

CHAPTER XXI.

ONE REASON WHY MEN-OF-WAR'S MEN ARE, GENERALLY, SHORT-LIVED.

I cannot quit this matter of the hammocks without making mention of a grievance among the sailors that ought to be redressed.

In a man-of-war at sea, the sailors have watch and watch; that is, through every twenty-four hours, they are on and off duty every four hours. Now, the hammocks are piped down from the nettings (the open space for stowing them, running round the top of the bulwarks) a little after sunset, and piped up again when the forenoon watch is called, at eight o'clock in the morning; so that during the daytime they are inaccessible as pallets. This would be all well enough, did the sailors have a complete night's rest; but every other night at sea, one watch have only four hours in their hammocks. Indeed, deducting the time allowed for the other watch to turn out; for yourself to arrange your hammock, get into it, and fairly get asleep; it maybe said that, every other night, you have but three hours' sleep in your hammock. Having then been on deck for twice four hours, at eight o'clock in the morning your watch-below comes round, and you are not liable to duty until noon. Under like circumstances, a merchant seaman goes to his bunk, and has the benefit of a good long sleep. But in a man-of-war you can do no such thing; your hammock is very neatly stowed in the nettings, and there it must remain till nightfall.

But perhaps there is a corner for you somewhere along the batteries on the gun-deck, where you may enjoy a snug nap. But as no one is allowed to recline on the larboard side of the gun-deck (which is reserved as a corridor for the officers when they go forward to their smoking-room at the bridle-port), the starboard side only is left to the seaman. But most of this side, also, is occupied by the carpenters, sail-makers, barbers, and coopers. In short, so few are the corners where you can snatch a nap during daytime in a frigate, that not one in ten of the watch, who have been on deck eight hours, can get a wink of sleep till the following night. Repeatedly, after by good fortune securing a corner, I have been roused from it by some functionary commissioned to keep it clear.

Off Cape Horn, what before had been very uncomfortable became a serious hardship. Drenched through and through by the spray of the sea at night. I have sometimes slept standing on the spar-deck--and shuddered as I slept--for the want of sufficient sleep in my hammock.

During three days of the stormiest weather, we were given the privilege of the berth-deck (at other times strictly interdicted), where we were permitted to spread our jackets, and take a nap in the morning after the eight hours' night exposure. But this privilege was but a beggarly one, indeed. Not to speak of our jackets--used for blankets--being soaking wet, the spray, coming down the hatchways, kept the planks of the berth-deck itself constantly wet; whereas, had we

been permitted our hammocks, we might have swung dry over all this deluge. But we endeavoured to make ourselves as warm and comfortable as possible, chiefly by close stowing, so as to generate a little steam, in the absence of any fire-side warmth. You have seen, perhaps, the way in which they box up subjects intended to illustrate the winter lectures of a professor of surgery. Just so we laid; heel and point, face to back, dove-tailed into each other at every ham and knee. The wet of our jackets, thus densely packed, would soon begin to distill. But it was like pouring hot water on you to keep you from freezing. It was like being "packed" between the soaked sheets in a Water-cure Establishment.

Such a posture could not be preserved for any considerable period without shifting side for side. Three or four times during the four hours I would be startled from a wet doze by the hoarse cry of a fellow who did the duty of a corporal at the after-end of my file. "Sleepers ahoy! stand by to slew round!" and, with a double shuffle, we all rolled in concert, and found ourselves facing the taffrail instead of the bowsprit. But, however you turned, your nose was sure to stick to one or other of the steaming backs on your two flanks. There was some little relief in the change of odour consequent upon this.

But what is the reason that, after battling out eight stormy hours on deck at, night, men-of-war's-men are not allowed the poor boon of a dry four hours' nap during the day following? What is the reason? The Commodore, Captain, and first Lieutenant, Chaplain, Purser, and scores

of others, have all night in, just as if they were staying at a hotel on shore. And the junior Lieutenants not only have their cots to go to at any time: but as only one of them is required to head the watch, and there are so many of them among whom to divide that duty, they are only on deck four hours to twelve hours below. In some cases the proportion is still greater. Whereas, with the people it is four hours in and four hours off continually.

What is the reason, then, that the common seamen should fare so hard in this matter? It would seem but a simple thing to let them get down their hammocks during the day for a nap. But no; such a proceeding would mar the uniformity of daily events in a man-of-war. It seems indispensable to the picturesque effect of the spar-deck, that the hammocks should invariably remain stowed in the nettings between sunrise and sundown. But the chief reason is this--a reason which has sanctioned many an abuse in this world--precedents are against it; such a thing as sailors sleeping in their hammocks in the daytime, after being eight hours exposed to a night-storm, was hardly ever heard of in the navy. Though, to the immortal honour of some captains be it said, the fact is upon navy record, that off Cape Horn, they have vouchsafed the morning hammocks to their crew. Heaven bless such tender-hearted officers; and may they and their descendants--ashore or afloat--have sweet and pleasant slumbers while they live, and an undreaming siesta when they die.

It is concerning such things as the subject of this chapter that

special enactments of Congress are demanded. Health and comfort--so far as duly attainable under the circumstances--should be legally guaranteed to the man-of-war's-men; and not left to the discretion or caprice of their commanders.