

CHAPTER XXIV

Dedicated To The College Of Physicians And Surgeons

By this time Samoa's wounded arm was in such a state, that amputation became necessary. Among savages, severe personal injuries are, for the most part, accounted but trifles. When a European would be taking to his couch in despair, the savage would disdain to recline.

More yet. In Polynesia, every man is his own barber and surgeon, cutting off his beard or arm, as occasion demands. No unusual thing, for the warriors of Varvoo to saw off their own limbs, desperately wounded in battle. But owing to the clumsiness of the instrument employed--a flinty, serrated shell--the operation has been known to last several days. Nor will they suffer any friend to help them; maintaining, that a matter so nearly concerning a warrior is far better attended to by himself. Hence it may be said, that they amputate themselves at their leisure, and hang up their tools when tired. But, though thus beholden to no one for aught connected with the practice of surgery, they never cut off their own heads, that ever I heard; a species of amputation to which, metaphorically speaking, many would-be independent sort of people in civilized lands are addicted.

Samoa's operation was very summary. A fire was kindled in the little caboose, or cook-house, and so made as to produce much smoke. He then

placed his arm upon one of the windlass bitts (a short upright timber, breast-high), and seizing the blunt cook's ax would have struck the blow; but for some reason distrusting the precision of his aim, Annatoo was assigned to the task. Three strokes, and the limb, from just above the elbow, was no longer Samoa's; and he saw his own bones; which many a centenarian can not say. The very clumsiness of the operation was safety to the subject. The weight and bluntness of the instrument both deadened the pain and lessened the hemorrhage. The wound was then scorched, and held over the smoke of the fire, till all signs of blood vanished. From that day forward it healed, and troubled Samoa but little.

But shall the sequel be told? How that, superstitiously averse to burying in the sea the dead limb of a body yet living; since in that case Samoa held, that he must very soon drown and follow it; and how, that equally dreading to keep the thing near him, he at last hung it aloft from the topmast-stay; where yet it was suspended, bandaged over and over in cerements. The hand that must have locked many others in friendly clasp, or smote a foe, was no food, thought Samoa, for fowls of the air nor fishes of the sea.

Now, which was Samoa? The dead arm swinging high as Haman? Or the living trunk below? Was the arm severed from the body, or the body from the arm? The residual part of Samoa was alive, and therefore we say it was he. But which of the writhing sections of a ten times severed worm, is the worm proper?

For myself, I ever regarded Samoa as but a large fragment of a man, not a man complete. For was he not an entire limb out of pocket? And the action at Teneriffe over, great Nelson himself--physiologically speaking--was but three-quarters of a man. And the smoke of Waterloo blown by, what was Anglesea but the like? After Saratoga, what Arnold? To say nothing of Mutius Scaevola minus a hand, General Knox a thumb, and Hannibal an eye; and that old Roman grenadier, Dentatus, nothing more than a bruised and battered trunk, a knotty sort of hemlock of a warrior, hard to hack and hew into chips, though much marred in symmetry by battle-ax blows. Ah! but these warriors, like anvils, will stand a deal of hard hammering. Especially in the old knight-errant times. For at the battle of Brevieux in Flanders, my glorious old gossiping ancestor, Froissart, informs me, that ten good knights, being suddenly unhorsed, fell stiff and powerless to the plain, fatally encumbered by their armor. Whereupon, the rascally burglarious peasants, their foes, fell to picking their visors; as burglars, locks; or oystermen, oysters; to get at their lives. But all to no purpose. And at last they were fain to ask aid of a blacksmith; and not till then, were the inmates of the armor dispatched. Now it was deemed very hard, that the mysterious state-prisoner of France should be riveted in an iron mask; but these knight-errants did voluntarily prison themselves in their own iron Bastiles; and thus helpless were murdered there-in. Days of chivalry these, when gallant chevaliers died chivalric deaths!

And this was the epic age, over whose departure my late eloquent and prophetic friend and correspondent, Edmund Burke, so movingly mourned. Yes, they were glorious times. But no sensible man, given to quiet domestic delights, would exchange his warm fireside and muffins, for a heroic bivouac, in a wild beechen wood, of a raw gusty morning in Normandy; every knight blowing his steel-gloved fingers, and vainly striving to cook his cold coffee in his helmet.