

CHAPTER LXXXV.

THE GREAT MASSACRE OF THE BEARDS.

The preceding chapter fitly paves the way for the present, wherein it sadly befalls White-Jacket to chronicle a calamitous event, which filled the Neversink with long lamentations, that echo through all her decks and tops. After dwelling upon our redundant locks and thrice-noble beards, fain would I cease, and let the sequel remain undisclosed, but truth and fidelity forbid.

As I now deviously hover and lingeringly skirmish about the frontiers of this melancholy recital, a feeling of sadness comes over me that I cannot withstand. Such a heartless massacre of hair! Such a Bartholomew's Day and Sicilian Vespers of assassinated beards! Ah! who would believe it! With intuitive sympathy I feel of my own brown beard while I write, and thank my kind stars that each precious hair is for ever beyond the reach of the ruthless barbers of a man-of-war!

It needs that this sad and most serious matter should be faithfully detailed. Throughout the cruise, many of the officers had expressed their abhorrence of the impunity with which the most extensive plantations of hair were cultivated under their very noses; and they frowned upon every beard with even greater dislike. They said it was unseamanlike; not ship-shape; in short, it was disgraceful to the

Navy. But as Captain Claret said nothing, and as the officers, of themselves, had no authority to preach a crusade against whiskerandoes, the Old Guard on the forecastle still complacently stroked their beards, and the sweet youths of the After-guard still lovingly threaded their fingers through their curls.

Perhaps the Captain's generosity in thus far permitting our beards sprung from the fact that he himself wore a small speck of a beard upon his own imperial cheek; which if rumour said true, was to hide something, as Plutarch relates of the Emperor Adrian. But, to do him justice--as I always have done--the Captain's beard did not exceed the limits prescribed by the Navy Department.

According to a then recent ordinance at Washington, the beards of both officers and seamen were to be accurately laid out and surveyed, and on no account must come lower than the mouth, so as to correspond with the Army standard--a regulation directly opposed to the theocratical law laid down in the nineteenth chapter and twenty-seventh verse of Leviticus, where it is expressly ordained, "Thou shalt not mar the corners of thy beard." But legislators do not always square their statutes by those of the Bible.

At last, when we had crossed the Northern Tropic, and were standing up to our guns at evening quarters, and when the setting sun, streaming in at the port-holes, lit up every hair, till to an observer on the quarter-deck, the two long, even lines of beards seemed one dense

grove; in that evil hour it must have been, that a cruel thought entered into the heart of our Captain.

A pretty set of savages, thought he, am I taking home to America; people will think them all catamounts and Turks. Besides, now that I think of it, it's against the law. It will never do. They must be shaven and shorn--that's flat.

There is no knowing, indeed, whether these were the very words in which the Captain meditated that night; for it is yet a mooted point among metaphysicians, whether we think in words or whether we think in thoughts. But something like the above must have been the Captain's cogitations. At any rate, that very evening the ship's company were astounded by an extraordinary announcement made at the main-hatch-way of the gun-deck, by the Boat-swain's mate there stationed. He was afterwards discovered to have been tipsy at the time.

"D'ye hear there, fore and aft? All you that have hair on your heads, shave them off; and all you that have beards, trim 'em small!"

Shave off our Christian heads! And then, placing them between our knees, trim small our worshipped beards! The Captain was mad.

But directly the Boatswain came rushing to the hatchway, and, after soundly rating his tipsy mate, thundered forth a true version of the order that had issued from the quarter-deck. As amended, it ran thus:

"D'ye hear there, fore and aft? All you that have long hair, cut it short; and all you that have large whiskers, trim them down, according to the Navy regulations."

This was an amendment, to be sure; but what barbarity, after all! What! not thirty days' run from home, and lose our magnificent homeward-bounders! The homeward-bounders we had been cultivating so long! Lose them at one fell swoop? Were the vile barbers of the gun-deck to reap our long, nodding harvests, and expose our innocent chins to the chill air of the Yankee coast! And our viny locks! were they also to be shorn? Was a grand sheep-shearing, such as they annually have at Nantucket, to take place; and our ignoble barbers to carry off the fleece?

Captain Claret! in cutting our beards and our hair, you cut us the unkindest cut of all! Were we going into action, Captain Claret--going to fight the foe with our hearts of flame and our arms of steel, then would we gladly offer up our beards to the terrific God of War, and that we would account but a wise precaution against having them tweaked by the foe. Then, Captain Claret, you would but be imitating the example of Alexander, who had his Macedonians all shaven, that in the hour of battle their beards might not be handles to the Persians. But now, Captain Claret! when after our long, long cruise, we are returning to our homes, tenderly stroking the fine tassels on our chins; and thinking of father or mother, or sister or brother, or

daughter or son; to cut off our beards now--the very beards that were frosted white off the pitch of Patagonia--this is too bitterly bad, Captain Claret! and, by Heaven, we will not submit. Train your guns inboard, let the marines fix their bayonets, let the officers draw their swords; we will not let our beards be reaped--the last insult inflicted upon a vanquished foe in the East!

