

## CHAPTER LXX.

### MONTHLY MUSTER ROUND THE CAPSTAN.

Besides general quarters, and the regular morning and evening quarters for prayers on board the Neversink, on the first Sunday of every month we had a grand "muster round the capstan," when we passed in solemn review before the Captain and officers, who closely scanned our frocks and trowsers, to see whether they were according to the Navy cut. In some ships, every man is required to bring his bag and hammock along for inspection.

This ceremony acquires its chief solemnity, and, to a novice, is rendered even terrible, by the reading of the Articles of War by the Captain's clerk before the assembled ship's company, who in testimony of their enforced reverence for the code, stand bareheaded till the last sentence is pronounced.

To a mere amateur reader the quiet perusal of these Articles of War would be attended with some nervous emotions. Imagine, then, what my feelings must have been, when, with my hat deferentially in my hand, I stood before my lord and master, Captain Claret, and heard these Articles read as the law and gospel, the infallible, unappealable dispensation and code, whereby I lived, and moved, and had my being on board of the United States ship Neversink.

Of some twenty offences--made penal--that a seaman may commit, and which are specified in this code, thirteen are punishable by death.

"Shall suffer death!" This was the burden of nearly every Article read by the Captain's clerk; for he seemed to have been instructed to omit the longer Articles, and only present those which were brief and to the point.

"Shall suffer death!" The repeated announcement falls on your ear like the intermitting discharge of artillery. After it has been repeated again and again, you listen to the reader as he deliberately begins a new paragraph; you hear him reciting the involved, but comprehensive and clear arrangement of the sentence, detailing all possible particulars of the offence described, and you breathlessly await, whether that clause also is going to be concluded by the discharge of the terrible minute-gun. When, lo! it again booms on your ear--shall suffer death! No reservations, no contingencies; not the remotest promise of pardon or reprieve; not a glimpse of commutation of the sentence; all hope and consolation is shut out--shall suffer death! that is the simple fact for you to digest; and it is a tougher morsel, believe White-Jacket when he says it, than a forty-two-pound cannon-ball.

But there is a glimmering of an alternative to the sailor who infringes these Articles. Some of them thus terminates: "Shall suffer death, or such punishment as a court-martial shall adjudge." But hints this at a

penalty still more serious? Perhaps it means "death, or worse punishment."

Your honours of the Spanish Inquisition, Loyola and Torquemada! produce, reverend gentlemen, your most secret code, and match these Articles of War, if you can. Jack Ketch, you also are experienced in these things! Thou most benevolent of mortals, who standest by us, and hangest round our necks, when all the rest of this world are against us--tell us, hangman, what punishment is this, horribly hinted at as being worse than death? Is it, upon an empty stomach, to read the Articles of War every morning, for the term of one's natural life? Or is it to be imprisoned in a cell, with its walls papered from floor to ceiling with printed copies, in italics, of these Articles of War?

But it needs not to dilate upon the pure, bubbling milk of human kindness, and Christian charity, and forgiveness of injuries which pervade this charming document, so thoroughly imbued, as a Christian code, with the benignant spirit of the Sermon on the Mount. But as it is very nearly alike in the foremost states of Christendom, and as it is nationally set forth by those states, it indirectly becomes an index to the true condition of the present civilization of the world.

As, month after month, I would stand bareheaded among my shipmates, and hear this document read, I have thought to myself, Well, well, White-Jacket, you are in a sad box, indeed. But prick your ears, there goes another minute-gun. It admonishes you to take all bad usage in

good part, and never to join in any public meeting that may be held on the gun-deck for a redress of grievances. Listen:

Art. XIII. "If any person in the navy shall make, or attempt to make, any mutinous assembly, he shall, on conviction thereof by a court martial, suffer death."

Bless me, White-Jacket, are you a great gun yourself, that you so recoil, to the extremity of your breechings, at that discharge?

