

## CHAPTER XCI.

### SMOKING-CLUB IN A MAN-OF-WAR, WITH SCENES ON THE GUN-DECK DRAWING NEAR HOME.

There is a fable about a painter moved by Jove to the painting of the head of Medusa. Though the picture was true to the life, yet the poor artist sickened at the sight of what his forced pencil had drawn. Thus, borne through my task toward the end, my own soul now sinks at what I myself have portrayed. But let us forget past chapters, if we may, while we paint less repugnant things.

Metropolitan gentlemen have their club; provincial gossipers their news-room; village quidnuncs their barber's shop; the Chinese their opium-houses; American Indians their council-fire; and even cannibals their Noojona, or Talk-Stone, where they assemble at times to discuss the affairs of the day. Nor is there any government, however despotic, that ventures to deny to the least of its subjects the privilege of a sociable chat. Not the Thirty Tyrants even--the clubbed post-captains of old Athens--could stop the wagging tongues at the street-corners. For chat man must; and by our immortal Bill of Rights, that guarantees to us liberty of speech, chat we Yankees will, whether on board a frigate, or on board our own terra-firma plantations.

In men-of-war, the Galley, or Cookery, on the gun-deck, is the grand

centre of gossip and news among the sailors. Here crowds assemble to chat away the half-hour elapsing after every meal. The reason why this place and these hours are selected rather than others is this: in the neighbourhood of the galley alone, and only after meals, is the man-of-war's-man permitted to regale himself with a smoke.

A sumptuary edict, truly, that deprived White-Jacket, for one, of a luxury to which he had long been attached. For how can the mystical motives, the capricious impulses of a luxurious smoker go and come at the beck of a Commodore's command? No! when I smoke, be it because of my sovereign good pleasure I choose so to do, though at so unseasonable an hour that I send round the town for a brasier of coals. What! smoke by a sun-dial? Smoke on compulsion? Make a trade, a business, a vile recurring calling of smoking? And, perhaps, when those sedative fumes have steeped you in the grandest of reveries, and, circle over circle, solemnly rises some immeasurable dome in your soul--far away, swelling and heaving into the vapour you raise--as if from one Mozart's grandest marches of a temple were rising, like Venus from the sea--at such a time, to have your whole Parthenon tumbled about your ears by the knell of the ship's bell announcing the expiration of the half-hour for smoking! Whip me, ye Furies! toast me in saltpetre! smite me, some thunderbolt! charge upon me, endless squadrons of Mamalukes! devour me, Feejees! but preserve me from a tyranny like this!

No! though I smoked like an Indian summer ere I entered the Neversink, so abhorrent was this sumptuary law that I altogether abandoned the

luxury rather than enslave it to a time and a place. Herein did I not right, Ancient and Honourable Old Guard of Smokers all round the world?

But there were others of the crew not so fastidious as myself. After every meal, they hied to the galley and solaced their souls with a whiff.

Now a bunch of cigars, all banded together, is a type and a symbol of the brotherly love between smokers. Likewise, for the time, in a community of pipes is a community of hearts! Nor was it an ill thing for the Indian Sachems to circulate their calumet tobacco-bowl--even as our own forefathers circulated their punch-bowl--in token of peace, charity, and good-will, friendly feelings, and sympathising souls. And this it was that made the gossipers of the galley so loving a club, so long as the vapoury bond united them.

It was a pleasant sight to behold them. Grouped in the recesses between the guns, they chatted and laughed like rows of convivialists in the boxes of some vast dining-saloon. Take a Flemish kitchen full of good fellows from Teniers; add a fireside group from Wilkie; throw in a naval sketch from Cruickshank; and then stick a short pipe into every mother's son's mouth, and you have the smoking scene at the galley of the Neversink.

Not a few were politicians; and, as there were some thoughts of a war with England at the time, their discussions waxed warm.

"I tell you what it is, shippies!" cried the old captain of gun No. 1 on the forecastle, "if that 'ere President of ourn don't luff up into the wind, by the Battle of the Nile! he'll be getting us into a grand fleet engagement afore the Yankee nation has rammed home her cartridges--let alone blowing the match!"

"Who talks of luffing?" roared a roystering fore-top-man. "Keep our Yankee nation large before the wind, say I, till you come plump on the enemy's bows, and then board him in the smoke," and with that, there came forth a mighty blast from his pipe.

"Who says the old man at the helm of the Yankee nation can't steer his trick as well as George Washington himself?" cried a sheet-anchor-man.

"But they say he's a cold-water customer, Bill," cried another; "and sometimes o' nights I somehow has a presentation that he's goin' to stop our grog."

"D'ye hear there, fore and aft!" roared the boatswain's mate at the gangway, "all hands tumble up, and 'bout ship!"

"That's the talk!" cried the captain of gun No. 1, as, in obedience to the summons, all hands dropped their pipes and crowded toward the ladders, "and that's what the President must do--go in stays, my lads, and put the Yankee nation on the other tack."

