

## CHAPTER LXXXIII.

### A MAN-OF-WAR COLLEGE.

In our man-of-war world, Life comes in at one gangway and Death goes overboard at the other. Under the man-of-war scourge, curses mix with tears; and the sigh and the sob furnish the bass to the shrill octave of those who laugh to drown buried griefs of their own. Checkers were played in the waist at the time of Shenly's burial; and as the body plunged, a player swept the board. The bubbles had hardly burst, when all hands were piped down by the Boatswain, and the old jests were heard again, as if Shenly himself were there to hear.

This man-of-war life has not left me unhardened. I cannot stop to weep over Shenly now; that would be false to the life I depict; wearing no mourning weeds, I resume the task of portraying our man-of-war world.

Among the various other vocations, all driven abreast on board of the Neversink, was that of the schoolmaster. There were two academies in the frigate. One comprised the apprentice boys, who, upon certain days of the week, were indoctrinated in the mysteries of the primer by an invalid corporal of marines, a slender, wizen-cheeked man, who had received a liberal infant-school education.

The other school was a far more pretentious affair--a sort of army and

navy seminary combined, where mystical mathematical problems were solved by the midshipmen, and great ships-of-the-line were navigated over imaginary shoals by unimaginable observations of the moon and the stars, and learned lectures were delivered upon great guns, small arms, and the curvilinear lines described by bombs in the air.

"The Professor" was the title bestowed upon the erudite gentleman who conducted this seminary, and by that title alone was he known throughout the ship. He was domiciled in the Ward-room, and circulated there on a social par with the Purser, Surgeon, and other non-combatants and Quakers. By being advanced to the dignity of a peerage in the Ward-room, Science and Learning were ennobled in the person of this Professor, even as divinity was honoured in the Chaplain enjoying the rank of a spiritual peer.

Every other afternoon, while at sea, the Professor assembled his pupils on the half-deck, near the long twenty-four pounders. A bass drum-head was his desk, his pupils forming a semicircle around him, seated on shot-boxes and match-tubs.

They were in the jelly of youth, and this learned Professor poured into their susceptible hearts all the gentle gunpowder maxims of war.

Presidents of Peace Societies and Superintendents of Sabbath-schools, must it not have been a most interesting sight?

But the Professor himself was a noteworthy person. A tall, thin, spectacled man, about forty years old, with a student's stoop in his shoulders, and wearing uncommonly scanty pantaloons, exhibiting an undue proportion of his boots. In early life he had been a cadet in the military academy of West Point; but, becoming very weak-sighted, and thereby in a good manner disqualified for active service in the field, he had declined entering the army, and accepted the office of Professor in the Navy.

His studies at West Point had thoroughly grounded him in a knowledge of gunnery; and, as he was not a little of a pedant, it was sometimes amusing, when the sailors were at quarters, to hear him criticise their evolutions at the batteries. He would quote Dr. Hutton's Tracts on the subject, also, in the original, "The French Bombardier," and wind up by Italian passages from the "Prattica Manuale dell' Artiglieria."

Though not required by the Navy regulations to instruct his scholars in aught but the application of mathematics to navigation, yet besides this, and besides instructing them in the theory of gunnery, he also sought to root them in the theory of frigate and fleet tactics. To be sure, he himself did not know how to splice a rope or furl a sail; and, owing to his partiality for strong coffee, he was apt to be nervous when we fired salutes; yet all this did not prevent him from delivering lectures on cannonading and "breaking the enemy's line."

He had arrived at his knowledge of tactics by silent, solitary study,

and earnest meditation in the sequestered retreat of his state-room. His case was somewhat parallel to the Scotchman's--John. Clerk, Esq., of Eldin--who, though he had never been to sea, composed a quarto treatise on fleet-fighting, which to this day remains a text-book; and he also originated a nautical manoeuvre, which has given to England many a victory over her foes.

Now there was a large black-board, something like a great-gun target--only it was square--which during the professor's lectures was placed upright on the gun-deck, supported behind by three boarding-pikes. And here he would chalk out diagrams of great fleet engagements; making marks, like the soles of shoes, for the ships, and drawing a dog-vane in one corner to denote the assumed direction of the wind. This done, with a cutlass he would point out every spot of interest.

