

RECOLLECTIONS  
OF A  
NAVAL OFFICER.

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CHAPTER I.

ENTRANCE INTO THE NAVY—JOIN THE "NORTH CAROLINA 74," AT NEW YORK—FIRST IMPRESSIONS—HAMMOCKS VERSUS COTTON-BALES—MIDSHIPMEN'S PRANKS—THE U. S. BRIG "SOMERS"—THE BRIG "BOXER"—MELANCHOLY SUICIDE—THE "BY-NO-MEAL" THEOREM—AM ORDERED TO THE LINE-OF-BATTLE-SHIP "COLUMBUS"—A POETICAL SAIL-MAKER.

WE are told that when Mr. Toots attempted to write an acrostic to Florence Dombey he carefully prepared the first letters of the lines, and then never got farther than "For when I gaze"; and I must confess that in commencing these recollections I feel somewhat in the same predicament; so I think it best to plunge at once *in medias res* and say that I entered the U. S. navy as a midshipman on the 19th day of October, 1841, being then fourteen years of age. I was almost immediately ordered to the U. S. ship *North Carolina*, and on the 27th day of the same month reported for duty to Commodore M. C. Perry, then commanding the station at New York.

I well recollect my extreme surprise at being addressed as *Mr.* by the commodore, and being recalled to my senses by the sharp *William* of my father, who accompanied me to the Navy Yard.

Upon our arrival at New York we had put up at the City Hotel, the favorite resort of naval officers. The night of our arrival we took a Whitehall boat at Castle Garden and pulled off to a transport lying in the North River, to visit my eldest brother who was on board with other officers on their way to join their regiments in Florida. My brother had just graduated at West Point, and was attached to the Fourth Infantry. I never saw him again as he died within a year.

I reported on board the receiving ship *North Carolina*, Captain Francis M. Gregory, on the morning of the 28th of October. She was at anchor in the North River, off the Battery; had a full complement of officers and men, and was kept in fine order. She was one of the largest of our line-of-battle ships, or 74's as they were generally called. One of the midshipmen informed me the next day that she was called a 74 because she carried 80 guns! When I got upon her quarter-deck the marines were drawn up for drill, the band was playing, a large party of ladies were promenading the poop-deck, and these sights taken in connection with unaccustomed *smells* (for this ship had always a curious odor of rum, tar, bean-soup and tobacco combined), tended to confuse me terribly. The one defined recollection I have is of a midshipman (whom I had met the day before in Commodore Perry's office) passing us, and recognizing my father with a touch of the cap, so jaunty and *debonair*, that I thought that if I could ever attain to that perfection I would be a naval officer indeed.

My father soon left me and I was taken below to be introduced to my messmates, of whom I found about thirty, messing in the gun-room and sleeping on the orlop deck. During the first day I was in a constant state of excitement; the frequent calling of all hands, and the running about caused me to think the ship was on fire, and I repaired to the quarter-deck many times to see what the matter was.

Several of the midshipmen hung about me, watching a chance to perpetrate their jokes; but a greenhorn, like myself,

happening to complain to them that he "could not find Cheeks, the marine, anywhere," caused me to smile; for I was well up in Marryatt's novels—so they let me alone with the remark that they supposed my father and brother (both of whom were in the navy) had put me up to the usual navy jokes.

About this time all hands were called to stand by the hammocks, and my surprise was great when I saw the hammocks taken out from the nettings; for I had previously supposed that naval officers, taking the hint from General Jackson's defences at New Orleans, had stuffed the ship's sides with bags of cotton, to resist shot! Fortunately I did not allow this to escape me, or I should have been called "cotton-bale Parker" to this day.

When I was taken down to the orlop deck and saw the hammocks swung I could not imagine how I was to sleep in, or rather *on* one; for, not knowing that it was not unlashed and that it contained inside a mattress and blankets, I naturally thought it was the way of sailors to sit a-straddle of it and repose in this unnatural attitude. It caused me much unhappiness that night in the gun-room, and I thought I had, perhaps, better resign and go home at once; but at two bells, nine o'clock, when we all went down to turn in, I was much relieved to see the hammocks spread out into a more reasonable shape.

