

cruising in the American seas. We learn, indeed, from the whole history of that period, how nearly balanced were the naval powers of Europe; England, France, Spain, and Holland, standing in mutual awe of each other, on the high seas.

CHAPTER II.

THE close of the seventeenth century was the period when the piracies had got to be the most serious, and when Kidd was guilty of those acts that have since given him a notoriety that would seem to be altogether disproportioned to his deeds. During the wars of that day, the seas had been much infested with a species of privateers, that often committed aggressions, and even piracies, on neutral vessels. Most of these rovers were English; and it is said that they sometimes plundered their own countrymen. New York was not entirely exempt from the suspicion of having equipped several vessels of this description, and very unpleasant surmises affected the characters of some distinguished men of the colony, the governor, Fletcher, among others. In appreciating such charges, it is necessary to remember the character of the age, there being no disgrace attached to adventures in private armed ships, and the transition from fighting for plunder, and plundering unlawfully, is very trifling, in private wars, where testimony is not easily obtained, and the law is impotent. That which men can practise with impunity, they are apt to undertake, when tempted by cupidity; and that which is frequent, ceases to shock the sense of right. It is by no means probable that either Governor Fletcher, or any distinguished colonist, deliberately engaged in piratical adventures; but it is quite possible that such men may have been concerned in the equipment of private cruisers, that subsequently committed acts which the laws condemned. It is possible, that when such vessels have returned, a rigid inquiry into the origin of the plunder they brought with them, was not always made. Such, in some measure, was the case with Kidd, whose subsequent notoriety appears to have been as much owing to the *décal* with which he sailed, sanctioned by government, and supported by men of character, and to