

CHAPTER XX.

HOW THEY SLEEP IN A MAN-OF-WAR.

No more of my luckless jacket for a while; let me speak of my hammock, and the tribulations I endured therefrom.

Give me plenty of room to swing it in; let me swing it between two date-trees on an Arabian plain; or extend it diagonally from Moorish pillar to pillar, in the open marble Court of the Lions in Granada's Alhambra: let me swing it on a high bluff of the Mississippi--one swing in the pure ether for every swing over the green grass; or let me oscillate in it beneath the cool dome of St. Peter's; or drop me in it, as in a balloon, from the zenith, with the whole firmament to rock and expatiate in; and I would not exchange my coarse canvas hammock for the grand state-bed, like a stately coach-and-four, in which they tuck in a king when he passes a night at Blenheim Castle.

When you have the requisite room, you always have "spreaders" in your hammock; that is, two horizontal sticks, one at each end, which serve to keep the sides apart, and create a wide vacancy between, wherein you can turn over and over--lay on this side or that; on your back, if you please; stretch out your legs; in short, take your ease in your hammock; for of all inns, your bed is the best.

But when, with five hundred other hammocks, yours is crowded and jammed on all sides, on a frigate berth-deck; the third from above, when "spreaders" are prohibited by an express edict from the Captain's cabin; and every man about you is jealously watchful of the rights and privileges of his own proper hammock, as settled by law and usage; then your hammock is your Bastile and canvas jug; into which, or out of which, it is very hard to get; and where sleep is but a mockery and a name.

Eighteen inches a man is all they allow you; eighteen inches in width; in that you must swing. Dreadful! they give you more swing than that at the gallows.

During warm nights in the Tropics, your hammock is as a stew-pan; where you stew and stew, till you can almost hear yourself hiss. Vain are all stratagems to widen your accommodations. Let them catch you insinuating your boots or other articles in the head of your hammock, by way of a "spreader." Near and far, the whole rank and file of the row to which you belong feel the encroachment in an instant, and are clamorous till the guilty one is found out, and his pallet brought back to its bearings.

In platoons and squadrons, they all lie on a level; their hammock clews crossing and recrossing in all directions, so as to present one vast field-bed, midway between the ceiling and the floor; which are about five feet asunder.

One extremely warm night, during a calm, when it was so hot that only a skeleton could keep cool (from the free current of air through its bones), after being drenched in my own perspiration, I managed to wedge myself out of my hammock; and with what little strength I had left, lowered myself gently to the deck. Let me see now, thought I, whether my ingenuity cannot devise some method whereby I can have room to breathe and sleep at the same time. I have it. I will lower my hammock underneath all these others; and then--upon that separate and independent level, at least--I shall have the whole berth-deck to myself. Accordingly, I lowered away my pallet to the desired point--about three inches from the floor--and crawled into it again.

But, alas! this arrangement made such a sweeping semi-circle of my hammock, that, while my head and feet were at par, the small of my back was settling down indefinitely; I felt as if some gigantic archer had hold of me for a bow.

But there was another plan left. I triced up my hammock with all my strength, so as to bring it wholly above the tiers of pallets around me. This done, by a last effort, I hoisted myself into it; but, alas! it was much worse than before. My luckless hammock was stiff and straight as a board; and there I was--laid out in it, with my nose against the ceiling, like a dead man's against the lid of his coffin.

So at last I was fain to return to my old level, and moralise upon the

folly, in all arbitrary governments, of striving to get either below or above those whom legislation has placed upon an equality with yourself.

Speaking of hammocks, recalls a circumstance that happened one night in the Neversink. It was three or four times repeated, with various but not fatal results.

The watch below was fast asleep on the berth-deck, where perfect silence was reigning, when a sudden shock and a groan roused up all hands; and the hem of a pair of white trowsers vanished up one of the ladders at the fore-hatchway.

We ran toward the groan, and found a man lying on the deck; one end of his hammock having given way, pitching his head close to three twenty-four pound cannon shot, which must have been purposely placed in that position. When it was discovered that this man had long been suspected of being an informer among the crew, little surprise and less pleasure were evinced at his narrow escape.