

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

OLD USHANT AT THE GANGWAY.

The rebel beards, headed by old Ushant's, streaming like a Commodore's bougee, now stood in silence at the mast.

"You knew the order!" said the Captain, eyeing them severely; "what does that hair on your chins?"

"Sir," said the Captain of the Forecastle, "did old Ushant ever refuse doing his duty? did he ever yet miss his muster? But, sir, old Ushant's beard is his own!"

"What's that, sir? Master-at-arms, put that man into the brig."

"Sir," said the old man, respectfully, "the three years for which I shipped are expired; and though I am perhaps bound to work the ship home, yet, as matters are, I think my beard might be allowed me. It is but a few days, Captain Claret."

"Put him into the brig!" cried the Captain; "and now, you old rascals!" he added, turning round upon the rest, "I give you fifteen minutes to have those beards taken off; if they then remain on your chins, I'll flog you--every mother's son of you--though you were all my own

god-fathers!"

The band of beards went forward, summoned their barbers, and their glorious pennants were no more. In obedience to orders, they then paraded themselves at the mast, and, addressing the Captain, said, "Sir, our muzzle-lashings are cast off!"

Nor is it unworthy of being chronicled, that not a single sailor who complied with the general order but refused to sport the vile regulation-whiskers prescribed by the Navy Department. No! like heroes they cried, "Shave me clean! I will not wear a hair, since I cannot wear all!"

On the morrow, after breakfast, Ushant was taken out of irons, and, with the master-at-arms on one side and an armed sentry on the other, was escorted along the gun-deck and up the ladder to the main-mast. There the Captain stood, firm as before. They must have guarded the old man thus to prevent his escape to the shore, something less than a thousand miles distant at the time.

"Well, sir, will you have that beard taken off? you have slept over it a whole night now; what do you say? I don't want to flog an old man like you, Ushant!"

"My beard is my own, sir!" said the old man, lowly.

"Will you take it off?"

"It is mine, sir?" said the old man, tremulously.

"Rig the gratings?" roared the Captain. "Master-at-arms, strip him! quarter-masters, seize him up! boatswain's mates, do your duty!"

While these executioners were employed, the Captain's excitement had a little time to abate; and when, at last, old Ushant was tied up by the arms and legs and his venerable back was exposed--that back which had bowed at the guns of the frigate Constitution when she captured the Guerriere--the Captain seemed to relent.

"You are a very old man," he said, "and I am sorry to flog you; but my orders must be obeyed. I will give you one more chance; will you have that beard taken off?"

"Captain Claret," said the old man, turning round painfully in his bonds, "you may flog me if you will; but, sir, in this one thing I cannot obey you."

"Lay on! I'll see his backbone!" roared the Captain in a sudden fury.

"By Heaven!" thrillingly whispered Jack Chase, who stood by, "it's only a halter; I'll strike him!"

"Better not," said a top-mate; "it's death, or worse punishment, remember."

"There goes the lash!" cried Jack. "Look at the old man! By G---d, I can't stand it! Let me go, men!" and with moist eyes Jack forced his way to one side.

"You, boatswain's mate," cried the Captain, "you are favouring that man! Lay on soundly, sir, or I'll have your own cat laid soundly on you."

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve lashes were laid on the back of that heroic old man. He only bowed over his head, and stood as the Dying Gladiator lies.

"Cut him down," said the Captain.

"And now go and cut your own throat," hoarsely whispered an old sheet-anchor-man, a mess-mate of Ushant's.

When the master-at-arms advanced with the prisoner's shirt, Ushant waved him off with the dignified air of a Brahim, saying, "Do you think, master-at-arms, that I am hurt? I will put on my own garment. I am never the worse for it, man; and 'tis no dishonour when he who would dishonour you, only dishonours himself."

"What says he?" cried the Captain; "what says that tarry old philosopher with the smoking back? Tell it to me, sir, if you dare! Sentry, take that man back to the brig. Stop! John Ushant, you have been Captain of the Forecastle; I break you. And now you go into the brig, there to remain till you consent to have that beard taken off."

"My beard is my own," said the old man, quietly. "Sen-try, I am ready."

