

CHAPTER X.

FROM POCKETS TO PICKPOCKETS.

As the latter part of the preceding chapter may seem strange to those landsmen, who have been habituated to indulge in high-raised, romantic notions of the man-of-war's man's character; it may not be amiss, to set down here certain facts on this head, which may serve to place the thing in its true light.

From the wild life they lead, and various other causes (needless to mention), sailors, as a class, entertain the most liberal notions concerning morality and the Decalogue; or rather, they take their own views of such matters, caring little for the theological or ethical definitions of others concerning what may be criminal, or wrong.

Their ideas are much swayed by circumstances. They will covertly abstract a thing from one, whom they dislike; and insist upon it, that, in such a case, stealing is not robbing. Or, where the theft involves something funny, as in the case of the white jacket, they only steal for the sake of the joke; but this much is to be observed nevertheless, i. e., that they never spoil the joke by returning the stolen article.

It is a good joke; for instance, and one often perpetrated on board ship, to stand talking to a man in a dark night watch, and all the

while he cutting the buttons from his coat. But once off, those buttons never grow on again. There is no spontaneous vegetation in buttons.

Perhaps it is a thing unavoidable, but the truth is that, among the crew of a man-of-war, scores of desperadoes are too often found, who stop not at the largest enormities. A species of highway robbery is not unknown to them. A gang will be informed that such a fellow has three or four gold pieces in the money-bag, so-called, or purse, which many tars wear round their necks, tucked out of sight. Upon this, they deliberately lay their plans; and in due time, proceed to carry them into execution. The man they have marked is perhaps strolling along the benighted berth-deck to his mess-chest; when of a sudden, the foot-pads dash out from their hiding-place, throw him down, and while two or three gag him, and hold him fast, another cuts the bag from his neck, and makes away with it, followed by his comrades. This was more than once done in the Neversink.

At other times, hearing that a sailor has something valuable secreted in his hammock, they will rip it open from underneath while he sleeps, and reduce the conjecture to a certainty.

To enumerate all the minor pilferings on board a man-of-war would be endless. With some highly commendable exceptions, they rob from one another, and rob back again, till, in the matter of small things, a community of goods seems almost established; and at last, as a whole, they become relatively honest, by nearly every man becoming the

reverse. It is in vain that the officers, by threats of condign punishment, endeavour to instil more virtuous principles into their crew; so thick is the mob, that not one thief in a thousand is detected.