

CHAPTER LXIX.

PRAYERS AT THE GUNS.

The training-days, or general quarters, now and then taking place in our frigate, have already been described, also the Sunday devotions on the half-deck; but nothing has yet been said concerning the daily morning and evening quarters, when the men silently stand at their guns, and the chaplain simply offers up a prayer.

Let us now enlarge upon this matter. We have plenty of time; the occasion invites; for behold! the homeward-bound Neversink bowls along over a jubilant sea.

Shortly after breakfast the drum beats to quarters; and among five hundred men, scattered over all three decks, and engaged in all manner of ways, that sudden rolling march is magical as the monitory sound to which every good Mussulman at sunset drops to the ground whatsoever his hands might have found to do, and, throughout all Turkey, the people in concert kneel toward their holy Mecca.

The sailors run to and fro--some up the deck-ladders, some down--to gain their respective stations in the shortest possible time. In three minutes all is composed. One by one, the various officers stationed over the separate divisions of the ship then approach the First

Lieutenant on the quarter-deck, and report their respective men at their quarters. It is curious to watch their countenances at this time. A profound silence prevails; and, emerging through the hatchway, from one of the lower decks, a slender young officer appears, hugging his sword to his thigh, and advances through the long lanes of sailors at their guns, his serious eye all the time fixed upon the First Lieutenant's--his polar star. Sometimes he essays a stately and graduated step, an erect and martial bearing, and seems full of the vast national importance of what he is about to communicate.

But when at last he gains his destination, you are amazed to perceive that all he has to say is imparted by a Freemason touch of his cap, and a bow. He then turns and makes off to his division, perhaps passing several brother Lieutenants, all bound on the same errand he himself has just achieved. For about five minutes these officers are coming and going, bringing in thrilling intelligence from all quarters of the frigate; most stoically received, however, by the First Lieutenant. With his legs apart, so as to give a broad foundation for the superstructure of his dignity, this gentleman stands stiff as a pike-staff on the quarter-deck. One hand holds his sabre--an appurtenance altogether unnecessary at the time; and which he accordingly tucks, point backward, under his arm, like an umbrella on a sun-shiny day. The other hand is continually bobbing up and down to the leather front of his cap, in response to the reports and salute of his subordinates, to whom he never deigns to vouchsafe a syllable, merely going through the motions of accepting their news, without bestowing

thanks for their pains.

This continual touching of caps between officers on board a man-of-war is the reason why you invariably notice that the glazed fronts of their caps look jaded, lack-lustre, and worn; sometimes slightly oleaginous--though, in other respects, the cap may appear glossy and fresh. But as for the First Lieutenant, he ought to have extra pay allowed to him, on account of his extraordinary outlays in cap fronts; for he it is to whom, all day long, reports of various kinds are incessantly being made by the junior Lieutenants; and no report is made by them, however trivial, but caps are touched on the occasion. It is obvious that these individual salutes must be greatly multiplied and aggregated upon the senior Lieutenant, who must return them all. Indeed, when a subordinate officer is first promoted to that rank, he generally complains of the same exhaustion about the shoulder and elbow that La Fayette mourned over, when, in visiting America, he did little else but shake the sturdy hands of patriotic farmers from sunrise to sunset.

The various officers of divisions having presented their respects, and made good their return to their stations, the First Lieutenant turns round, and, marching aft, endeavours to catch the eye of the Captain, in order to touch his own cap to that personage, and thereby, without adding a word of explanation, communicate the fact of all hands being at their gun's. He is a sort of retort, or receiver-general, to concentrate the whole sum of the information imparted to him, and

discharge it upon his superior at one touch of his cap front.

But sometimes the Captain feels out of sorts, or in ill-humour, or is pleased to be somewhat capricious, or has a fancy to show a touch of his omnipotent supremacy; or, peradventure, it has so happened that the First Lieutenant has, in some way, piqued or offended him, and he is not unwilling to show a slight specimen of his dominion over him, even before the eyes of all hands; at all events, only by some one of these suppositions can the singular circumstance be accounted for, that frequently Captain Claret would pertinaciously promenade up and down the poop, purposely averting his eye from the First Lieutenant, who would stand below in the most awkward suspense, waiting the first wink from his superior's eye.

