

CHAPTER XV.

A SALT-JUNK CLUB IN A MAN-OF-WAR, WITH A NOTICE TO QUIT.

It was about the period of the Cologne-water excitement that my self-conceit was not a little wounded, and my sense of delicacy altogether shocked, by a polite hint received from the cook of the mess to which I happened to belong. To understand the matter, it is needful to enter into preliminaries.

The common seamen in a large frigate are divided into some thirty or forty messes, put down on the purser's books as Mess No. 1, Mess No. 2, Mess No. 3, etc. The members of each mess club, their rations of provisions, and breakfast, dine, and sup together in allotted intervals between the guns on the main-deck. In undeviating rotation, the members of each mess (excepting the petty-officers) take their turn in performing the functions of cook and steward. And for the time being, all the affairs of the club are subject to their inspection and control.

It is the cook's business, also, to have an eye to the general interests of his mess; to see that, when the aggregated allowances of beef, bread, etc., are served out by one of the master's mates, the mess over which he presides receives its full share, without stint or subtraction. Upon the berth-deck he has a chest, in which to keep his

pots, pans, spoons, and small stores of sugar, molasses, tea, and flour.

But though entitled a cook, strictly speaking, the head of the mess is no cook at all; for the cooking for the crew is all done by a high and mighty functionary, officially called the "ship's cook," assisted by several deputies. In our frigate, this personage was a dignified coloured gentleman, whom the men dubbed "Old Coffee;" and his assistants, negroes also, went by the poetical appellations of "Sunshine," "Rose-water," and "May-day."

Now the ship's cooking required very little science, though old Coffee often assured us that he had graduated at the New York Astor House, under the immediate eye of the celebrated Coleman and Stetson. All he had to do was, in the first place, to keep bright and clean the three huge coppers, or caldrons, in which many hundred pounds of beef were daily boiled. To this end, Rose-water, Sunshine, and May-day every morning sprang into their respective apartments, stripped to the waist, and well provided with bits of soap-stone and sand. By exercising these in a very vigorous manner, they threw themselves into a violent perspiration, and put a fine polish upon the interior of the coppers.

Sunshine was the bard of the trio; and while all three would be busily employed clattering their soap-stones against the metal, he would exhilarate them with some remarkable St. Domingo melodies; one of which was the following:

"Oh! I los' my shoe in an old canoe,

Johnio! come Winum so!

Oh! I los' my boot in a pilot-boat,

Johnio! come Winum so!

Den rub-a-dub de copper, oh!

Oh! copper rub-a-dub-a-oh!"

When I listened to these jolly Africans, thus making gleeful their toil by their cheering songs, I could not help murmuring against that immemorial rule of men-of-war, which forbids the sailors to sing out, as in merchant-vessels, when pulling ropes, or occupied at any other ship's duty. Your only music, at such times, is the shrill pipe of the boatswain's mate, which is almost worse than no music at all. And if the boatswain's mate is not by, you must pull the ropes, like convicts, in profound silence; or else endeavour to impart unity to the exertions of all hands, by singing out mechanically, one, two, three, and then pulling all together.

Now, when Sunshine, Rose-water, and May-day have so polished the ship's coppers, that a white kid glove might be drawn along the inside and show no stain, they leap out of their holes, and the water is poured in for the coffee. And the coffee being boiled, and decanted off in bucketfuls, the cooks of the messes march up with their salt beef for dinner, strung upon strings and tallied with labels; all of which are plunged together into the self-same coppers, and there boiled. When, upon the beef being fished out with a huge pitch-fork, the water for

the evening's tea is poured in; which, consequently possesses a flavour not unlike that of shank-soup.

From this it will be seen, that, so far as cooking is concerned, a "cook of the mess" has very little to do; merely carrying his provisions to and from the grand democratic cookery. Still, in some things, his office involves many annoyances. Twice a week butter and cheese are served out--so much to each man--and the mess-cook has the sole charge of these delicacies. The great difficulty consists in so catering for the mess, touching these luxuries, as to satisfy all. Some guzzlers are for devouring the butter at a meal, and finishing off with the cheese the same day; others contend for saving it up against Banyan Day, when there is nothing but beef and bread; and others, again, are for taking a very small bit of butter and cheese, by way of dessert, to each and every meal through the week. All this gives rise to endless disputes, debates, and altercations.

Sometimes, with his mess-cloth--a square of painted canvas--set out on deck between the guns, garnished with pots, and pans, and kids, you see the mess-cook seated on a matchtub at its head, his trowser legs rolled up and arms bared, presiding over the convivial party.

