

CHAPTER LXXVI.

THE CHAINS.

When wearied with the tumult and occasional contention of the gun-deck of our frigate, I have often retreated to a port-hole, and calmed myself down by gazing broad off upon a placid sea. After the battle-din of the last two chapters, let us now do the like, and, in the sequestered fore-chains of the Neversink, tranquillise ourselves, if we may.

Notwithstanding the domestic communism to which the seamen in a man-of-war are condemned, and the publicity in which actions the most diffident and retiring in their nature must be performed, there is yet an odd corner or two where you may sometimes steal away, and, for a few moments, almost be private.

Chief among these places is the chains, to which I would sometimes hie during our pleasant homeward-bound glide over those pensive tropical latitudes. After hearing my fill of the wild yarns of our top, here would I recline--if not disturbed--serenely concocting information into wisdom.

The chains designates the small platform outside of the hull, at the base of the large shrouds leading down from the three mast-heads to the

bulwarks. At present they seem to be getting out of vogue among merchant-vessels, along with the fine, old-fashioned quarter-galleries, little turret-like ap-purtenances, which, in the days of the old Admirals, set off the angles of an armed ship's stern. Here a naval officer might lounge away an hour after action, smoking a cigar, to drive out of his whiskers the villainous smoke of the gun-powder. The picturesque, delightful stern-gallery, also, a broad balcony overhanging the sea, and entered from the Captain's cabin, much as you might enter a bower from a lady's chamber; this charming balcony, where, sailing over summer seas in the days of the old Peruvian viceroys, the Spanish cavalier Mendanna, of Lima, made love to the Lady Isabella, as they voyaged in quest of the Solomon Islands, the fabulous Ophir, the Grand Cyclades; and the Lady Isabella, at sunset, blushed like the Orient, and gazed down to the gold-fish and silver-hued flying-fish, that wove the woof and warp of their wakes in bright, scaly tartans and plaids underneath where the Lady reclined; this charming balcony--exquisite retreat--has been cut away by Vandalic innovations. Ay, that claw-footed old gallery is no longer in fashion; in Commodore's eyes, is no longer genteel.

Out on all furniture fashions but those that are past! Give me my grandfather's old arm-chair, planted upon four carved frogs, as the Hindoos fabled the world to be supported upon four tortoises; give me his cane, with the gold-loaded top--a cane that, like the musket of General Washington's father and the broadsword of William Wallace, would break down the back of the switch-carrying dandies of these

spindle-shank days; give me his broad-breasted vest, coming bravely down over the hips, and furnished with two strong-boxes of pockets to keep guineas in; toss this toppling cylinder of a beaver overboard, and give me my grandfather's gallant, gable-ended, cocked hat.

But though the quarter-galleries and the stern-gallery of a man-of-war are departed, yet the chains still linger; nor can there be imagined a more agreeable retreat. The huge blocks and lanyards forming the pedestals of the shrouds divide the chains into numerous little chapels, alcoves, niches, and altars, where you lazily lounge--outside of the ship, though on board. But there are plenty to divide a good thing with you in this man-of-war world. Often, when snugly seated in one of these little alcoves, gazing off to the horizon, and thinking of Cathay, I have been startled from my repose by some old quarter-gunner, who, having newly painted a parcel of match-tubs, wanted to set them to dry.

At other times, one of the tattooing artists would crawl over the bulwarks, followed by his sitter; and then a bare arm or leg would be extended, and the disagreeable business of "pricking" commence, right under my eyes; or an irruption of tars, with ditty-bags or sea-reticules, and piles of old trowsers to mend, would break in upon my seclusion, and, forming a sewing-circle, drive me off with their chatter.

But once--it was a Sunday afternoon--I was pleasantly reclining in a

particularly shady and secluded little niche between two lanyards, when I heard a low, supplicating voice. Peeping through the narrow space between the ropes, I perceived an aged seaman on his knees, his face turned seaward, with closed eyes, buried in prayer. Softly rising, I stole through a port-hole, and left the venerable worshipper alone.

He was a sheet-anchor-man, an earnest Baptist, and was well known, in his own part of the ship, to be constant in his solitary devotions in the chains. He reminded me of St. Anthony going out into the wilderness to pray.

This man was captain of the starboard bow-chaser, one of the two long twenty-four-pounders on the fore-castle. In time of action, the command of that iron Thalaba the Destroyer would devolve upon him. It would be his business to "train" it properly; to see it well loaded; the grape and cannister rammed home; also, to "prick the cartridge," "take the sight," and give the word for the match-man to apply his wand; bidding a sudden hell to flash forth from the muzzle, in wide combustion and death.

Now, this captain of the bow-chaser was an upright old man, a sincere, humble believer, and he but earned his bread in being captain of that gun; but how, with those hands of his begrimed with powder, could he break that other and most peaceful and penitent bread of the Supper? though in that hallowed sacrament, it seemed, he had often partaken ashore. The omission of this rite in a man-of-war--though there is a

chaplain to preside over it, and at least a few communicants to partake--must be ascribed to a sense of religious propriety, in the last degree to be commended.

Ah! the best righteousness of our man-of-war world seems but an unrealised ideal, after all; and those maxims which, in the hope of bringing about a Millennium, we busily teach to the heathen, we Christians ourselves disregard. In view of the whole present social frame-work of our world, so ill adapted to the practical adoption of the meekness of Christianity, there seems almost some ground for the thought, that although our blessed Saviour was full of the wisdom of heaven, yet his gospel seems lacking in the practical wisdom of earth--in a due appreciation of the necessities of nations at times demanding bloody massacres and wars; in a proper estimation of the value of rank, title, and money. But all this only the more crowns the divine consistency of Jesus; since Burnet and the best theologians demonstrate, that his nature was not merely human--was not that of a mere man of the world.