Where are you, sheet-anchor-men! Captains of the tops! gunner's mates! mariners, all! Muster round the capstan your venerable beards, and while you braid them together in token of brotherhood, cross hands and swear that we will enact over again the mutiny of the Nore, and sooner perish than yield up a hair!

The excitement was intense throughout that whole evening. Groups of tens and twenties were scattered about all the decks, discussing the mandate, and inveighing against its barbarous author. The long area of the gun-deck was something like a populous street of brokers, when some terrible commercial tidings have newly arrived. One and all, they resolved not to succumb, and every man swore to stand by his beard and his neighbour.

Twenty-four hours after--at the next evening quarters--the Captain's eye was observed to wander along the men at their guns--not a beard was shaven!

When the drum beat the retreat, the Boatswain--now attended by all four

of his mates, to give additional solemnity to the announcement--repeated the previous day's order, and concluded by saying, that twenty-four hours would be given for all to acquiesce.

But the second day passed, and at quarters, untouched, every beard bristled on its chin. Forthwith Captain Claret summoned the midshipmen, who, receiving his orders, hurried to the various divisions of the guns, and communicated them to the Lieutenants respectively stationed over divisions.

The officer commanding mine turned upon us, and said, "Men, if tomorrow night I find any of you with long hair, or whiskers of a standard violating the Navy regulations, the names of such offenders shall be put down on the report."

The affair had now assumed a most serious aspect. The Captain was in earnest. The excitement increased ten-fold; and a great many of the older seamen, exasperated to the uttermost, talked about knocking of duty till the obnoxious mandate was revoked. I thought it impossible that they would seriously think of such a folly; but there is no knowing what man-of-war's-men will sometimes do, under provocation--witness Parker and the Nore.

That same night, when the first watch was set, the men in a body drove the two boatswain's mates from their stations at the fore and main hatchways, and unshipped the ladders; thus cutting off all

communication between the gun and spar decks, forward of the main-mast.

Mad Jack had the trumpet; and no sooner was this incipient mutiny reported to him, than he jumped right down among the mob, and fearlessly mingling with them, exclaimed, "What do you mean, men? don't be fools! This is no way to get what you want. Turn to, my lads, turn to! Boatswain's mate, ship that ladder! So! up you tumble, now, my hearties! away you go!"

His gallant, off-handed, confident manner, recognising no attempt at mutiny, operated upon the sailors like magic.

They tumbled up, as commanded; and for the rest of that night contented themselves with privately fulminating their displeasure against the Captain, and publicly emblazoning every anchor-button on the coat of admired Mad Jack.

Captain Claret happened to be taking a nap in his cabin at the moment of the disturbance; and it was quelled so soon that he knew nothing of it till it was officially reported to him. It was afterward rumoured through the ship that he reprimanded Mad Jack for acting as he did. He maintained that he should at once have summoned the marines, and charged upon the "mutineers." But if the sayings imputed to the Captain were true, he nevertheless refrained from subsequently noticing the disturbance, or attempting to seek out and punish the ringleaders. This was but wise; for there are times when even the most potent governor

must wink at transgression in order to preserve the laws inviolate for the future. And great care is to be taken, by timely management, to avert an incontestable act of mutiny, and so prevent men from being roused, by their own consciousness of transgression, into all the fury of an unbounded insurrection. Then for the time, both soldiers and sailors are irresistible; as even the valour of Caesar was made to know, and the prudence of Germanicus, when their legions rebelled. And not all the concessions of Earl Spencer, as First lord of the Admiralty, nor the threats and entreaties of Lord Bridport, the Admiral of the Fleet--no, nor his gracious Majesty's plenary pardon in prospective, could prevail upon the Spithead mutineers (when at last fairly lashed up to the mark) to succumb, until deserted by their own mess-mates, and a handful was left in the breach.

Therefore, Mad Jack! you did right, and no one else could have acquitted himself better. By your crafty simplicity, good-natured daring, and off-handed air (as if nothing was happening) you perhaps quelled a very serious affair in the bud, and prevented the disgrace to the American Navy of a tragical mutiny, growing out of whiskers, soap-suds, and razors. Think of it, if future historians should devote a long chapter to the great Rebellion of the Beards on board the United States ship Neversink. Why, through all time thereafter, barbers would cut down their spiralised poles, and substitute miniature main-masts for the emblems of their calling.