"Now, men, you can't have any butter to-day. I'm saving it up for to-morrow. You don't know the value of butter, men. You, Jim, take your hoof off the cloth! Devil take me, if some of you chaps haven't no more manners than so many swines! Quick, men, quick; bear a hand, and

'scoff' (eat) away.--I've got my to-morrow's duff to make yet, and some of you fellows keep scoffing as if I had nothing to do but sit still here on this here tub here, and look on. There, there, men, you've all had enough: so sail away out of this, and let me clear up the wreck."

In this strain would one of the periodical cooks of mess No. 15 talk to us. He was a tall, resolute fellow, who had once been a brakeman on a railroad, and he kept us all pretty straight; from his fiat there was no appeal.

But it was not thus when the turn came to others among us. Then it was look out for squalls. The business of dining became a bore, and digestion was seriously impaired by the unamiable discourse we had over our salt horse.

I sometimes thought that the junks of lean pork--which were boiled in their own bristles, and looked gaunt and grim, like pickled chins of half-famished, unwashed Cossacks--had something to do with creating the bristling bitterness at times prevailing in our mess. The men tore off the tough hide from their pork, as if they were Indians scalping Christians.

Some cursed the cook for a rogue, who kept from us our butter and cheese, in order to make away with it himself in an underhand manner; selling it at a premium to other messes, and thus accumulating a

princely fortune at our expense. Others anathematised him for his slovenliness, casting hypercritical glances into their pots and pans, and scraping them with their knives. Then he would be railed at for his miserable "duffs," and other shortcoming preparations.

Marking all this from the beginning, I, White-Jacket, was sorely troubled with the idea, that, in the course of time, my own turn would come round to undergo the same objurgations. How to escape, I knew not. However, when the dreaded period arrived, I received the keys of office (the keys of the mess-chest) with a resigned temper, and offered up a devout ejaculation for fortitude under the trial. I resolved, please Heaven, to approve myself an unexceptionable caterer, and the most impartial of stewards.

The first day there was "duff" to make--a business which devolved upon the mess-cooks, though the boiling of it pertained to Old Coffee and his deputies. I made up my mind to lay myself out on that duff; to centre all my energies upon it; to put the very soul of art into it, and achieve an unrivalled duff--a duff that should put out of conceit all other duffs, and for ever make my administration memorable.

From the proper functionary the flour was obtained, and the raisins; the beef-fat, or "slush," from Old Coffee; and the requisite supply of water from the scuttle-butt. I then went among the various cooks, to compare their receipts for making "duffs:" and having well weighed them

all, and gathered from each a choice item to make an original receipt of my own, with due deliberation and solemnity I proceeded to business. Placing the component parts in a tin pan, I kneaded them together for an hour, entirely reckless as to pulmonary considerations, touching the ruinous expenditure of breath; and having decanted the semi-liquid dough into a canvas-bag, secured the muzzle, tied on the tally, and delivered it to Rose-water, who dropped the precious bag into the coppers, along with a score or two of others.

Eight bells had struck. The boatswain and his mates had piped the hands to dinner; my mess-cloth was set out, and my messmates were assembled, knife in hand, all ready to precipitate themselves upon the devoted duff: Waiting at the grand cookery till my turn came, I received the bag of pudding, and gallanting it into the mess, proceeded to loosen the string.

It was an anxious, I may say, a fearful moment. My hands trembled; every eye was upon me; my reputation and credit were at stake. Slowly I undressed the duff, dandling it upon my knee, much as a nurse does a baby about bed-time. The excitement increased, as I curled down the bag from the pudding; it became intense, when at last I plumped it into the pan, held up to receive it by an eager hand. Bim! it fell like a man shot down in a riot. Distraction! It was harder than a sinner's heart; yea, tough as the cock that crowed on the morn that Peter told a lie.

"Gentlemen of the mess, for heaven's sake! permit me one word. I have

done my duty by that duff--I have----"

But they beat down my excuses with a storm of criminations. One present proposed that the fatal pudding should be tied round my neck, like a mill-stone, and myself pushed overboard. No use, no use; I had failed; ever after, that duff lay heavy at my stomach and my heart.

After this, I grew desperate; despised popularity; returned scorn for scorn; till at length my week expired, and in the duff-bag I transferred the keys of office to the next man on the roll.

Somehow, there had never been a very cordial feeling between this mess and me; all along they had nourished a prejudice against my white jacket. They must have harbored the silly fancy that in it I gave myself airs, and wore it in order to look consequential; perhaps, as a cloak to cover pilferings of tit-bits from the mess. But to out with the plain truth, they themselves were not a very irreproachable set. Considering the sequel I am coming to, this avowal may be deemed sheer malice; but for all that, I cannot avoid speaking my mind.