Here another surprise awaited me: up to this time I had suffered much with ear-ache, and my mother had caused me to wear night-caps—there was nothing strange to me in this, as other boys wore them at my boarding-school—but it seems it was not a "way they had in the navy." My caps were of many colors: red, blue, green, etc., for they were made of remnants of my sisters' dresses. Now as I made my final preparations for repose I opened my trunk and put on a close-fitting night-cap. It was the signal for an indescribable scene of confusion. If I had put on a suit of mail it could not have caused greater astonishment among these light-hearted reefers. They rushed to my trunk, seized the caps,

put them on, and joined in a wild dance on the orlop deck, in which were mingled red caps, blue caps, white caps—all colors of caps—in pleasing variety. I had to take mine off before turning in as it really did seem to be too much for their feelings; but I managed to smuggle it under my pillow, and when all was quiet I put it on again; but when the midshipman came down at midnight to call the relief he spied it, and we had another scene. This was the last I ever saw of my caps. I have never had one on since, and *consequently* have never had the ear-ache!

I do not propose to give a detailed account of my life on board this ship, but only to present a few scenes as they come to my recollection.

My first duty was to carry the daily dispatches to Commodore Perry at the Navy Yard, and this kept me in a boat pretty much all day, and involved a good deal of risk in passing the ferries; but after a few weeks I was, to my great joy, (for I was green then and didn't know any better) assigned to a watch.

About the latter part of November the ship was taken to the Navy Yard, laid alongside the wharf, and made comfortable for the winter, by building houses over the hatches, closing in the half-ports, etc. Our time was occupied in keeping our watches and learning navigation under Professor Ward. I, for one, soon learned to work all the rules in Bowditch's Navigator; though, if the truth must be told, I did not exactly understand "what it was about:" nor did I learn until I got fairly to sea on my first cruise. Few explanations were given as to "theory," as well as I remember.

The navy at that day was, as to the officers and men, very similar to the British navy, as described by Marryatt in his novels: the same jokes were perpetrated and the same characters existed.

We had on board the *North Carolina* some sailors who had been in the *Constitution* when she captured the *Guerriere*; some who were in the *United States* when she took the *Mace-*

*donian*, and others who had served under Commodores Perry and McDonough on the Lakes; and it was the custom to get them in the gun-room at night, to sing the old sailor ditties of "The Constitution and the Guerriere," "The Wasp and the Frolic," "The Enterprise and the Boxer," etc. Of course I looked upon these men as not only heroes, but Methusalehs as well!

Among my messmates was the ill-fated Spencer. He was a classmate of mine, and joined shortly after I did. I remember him as a tall, pale, delicate-looking young man of perhaps nineteen years of age. It will be remembered that Midshipman Spencer was accused of inciting a mutiny on board the United States brig *Somers*, in November, 1842. He was tried by a summary court-martial at sea, and hanged at the yard-arm on the 1st of December following, in company with the boatswain's mate, Cromwell, and the gunner's mate, Small. This affair caused an immense sensation in the country, and the commander, Alex. Slidell Mackenzie, asked for and obtained a Court of Inquiry. His course was sustained by it; though J. Fenimore Cooper, the novelist, took up the cudgels, and made a savage attack upon him. Officers of the navy in my time generally declined to discuss this affair.

I saw the *Somers* launched at the New York Navy Yard in the spring of 1842.

During the winter the brig *Boxer* was fitted out for foreign service, and I was anxious to apply for her, but our judicious, and kind-hearted first lieutenant, Charles Armstrong, would not allow me to do so.

It was the luck in that day of the small, crowded, ill-ventilated vessels like the *Boxer* and *Dolphin* to be sent to the West Indies, coast of Africa, and other sickly stations: on the same principle I suppose, as Dickens says, that in serving out clothing the long men get into the short trousers, and the short men into the long ones. While the *Boxer* was fitting out our junior lieutenant was ordered to her, much against his will; he tried very hard to have his orders revoked, but

without success. He was much loved by the midshipmen, and we often went to see him.

One afternoon while rowing about the dock for amusement, in company with another reefer, I saw a boat under the bows of the *Boxer* smuggling liquor to the men. We went on board and reported it to our friend, whom we found the senior officer—the captain and executive officer being on shore. I well remember his kindness to us, boys as we were, taking us below and treating us to cakes. The next morning shortly after 4 o'clock we were aroused by the news that the *Boxer's* men had mutinied and killed this lieutenant. Our marines were immediately sent on board, and I went in charge of the boat. It was a mistake about the mutiny. Our friend had gone on deck at 4 A. M. to keep the morning watch, and a few minutes after he blew his brains out. I saw his body lying cold and stiff upon the quarter-deck. No one ever knew the cause of the fatal act. Our fellows felt the death of this officer very much, and it was some days before we were up to our tricks and deviltries again.