"Now, young gentlemen, the board before you exhibits the disposition of the British West Indian squadron under Rodney, when, early on the morning of the 9th of April, in the year of our blessed Lord 1782, he discovered part of the French fleet, commanded by the Count de Grasse, lying under the north end of the Island of Dominica. It was at this juncture that the Admiral gave the signal for the British line to prepare for battle, and stand on. D'ye understand, young gentlemen? Well, the British van having nearly fetched up with the centre of the enemy--who, be it remembered, were then on the starboard tack--and Rodney's centre and rear being yet becalmed under the lee of the

land--the question I ask you is, What should Rodney now do?"

"Blaze away, by all means!" responded a rather confident reefer, who had zealously been observing the diagram.

"But, sir, his centre and rear are still becalmed, and his van has not yet closed with the enemy."

"Wait till he does come in range, and then blaze away," said the reefer.

"Permit me to remark, Mr. Pert, that 'blaze away' is not a strictly technical term; and also permit me to hint, Mr. Pert, that you should consider the subject rather more deeply before you hurry forward your opinion."

This rebuke not only abashed Mr. Pert, but for a time intimidated the rest; and the professor was obliged to proceed, and extricate the British fleet by himself. He concluded by awarding Admiral Rodney the victory, which must have been exceedingly gratifying to the family pride of the surviving relatives and connections of that distinguished hero.

"Shall I clean the board, sir?" now asked Mr. Pert, brightening up.

"No, sir; not till you have saved that crippled French ship in the

corner. That ship, young gentlemen, is the Glorieuse: you perceive she is cut off from her consorts, and the whole British fleet is giving chase to her. Her bowsprit is gone; her rudder is torn away; she has one hundred round shot in her hull, and two thirds of her men are dead or dying. What's to be done? the wind being at northeast by north?"

"Well, sir," said Mr. Dash, a chivalric young gentleman from Virginia, "I wouldn't strike yet; I'd nail my colours to the main-royal-mast! I would, by Jove!"

"That would not save your ship, sir; besides, your main-mast has gone by the board."

"I think, sir," said Mr. Slim, a diffident youth, "I think, sir, I would haul back the fore-top-sail."

"And why so? of what service would that be, I should like to know, Mr. Slim?"

"I can't tell exactly; but I think it would help her a little," was the timid reply.

"Not a whit, sir--not one particle; besides, you can't haul back your fore-top-sail--your fore-mast is lying across your fore-castle."

"Haul back the main-top-sail, then," suggested another.

"Can't be done; your main-mast, also, has gone by the board!"

"Mizzen-top-sail?" meekly suggested little Boat-Plug.

"Your mizzen-top-mast, let me inform you, sir, was shot down in the first of the fight!"

"Well, sir," cried Mr. Dash, "I'd tack ship, anyway; bid 'em good-by with a broadside; nail my flag to the keel, if there was no other place; and blow my brains out on the poop!"

"Idle, idle, sir! worse than idle! you are carried away, Mr. Dash, by your ardent Southern temperament! Let me inform you, young gentlemen, that this ship," touching it with his cutlass, "cannot be saved."

Then, throwing down his cutlass, "Mr. Pert, have the goodness to hand me one of those cannon-balls from the rack."

Balancing the iron sphere in one hand, the learned professor began fingering it with the other, like Columbus illustrating the rotundity of the globe before the Royal Commission of Castilian Ecclesiastics.

"Young gentlemen, I resume my remarks on the passage of a shot in vacuo, which remarks were interrupted yesterday by general quarters. After quoting that admirable passage in 'Spearman's British Gunner,' I

then laid it down, you remember, that the path of a shot in vacuo describes a parabolic curve. I now add that, agreeably to the method pursued by the illustrious Newton in treating the subject of curvilinear motion, I consider the trajectory or curve described by a moving body in space as consisting of a series of right lines, described in successive intervals of time, and constituting the diagonals of parallelograms formed in a vertical plane between the vertical deflections caused by gravity and the production of the line of motion which has been described in each preceding interval of time. This must be obvious; for, if you say that the passage in vacuo of this cannon-ball, now held in my hand, would describe otherwise than a series of right lines, etc., then you are brought to the Reductio ad Absurdum, that the diagonals of parallelograms are----"

"All hands reef top-sail!" was now thundered forth by the boatswain's mates. The shot fell from the professor's palm; his spectacles dropped on his nose, and the school tumultuously broke up, the pupils scrambling up the ladders with the sailors, who had been overhearing the lecture.