



YARNS.

BY A YOUNG SEA-CAPTAIN.

No. III.

CRUISING with the Mediterranean Fleet, before the Russian War, was very like yachting: the Admiral's wife often accompanied him to sea in his flag-ship, where she had her drawing-room, her suite of private apartments, and better accommodation than many houses in Mayfair. The Admiral had generally officers from other ships to dine with him, so whatever news there was circulated at his table. In calm weather, leave was sometimes given for the officers of different ships to visit each other. Life had no particular object: European politics were stagnant: we were all in the placid enjoyment of full pay: the Mediterranean command was regarded as an easy and honourable berth for some elderly gentleman who had well served his party, and was therefore supposed to have well served his country. There was a tacit understanding that the Admiralty would not interfere with the Commander-in-chief if he would not bother them for ships and men and stores.

And so these great wooden castles floated lazily about on the blue waters of the Mediterranean, anchoring for a week or two at Athens, Smyrna, Gibraltar, or any place of interest. If foul or light winds prolonged our cruise, and the hay for the Admiral's cow began to run short, then it became necessary that England should be informed what had become of her Mediterranean Fleet: the signal is made to a steamer to get up steam to take dispatches to the nearest port; and a general signal announces that an opportunity offers of sending letters to England: the Admiral's steward, and probably a steward from every ship, goes on board, and as she steams away we envy them their trip. The next morning we watch for the smoke of the returning steamer, and welcome the stewards, who are laden with milk, butter, fresh meat and vegetables, and a newspaper or two.

A storm at sea has probably been oftener described than a calm, but in the days of sailing-ships a calm was sometimes quite as vexatious; utterly unmanageable, the ponderous old line-of-battle ships got into the trough of the sea, and shipping water in at the main-deck ports seemed as if they would roll bottom up: the sails that were set in the vain attempt to steady the ship, flapped and banged themselves to pieces against the rigging, and every block and every rope chattered: the guns had to be secured as for a gale of wind. Sometimes two ships would drift so dangerously close to each other that the boats of the Fleet had to be sent to tow them apart: and any little catspaw of wind to give the ships steerage way was most welcome.

In 1852 the Fleet consisted of five line-of-battle ships, and used to cruise with two or three frigates, and perhaps the same number of paddle-wheel steamers: but the latter were often under sail with their wheels disconnected, so we numbered about ten ships for any evolutions or naval tactics. There was generally a certain amount of drill daily, regulated by signal from the flag-ship. A day with a light steady breeze would be devoted to firing at a target: the ships spread all over the horizon that each may have a clear area for practising. The targets are made of a cask with a flag-staff driven into the bung-hole: every ship sails round and round her own, blazing away broadside after broadside, shot, shell, shrapnel, grape, and canister, tearing up the foaming sea around. When the ship is firing at long range and rolling about, the cask has a very fair chance. I have known it bob up and down unhurt in the seething water all day, mockingly nodding its little red flag, but when brought on board in the evening it was pretty sure to show traces of its late peril. Firing at a mark with pistols or rifles may be practised at any time: the target is usually a bottle (empty)