And here is ample scope for some pregnant instruction, how that events

of vast magnitude in our man-of-war world may originate in the pettiest of trifles. But that is an old theme; we waive it, and proceed.

On the morning following, though it was not a regular shaving day, the gun-deck barbers were observed to have their shops open, their match-tub accommodations in readiness, and their razors displayed. With their brushes, raising a mighty lather in their tin pots, they stood eyeing the passing throng of seamen, silently inviting them to walk in and be served. In addition to their usual implements, they now flourished at intervals a huge pair of sheep-shears, by way of more forcibly reminding the men of the edict which that day must be obeyed, or woe betide them.

For some hours the seamen paced to and fro in no very good humour, vowing not to sacrifice a hair. Beforehand, they denounced that man who should abase himself by compliance. But habituation to discipline is magical; and ere long an old forecastle-man was discovered elevated upon a match-tub, while, with a malicious grin, his barber--a fellow who, from his merciless rasping, was called Blue-Skin--seized him by his long beard, and at one fell stroke cut it off and tossed it out of the port-hole behind him. This forecastle-man was ever afterwards known by a significant title--in the main equivalent to that name of reproach fastened upon that Athenian who, in Alexander's time, previous to which all the Greeks sported beards, first submitted to the deprivation of his own. But, spite of all the contempt hurled on our forecastle-man, so prudent an example was soon followed; presently all the barbers were

busy.

Sad sight! at which any one but a barber or a Tartar would have wept! Beards three years old; goatees that would have graced a Chamois of the Alps; imperials that Count D'Orsay would have envied; and love-curls and man-of-war ringlets that would have measured, inch for inch, with the longest tresses of The Fair One with the Golden Locks--all went by the board! Captain Claret! how can you rest in your hammock! by this brown beard which now waves from my chin--the illustrious successor to that first, young, vigorous beard I yielded to your tyranny--by this manly beard, I swear, it was barbarous!

My noble captain, Jack Chase, was indignant. Not even all the special favours he had received from Captain Claret, and the plenary pardon extended to him for his desertion into the Peruvian service, could restrain the expression of his feelings. But in his cooler moments, Jack was a wise man; he at last deemed it but wisdom to succumb.

When he went to the barber he almost drew tears from his eyes. Seating himself mournfully on the match-tub, he looked sideways, and said to the barber, who was slithering his sheep-shears in readiness to begin: "My friend, I trust your scissors are consecrated. Let them not touch this beard if they have yet to be dipped in holy water; beards are sacred things, barber. Have you no feeling for beards, my friend? think of it;" and mournfully he laid his deep-dyed, russet cheek upon his hand. "Two summers have gone by since my chin has been reaped. I

was in Coquimbo then, on the Spanish Main; and when the husband-man was sowing his Autumnal grain on the Vega, I started this blessed beard; and when the vine-dressers were trimming their vines in the vineyards, I first trimmed it to the sound of a flute. Ah! barber, have you no heart? This beard has been caressed by the snow-white hand of the lovely Tomasita of Tombez--the Castilian belle of all lower Peru. Think of that, barber! I have worn it as an officer on the quarter-deck of a Peruvian man-of-war. I have sported it at brilliant fandangoes in Lima. I have been aloft and aloft with it at sea. Yea, barber! it has streamed like an Admiral's pennant at the mast-head of this same gallant frigate, the Neversink! Oh! barber, barber! it stabs me to the heart.--Talk not of hauling down your ensigns and standards when vanquished--what is that, barber! to striking the flag that Nature herself has nailed to the mast!"

Here noble Jack's feelings overcame him: he dropped from the animated attitude into which his enthusiasm had momentarily transported him; his proud head sunk upon his chest, and his long, sad beard almost grazed the deck.

"Ay! trail your beards in grief and dishonour, oh crew of the Neversink!" sighed Jack. "Barber, come closer--now, tell me, my friend, have you obtained absolution for this deed you are about to commit? You have not? Then, barber, I will absolve you; your hands shall be washed of this sin; it is not you, but another; and though you are about to shear off my manhood, yet, barber, I freely forgive you; kneel, kneel,

barber! that I may bless you, in token that I cherish no malice!"

So when this barber, who was the only tender-hearted one of his tribe, had kneeled, been absolved, and then blessed, Jack gave up his beard into his hands, and the barber, clipping it off with a sigh, held it high aloft, and, parodying the style of the boatswain's mates, cried aloud, "D'ye hear, fore and aft? This is the beard of our matchless Jack Chase, the noble captain of this frigate's main-top!"