regulations.

As five hundred men come to drink at this scuttle-butt; as it is often surrounded by officers' servants drawing water for their masters to wash; by the cooks of the range, who hither come to fill their coffee-pots; and by the cooks of the ship's messes to procure water for their duffs; the scuttle-butt may be denominated the town-pump of the ship. And would that my fine countryman, Hawthorne of Salem, had but served on board a man-of-war in his time, that he might give us the reading of a "rill" from the scuttle-butt.

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As in all extensive establishments--abbeys, arsenals, colleges, treasuries, metropolitan post-offices, and monasteries--there are many snug little niches, wherein are ensconced certain superannuated old

pensioner officials; and, more especially, as in most ecclesiastical establishments, a few choice prebendary stalls are to be found, furnished with well-filled mangers and racks; so, in a man-of-war, there are a variety of similar snuggeries for the benefit of decrepit or rheumatic old tars. Chief among these is the office of mast-man.

There is a stout rail on deck, at the base of each mast, where a number of braces, lifts, and buntlines are belayed to the pins. It is the sole duty of the mast-man to see that these ropes are always kept clear, to preserve his premises in a state of the greatest attainable neatness, and every Sunday morning to dispose his ropes in neat Flemish coils.

The main-mast-man of the Neversink was a very aged seaman, who well deserved his comfortable berth. He had seen more than half a century of the most active service, and, through all, had proved himself a good and faithful man. He furnished one of the very rare examples of a sailor in a green old age; for, with most sailors, old age comes in youth, and Hardship and Vice carry them on an early bier to the grave.

As in the evening of life, and at the close of the day, old Abraham sat at the door of his tent, biding his time to die, so sits our old mast-man on the coat of the mast, glancing round him with patriarchal benignity. And that mild expression of his sets off very strangely a face that has been burned almost black by the torrid suns that shone fifty years ago--a face that is seamed with three sabre cuts. You would

almost think this old mast-man had been blown out of Vesuvius, to look alone at his scarred, blackened forehead, chin, and cheeks. But gaze down into his eye, and though all the snows of Time have drifted higher and higher upon his brow, yet deep down in that eye you behold an infantile, sinless look, the same that answered the glance of this old man's mother when first she cried for the babe to be laid by her side. That look is the fadeless, ever infantile immortality within.

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The Lord Nelsons of the sea, though but Barons in the state, yet oftentimes prove more potent than their royal masters; and at such scenes as Trafalgar--dethroning this Emperor and reinstating that--enact on the ocean the proud part of mighty Richard Neville, the king-making Earl of the land. And as Richard Neville entrenched himself in his moated old man-of-war castle of Warwick, which, underground, was traversed with vaults, hewn out of the solid rock, and intricate as the wards of the old keys of Calais surrendered to Edward III.; even so do these King-Commodores house themselves in their water-rimmed, cannon-sentried frigates, oaken dug, deck under deck, as cell under cell. And as the old Middle-Age warders of Warwick, every night at curfew, patrolled the battlements, and dove down into the vaults to see that all lights were extinguished, even so do the master-at-arms and ship's corporals of a frigate perambulate all the decks of a man-of-war, blowing out all tapers but those burning in the legalized battle-lanterns. Yea, in these things, so potent is the authority of

these sea-wardens, that, though almost the lowest subalterns in the ship, yet should they find the Senior Lieutenant himself sitting up late in his state-room, reading Bowditch's Navigator, or D'Anton "On Gunpowder and Fire-arms," they would infallibly blow the light out under his very nose; nor durst that Grand-Vizier resent the indignity.

But, unwittingly, I have ennobled, by grand historical comparisons, this prying, pettifogging, Irish-informer of a master-at-arms.

You have seen some slim, slip-shod housekeeper, at midnight ferreting over a rambling old house in the country, startling at fancied witches and ghosts, yet intent on seeing every door bolted, every smouldering ember in the fireplaces smothered, every loitering domestic abed, and every light made dark. This is the master-at-arms taking his night-rounds in a frigate.

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It may be thought that but little is seen of the Commodore in these chapters, and that, since he so seldom appears on the stage, he cannot be so august a personage, after all. But the mightiest potentates keep the most behind the veil. You might tarry in Constantinople a month, and never catch a glimpse of the Sultan. The grand Lama of Thibet, according to some accounts, is never beheld by the people. But if any one doubts the majesty of a Commodore, let him know that, according to XLII. of the Articles of War, he is invested with a prerogative which,

according to monarchical jurists, is inseparable from the throne--the plenary pardoning power. He may pardon all offences committed in the squadron under his command.

But this prerogative is only his while at sea, or on a foreign station. A circumstance peculiarly significant of the great difference between the stately absolutism of a Commodore enthroned on his poop in a foreign harbour, and an unlaced Commodore negligently reclining in an easy-chair in the bosom of his family at home.