The midshipmen were constantly changing during the six months I was on board this ship. As vessels were fitted out drafts of reefers were sent to them, and new ones were constantly arriving. In consequence of this our mess was kept in a disorganized condition, and in point of fact our money would give out before the end of the month and we would go for several days without regular meals. I have occasion to remember this fact. I joined on the 28th day of October, when the mess was in this condition. The caterer did not ask me for my mess bill, and I never thought of offering it; in fact, I did not know how the mess was supplied and had an idea that the government furnished it. The day after I joined, Friday, I was invited to breakfast with the lieutenants in the ward-room. I had not much appetite, and when I left the table Mr. Armstrong said: "Youngster, this will never do; you must learn to eat your ration." To my extreme surprise we had no dinner in the gun-room that day, and no

supper! The table was not even set! It seems that during this *dies infaustus* kind of a time the midshipmen lived upon the bum-boat and skirmished on the berth-deck for a living; but I knew nothing about that, and was too proud and bashful to make any inquiries, and, strange to say, no one thought of giving me information. All day Saturday it was the same *dies non*. I frequently thought of the *ration* alluded to by Lieutenant Armstrong and wished I could see it! On Sunday after muster, Mr. Neville, the sailing master, told me my father wanted me to come ashore in the 1 o'clock boat, and said the first lieutenant would give me permission to go if I asked him. I was rather astonished to hear this, for I had supposed that I was to remain on board three years without going on shore, and had been wondering how long I could hold out without eating. I think that reading about Admiral Collingwood's long cruises had given me this idea. I went on shore and hurried up to the City Hotel; the clerk informed me that my father had gone to Brooklyn to dine, and left word for me to follow him. I found I had left my purse on board and had no money to pay my ferriage: but there was a chance to overtake my father. I caught up with him on Fulton Street, just opposite the old Dutch Reformed church (I have never passed it since without recalling this incident), and getting some money from him went to a stand and purchased some pies and cakes, which I immediately commenced devouring. My father seemed surprised, and well he might be! He asked me how I liked it on board ship. I told him that I did not like it at all; that they had no meals there. He, thinking that the midshipmen lived, perhaps, on the ship's rations—salt beef and hard-tack—and that I did not like it, replied that I would get accustomed to it. I told him no; that I had never been used to going without meals and that I was too old to learn; it might do for other midshipmen, but I could not stand it; and finally, as to returning to that ship and trying to live without eating, I couldn't and I wouldn't.

My father naturally failed to entirely comprehend the actual condition of our mess, and we continued the conversation until we arrived at our destination. We had an excellent dinner, and I rather suspect my performance at it somewhat astonished our kind entertainers. We had tarts for dessert. I ate about twelve, and there was one remaining on the dish. Observing me to eye it rather hard, our kind hostess said: "William must have this, because he is a sailor boy." The sailor boy took it accordingly!

It was now time to set off for the Battery as I was ordered to return in the sunset boat. I unwillingly accompanied my father, and though I was dressed in a midshipman's jacket and trousers, with a smart dirk at my side, I was a little enough fellow to hold him by the hand. Upon our arrival at Castle Garden we found one of the older midshipmen who explained the condition of affairs to my father; he said that the next day, being the first of the month, everything would be all right, and meals would be served regularly. Upon this assurance I consented to return, but took the precaution to lay in pies and cakes enough to last me several days. Upon getting back to the gun-room, one of the older midshipmen surprised me by an invitation to an oyster supper that night at 9 o'clock. I cannot say I felt hungry, but I remembered Major Dalgetty's advice as to the laying in of *provançe*, and accepted. The next morning we had a regular breakfast to my great gratification. We always had this to go through with as long as I was in the ship; it was "bite and cry" for the last three days of every month; but I "knew the ropes" then, and could skirmish with the best of them, and my experience taught me to look after the greenhorns on such occasions and see that they got enough to eat.

Towards the latter part of the spring of 1842 I was detached from the *North Carolina* and ordered to the line-of-battle ship *Columbus*, then fitting out at Boston for the Mediterranean.

I bade adieu to the old ship with many regrets; and with this shall close my first chapter, which I found so hard to

commence. And, after all, when I come to think of it, this is not so much to be wondered at; for I once sailed with a fellow—a poetical sailmaker—who, after we had been only a few days at sea, remarked to me confidentially, that he would like to read me a piece of his poetry, "if I wouldn't laugh at it:" (the idea!)

I having duly promised, he read as follows:

"Far o'er the billow the moonlight is streaming,  
Dispelling the vapor and gloom of the night,"

and then stopped, with the remark that "that was as far as he had got:" and though I continued with him for two years *he never got any farther! Basta.*

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