But give ear again. Here goes another minute-gun. It indirectly admonishes you to receive the grossest insult, and stand still under it:

Art. XIV. "No private in the navy shall disobey the lawful orders of his superior officer, or strike him, or draw, or offer to draw, or raise any weapon against him, while in the execution of the duties of his office, on pain of death."

Do not hang back there by the bulwarks, White-Jacket; come up to the mark once more; for here goes still another minute-gun, which admonishes you never to be caught napping:

Part of Art. XX. "If any person in the navy shall sleep upon his watch, he shall suffer death."

Murderous! But then, in time of peace, they do not enforce these

blood-thirsty laws? Do they not, indeed? What happened to those three sailors on board an American armed vessel a few years ago, quite within your memory, White-Jacket; yea, while you yourself were yet serving on board this very frigate, the Neversink? What happened to those three Americans, White-Jacket--those three sailors, even as you, who once were alive, but now are dead? "Shall suffer death!" those were the three words that hung those three sailors.

Have a care, then, have a care, lest you come to a sad end, even the end of a rope; lest, with a black-and-blue throat, you turn a dumb diver after pearl-shells; put to bed for ever, and tucked in, in your own hammock, at the bottom of the sea. And there you will lie, White-Jacket, while hostile navies are playing cannon-ball billiards over your grave.

By the main-mast! then, in a time of profound peace, I am subject to the cut-throat martial law. And when my own brother, who happens to be dwelling ashore, and does not serve his country as I am now doing--when he is at liberty to call personally upon the President of the United States, and express his disapprobation of the whole national administration, here am I, liable at any time to be run up at the yard-arm, with a necklace, made by no jeweler, round my neck!

A hard case, truly, White-Jacket; but it cannot be helped. Yes; you live under this same martial law. Does not everything around you din the fact in your ears? Twice every day do you not jump to your quarters

at the sound of a drum? Every morning, in port, are you not roused from your hammock by the reveille, and sent to it again at nightfall by the tattoo? Every Sunday are you not commanded in the mere matter of the very dress you shall wear through that blessed day? Can your shipmates so much as drink their "tot of grog?" nay, can they even drink but a cup of water at the scuttle-butt, without an armed sentry standing over them? Does not every officer wear a sword instead of a cane? You live and move among twenty-four-pounders. White-Jacket; the very cannon-balls are deemed an ornament around you, serving to embellish the hatchways; and should you come to die at sea, White-Jacket, still two cannon-balls would bear you company when you would be committed to the deep. Yea, by all methods, and devices, and inventions, you are momentarily admonished of the fact that you live under the Articles of War. And by virtue of them it is, White-Jacket, that, without a hearing and without a trial, you may, at a wink from the Captain, be condemned to the scourge.

Speak you true? Then let me fly!

Nay, White-Jacket, the landless horizon hoops you in.

Some tempest, then, surge all the sea against us! hidden reefs and rocks, arise and dash the ships to chips! I was not born a serf, and will not live a slave! Quick! cork-screw whirlpools, suck us down! world's end whelm us!

Nay, White-Jacket, though this frigate laid her broken bones upon the Antarctic shores of Palmer's Land; though not two planks adhered; though all her guns were spiked by sword-fish blades, and at her yawning hatchways mouth-yawning sharks swam in and out; yet, should you escape the wreck and scramble to the beach, this Martial Law would meet you still, and snatch you by the throat. Hark!

Art. XLII. Part of Sec. 3.-"In all cases where the crews of the ships or vessels of the United States shall be separated from their vessels by the latter being wrecked, lost, or destroyed, all the command, power, and authority given to the officers of such ships or vessels shall remain, and be in full force, as effectually as if such ship or vessel were not so wrecked, lost or destroyed."

Hear you that, White-Jacket! I tell you there is no escape. Afloat or wrecked the Martial Law relaxes not its gripe. And though, by that self-same warrant, for some offence therein set down, you were indeed to "suffer death," even then the Martial Law might hunt you straight through the other world, and out again at its other end, following you through all eternity, like an endless thread on the inevitable track of its own point, passing unnumbered needles through.