But these political discussions by no means supplied the staple of conversation for the gossiping smokers of the galley. The interior affairs of the frigate itself formed their principal theme. Rumours about the private life of the Commodore in his cabin; about the Captain, in his; about the various officers in the ward-room; about the reefers in the steerage, and their madcap frolickings, and about a thousand other matters touching the crew themselves; all these--forming the eternally shifting, domestic by-play of a man-of-war--proved inexhaustible topics for our quidnuncs.

The animation of these scenes was very much heightened as we drew nearer and nearer our port; it rose to a climax when the frigate was reported to be only twenty-four hours' sail from the land. What they should do when they landed; how they should invest their wages; what they should eat; what they should drink; and what lass they should marry--these were the topics which absorbed them.

"Sink the sea!" cried a fore-castle man. "Once more ashore, and you'll never again catch old Boombolt afloat. I mean to settle down in a sail-loft."

"Cable-tier pinchers blister all tarpaulin hats!" cried a young after-guard's-man; "I mean to go back to the counter."

"Shipmates! take me by the arms, and swab up the lee-scuppers with me,

but I mean to steer a clam-cart before I go again to a ship's wheel.  
Let the Navy go by the board--to sea again, I won't!"

"Start my soul-bolts, maties, if any more Blue Peters and sailing signals fly at my fore!" cried the Captain of the Head. "My wages will buy a wheelbarrow, if nothing more."

"I have taken my last dose of salts," said the Captain of the Waist, "and after this mean to stick to fresh water. Ay, maties, ten of us Waisters mean to club together and buy a serving-mallet boat, d'ye see; and if ever we drown, it will be in the 'raging canal!' Blast the sea, shipmates! say I."

"Profane not the holy element!" said Lemsford, the poet of the gun-deck, leaning over a cannon. "Know ye not, man-of-war's-men! that by the Parthian magi the ocean was held sacred? Did not Tiridates, the Eastern monarch, take an immense land circuit to avoid desecrating the Mediterranean, in order to reach his imperial master, Nero, and do homage for his crown?"

"What lingo is that?" cried the Captain of the Waist.

"Who's Commodore Tiddery-eye?" cried the forecastle-man.

"Hear me out," resumed Lemsford. "Like Tiridates, I venerate the sea, and venerate it so highly, shipmates, that evermore I shall abstain

from crossing it. In that sense, Captain of the Waist, I echo your cry."

It was, indeed, a remarkable fact, that nine men out of every ten of the Neversink's crew had formed some plan or other to keep themselves ashore for life, or, at least, on fresh water, after the expiration of the present cruise. With all the experiences of that cruise accumulated in one intense recollection of a moment; with the smell of tar in their nostrils; out of sight of land; with a stout ship under foot, and snuffing the ocean air; with all the things of the sea surrounding them; in their cool, sober moments of reflection; in the silence and solitude of the deep, during the long night-watches, when all their holy home associations were thronging round their hearts; in the spontaneous piety and devotion of the last hours of so long a voyage; in the fullness and the frankness of their souls; when there was naught to jar the well-poised equilibrium of their judgment--under all these circumstances, at least nine tenths of a crew of five hundred man-of-war's-men resolved for ever to turn their backs on the sea. But do men ever hate the thing they love? Do men forswear the hearth and the homestead? What, then, must the Navy be?

But, alas for the man-of-war's-man, who, though he may take a Hannibal oath against the service; yet, cruise after cruise, and after forswearing it again and again, he is driven back to the spirit-tub and the gun-deck by his old hereditary foe, the ever-devilish god of grog.

On this point, let some of the crew of the Neversink be called to the stand.

You, Captain of the Waist! and you, seamen of the fore-top! and you, after-guard's-men and others! how came you here at the guns of the North Carolina, after registering your solemn vows at the galley of the Neversink?

They all hang their heads. I know the cause; poor fellows! perjure yourselves not again; swear not at all hereafter.

Ay, these very tars--the foremost in denouncing the Navy; who had bound themselves by the most tremendous oaths--these very men, not three days after getting ashore, were rolling round the streets in penniless drunkenness; and next day many of them were to be found on board of the guardo or receiving-ship. Thus, in part, is the Navy manned.

But what was still more surprising, and tended to impart a new and strange insight into the character of sailors, and overthrow some long-established ideas concerning them as a class, was this: numbers of men who, during the cruise, had passed for exceedingly prudent, nay, parsimonious persons, who would even refuse you a patch, or a needleful of thread, and, from their stinginess, procured the name of Ravelings--no sooner were these men fairly adrift in harbour, and under the influence of frequent quaffings, than their three-years'-earned wages flew right and left; they summoned whole



boarding-houses of sailors to the bar, and treated them over and over again. Fine fellows! generous-hearted tars! Seeing this sight, I thought to myself, Well, these generous-hearted tars on shore were the greatest curmudgeons afloat! it's the bottle that's generous, not they! Yet the popular conceit concerning a sailor is derived from his behaviour ashore; whereas, ashore he is no longer a sailor, but a landsman for the time. A man-of-war's-man is only a man-of-war's-man at sea; and the sea is the place to learn what he is. But we have seen that a man-of-war is but this old-fashioned world of ours afloat, full of all manner of characters--full of strange contradictions; and though boasting some fine fellows here and there, yet, upon the whole, charged to the combings of her hatchways with the spirit of Belial and all unrighteousness.