And back he went into durance between the guns; but after lying some four or five days in irons, an order came to remove them; but he was still kept confined.

Books were allowed him, and he spent much time in reading. But he also spent many hours in braiding his beard, and interweaving with it strips of red bunting, as if he desired to dress out and adorn the thing which had triumphed over all opposition.

He remained a prisoner till we arrived in America; but the very moment he heard the chain rattle out of the hawse-hole, and the ship swing to her anchor, he started to his feet, dashed the sentry aside, and gaining the deck, exclaimed, "At home, with my beard!"

His term of service having some months previous expired, and the ship being now in harbour, he was beyond the reach of naval law, and the officers durst not molest him. But without unduly availing himself of these circumstances, the old man merely got his bag and hammock

together, hired a boat, and throwing himself into the stern, was rowed ashore, amid the unsuppressible cheers of all hands. It was a glorious conquest over the Conqueror himself, as well worthy to be celebrated as the Battle of the Nile.

Though, as I afterward learned, Ushant was earnestly entreated to put the case into some lawyer's hands, he firmly declined, saying, "I have won the battle, my friends, and I do not care for the prize-money." But even had he complied with these entreaties, from precedents in similar cases, it is almost certain that not a sou's worth of satisfaction would have been received.

I know not in what frigate you sail now, old Ushant; but Heaven protect your storied old beard, in whatever Typhoon it may blow. And if ever it must be shorn, old man, may it fare like the royal beard of Henry I., of England, and be clipped by the right reverend hand of some Archbishop of Sees.

As for Captain Claret, let it not be supposed that it is here sought to impale him before the world as a cruel, black-hearted man. Such he was not. Nor was he, upon the whole, regarded by his crew with anything like the feelings which man-of-war's-men sometimes cherish toward signally tyrannical commanders. In truth, the majority of the Neversink's crew--in previous cruises habituated to flagrant misuse--deemed Captain Claret a lenient officer. In many things he certainly refrained from oppressing them. It has been related what

privileges he accorded to the seamen respecting the free playing of checkers--a thing almost unheard of in most American men-of-war. In the matter of overseeing the men's clothing, also, he was remarkably indulgent, compared with the conduct of other Navy captains, who, by sumptuary regulations, oblige their sailors to run up large bills with the Purser for clothes. In a word, of whatever acts Captain Claret might have been guilty in the Neversink, perhaps none of them proceeded from any personal, organic hard-heartedness. What he was, the usages of the Navy had made him. Had he been a mere landsman--a merchant, say--he would no doubt have been considered a kind-hearted man.

There may be some who shall read of this Bartholomew Massacre of beards who will yet marvel, perhaps, that the loss of a few hairs, more or less, should provoke such hostility from the sailors, lash them into so frothing a rage; indeed, come near breeding a mutiny.

But these circumstances are not without precedent. Not to speak of the riots, attended with the loss of life, which once occurred in Madrid, in resistance to an arbitrary edict of the king's, seeking to suppress the cloaks of the Cavaliers; and, not to make mention of other instances that might be quoted, it needs only to point out the rage of the Saxons in the time of William the Conqueror, when that despot commanded the hair on their upper lips to be shaven off--the hereditary mustaches which whole generations had sported. The multitude of the dispirited vanquished were obliged to acquiesce; but many Saxon Franklins and gentlemen of spirit, choosing rather to lose their

castles than their mustaches, voluntarily deserted their firesides, and went into exile. All this is indignantly related by the stout Saxon friar, Matthew Paris, in his *Historia Major*, beginning with the Norman Conquest.

And that our man-of-war's-men were right in desiring to perpetuate their beards, as martial appurtenances, must seem very plain, when it is considered that, as the beard is the token of manhood, so, in some shape or other, has it ever been held the true badge of a warrior.

Bonaparte's grenadiers were stout whiskerandoes; and perhaps, in a charge, those fierce whiskers of theirs did as much to appall the foe as the sheen of their bayonets. Most all fighting creatures sport either whiskers or beards; it seems a law of Dame Nature. Witness the boar, the tiger, the cougar, man, the leopard, the ram, the cat--all warriors, and all whiskerandoes. Whereas, the peace-loving tribes have mostly enameled chins.