After my week of office, the mess gradually changed their behaviour to me; they cut me to the heart; they became cold and reserved; seldom or never addressed me at meal-times without invidious allusions to my duff, and also to my jacket, and its dripping in wet weather upon the mess-cloth. However, I had no idea that anything serious, on their part, was brewing; but alas! so it turned out.

We were assembled at supper one evening when I noticed certain winks and silent hints tipped to the cook, who presided. He was a little, oily fellow, who had once kept an oyster-cellar ashore; he bore me a grudge. Looking down on the mess-cloth, he observed that some fellows never knew when their room was better than their company. This being a maxim of indiscriminate application, of course I silently assented to it, as any other reasonable man would have done. But this remark was followed up by another, to the effect that, not only did some fellows never know when their room was better than their company, but they persisted in staying when their company wasn't wanted; and by so doing disturbed the serenity of society at large. But this, also, was a general observation that could not be gainsaid. A long and ominous pause ensued; during which I perceived every eye upon me, and my white jacket; while the cook went on to enlarge upon the disagreeableness of a perpetually damp garment in the mess, especially when that garment was white. This was coming nearer home.

Yes, they were going to black-ball me; but I resolved to sit it out a little longer; never dreaming that my moralist would proceed to extremities, while all hands were present. But bethinking him that by going this roundabout way he would never get at his object, he went off on another tack; apprising me, in substance, that he was instructed by the whole mess, then and there assembled, to give me warning to seek out another club, as they did not longer fancy the society either of myself or my jacket.

I was shocked. Such a want of tact and delicacy! Common propriety suggested that a point-blank intimation of that nature should be conveyed in a private interview; or, still better, by note. I immediately rose, tucked my jacket about me, bowed, and departed.

And now, to do myself justice, I must add that, the next day, I was received with open arms by a glorious set of fellows--Mess No. 1!--numbering, among the rest, my noble Captain Jack Chase.

This mess was principally composed of the headmost men of the gun-deck; and, out of a pardonable self-conceit, they called themselves the "Forty-two-pounder Club;" meaning that they were, one and all, fellows of large intellectual and corporeal calibre. Their mess-cloth was well located. On their starboard hand was Mess No. 2, embracing sundry rare jokers and high livers, who waxed gay and epicurean over their salt fare, and were known as the "Society for the Destruction of Beef and Pork." On the larboard hand was Mess No. 31, made up entirely of fore-top-men, a dashing, blaze-away set of men-of-war's-men, who called themselves the "Cape Horn Snorters and Neversink Invincibles." Opposite, was one of the marine messes, mustering the aristocracy of the marine corps--the two corporals, the drummer and fifer, and some six or eight rather gentlemanly privates, native-born Americans, who had served in the Seminole campaigns of Florida; and they now enlivened their salt fare with stories of wild ambushes in the Everglades; and one of them related a surprising tale of his hand-to-hand encounter

with Osceola, the Indian chief, whom he fought one morning from daybreak till breakfast time. This slashing private also boasted that he could take a chip from between your teeth at twenty paces; he offered to bet any amount on it; and as he could get no one to hold the chip, his boast remained for ever good.

Besides many other attractions which the Forty-two-pounder Club furnished, it had this one special advantage, that, owing to there being so many petty officers in it, all the members of the mess were exempt from doing duty as cooks and stewards. A fellow called a steady-cook, attended to that business during the entire cruise. He was a long, lank, pallid varlet, going by the name of Shanks. In very warm weather this Shanks would sit at the foot of the mess-cloth, fanning himself with the front flap of his frock or shirt, which he inelegantly wore over his trousers. Jack Chase, the President of the Club, frequently remonstrated against this breach of good manners; but the steady-cook had somehow contracted the habit, and it proved incurable.

For a time, Jack Chase, out of a polite nervousness touching myself, as a newly-elected member of the club, would frequently endeavour to excuse to me the vulgarity of Shanks. One day he wound up his remarks by the philosophic reflection--"But, White-Jacket, my dear fellow, what can you expect of him? Our real misfortune is, that our noble club should be obliged to dine with its cook."

There were several of these steady-cooks on board; men of no mark or consideration whatever in the ship; lost to all noble promptings; sighing for no worlds to conquer, and perfectly contented with mixing their duff's, and spreading their mess-cloths, and mustering their pots and pans together three times every day for a three years' cruise. They were very seldom to be seen on the spar-deck, but kept below out of sight.