"Now I have him!" he must have said to himself, as the Captain would turn toward him in his walk; "now's my time!" and up would go his hand to his cap; but, alas! the Captain was off again; and the men at the guns would cast sly winks at each other as the embarrassed Lieutenant would bite his lips with suppressed vexation.

Upon some occasions this scene would be repeated several times, till at last Captain Claret, thinking, that in the eyes of all hands, his dignity must by this time be pretty well bolstered, would stalk towards his subordinate, looking him full in the eyes; whereupon up goes his hand to the cap front, and the Captain, nodding his acceptance of the report, descends from his perch to the quarter-deck.

By this time the stately Commodore slowly emerges from his cabin, and soon stands leaning alone against the brass rails of the after-hatchway. In passing him, the Captain makes a profound salutation, which his superior returns, in token that the Captain is at perfect liberty to proceed with the ceremonies of the hour.

Marching on, Captain Claret at last halts near the main-mast, at the head of a group of the ward-room officers, and by the side of the Chaplain. At a sign from his finger, the brass band strikes up the Portuguese hymn. This over, from Commodore to hammock-boy, all hands uncover, and the Chaplain reads a prayer. Upon its conclusion, the drum beats the retreat, and the ship's company disappear from the guns. At sea or in harbour, this ceremony is repeated every morning and evening.

By those stationed on the quarter-deck the Chaplain is distinctly heard; but the quarter-deck gun division embraces but a tenth part of the ship's company, many of whom are below, on the main-deck, where not one syllable of the prayer can be heard. This seemed a great misfortune; for I well knew myself how blessed and soothing it was to mingle twice every day in these peaceful devotions, and, with the Commodore, and Captain, and smallest boy, unite in acknowledging Almighty God. There was also a touch of the temporary equality of the Church about it, exceedingly grateful to a man-of-war's-man like me.

My carronade-gun happened to be directly opposite the brass railing

against which the Commodore invariably leaned at prayers. Brought so close together, twice every day, for more than a year, we could not but become intimately acquainted with each other's faces. To this fortunate circumstance it is to be ascribed, that some time after reaching home, we were able to recognise each other when we chanced to meet in Washington, at a ball given by the Russian Minister, the Baron de Bodisco. And though, while on board the frigate, the Commodore never in any manner personally addressed me--nor did I him--yet, at the Minister's social entertainment, we there became exceedingly chatty; nor did I fail to observe, among that crowd of foreign dignitaries and magnates from all parts of America, that my worthy friend did not appear so exalted as when leaning, in solitary state, against the brass railing of the Neversink's quarter-deck. Like many other gentlemen, he appeared to the best advantage, and was treated with the most deference in the bosom of his home, the frigate.

Our morning and evening quarters were agreeably diversified for some weeks by a little circumstance, which to some of us at least, always seemed very pleasing.

At Callao, half of the Commodore's cabin had been hospitably yielded to the family of a certain aristocratic-looking magnate, who was going ambassador from Peru to the Court of the Brazils, at Rio. This dignified diplomatist sported a long, twirling mustache, that almost enveloped his mouth. The sailors said he looked like a rat with his teeth through a bunch of oakum, or a St. Jago monkey peeping through a

prickly-pear bush.

He was accompanied by a very beautiful wife, and a still more beautiful little daughter, about six years old. Between this dark-eyed little gipsy and our chaplain there soon sprung up a cordial love and good feeling, so much so, that they were seldom apart. And whenever the drum beat to quarters, and the sailors were hurrying to their stations, this little signorita would outrun them all to gain her own quarters at the capstan, where she would stand by the chaplain's side, grasping his hand, and looking up archly in his face.

It was a sweet relief from the domineering sternness of our martial discipline--a sternness not relaxed even at our devotions before the altar of the common God of commodore and cabin-boy--to see that lovely little girl standing among the thirty-two pounders, and now and then casting a wondering, commiserating glance at the array of grim seamen around her.