

CHAPTER XXII.

WASH-DAY AND HOUSE-CLEANING IN A MAN-OF-WAR.

Besides the other tribulations connected with your hammock, you must keep it snow-white and clean; who has not observed the long rows of spotless hammocks exposed in a frigate's nettings, where, through the day, their outsides, at least, are kept airing?

Hence it comes that there are regular mornings appointed for the scrubbing of hammocks; and such mornings are called scrub-hammock-mornings; and desperate is the scrubbing that ensues.

Before daylight the operation begins. All hands are called, and at it they go. Every deck is spread with hammocks, fore and aft; and lucky are you if you can get sufficient superficies to spread your own hammock in. Down on their knees are five hundred men, scrubbing away with brushes and brooms; jostling, and crowding, and quarrelling about using each other's suds; when all their Purser's soap goes to create one indiscriminate yeast.

Sometimes you discover that, in the dark, you have been all the while scrubbing your next neighbour's hammock instead of your own. But it is too late to begin over again; for now the word is passed for every man to advance with his hammock, that it may be tied to a net-like

frame-work of clothes-lines, and hoisted aloft to dry.

That done, without delay you get together your frocks and trowsers, and on the already flooded deck embark in the laundry business. You have no special bucket or basin to yourself--the ship being one vast wash-tub, where all hands wash and rinse out, and rinse out and wash, till at last the word is passed again, to make fast your clothes, that they, also, may be elevated to dry.

Then on all three decks the operation of holy-stoning begins, so called from the queer name bestowed upon the principal instruments employed. These are ponderous flat stones with long ropes at each end, by which the stones are slidden about, to and fro, over the wet and sanded decks; a most wearisome, dog-like, galley-slave employment. For the byways and corners about the masts and guns, smaller stones are used, called prayer-books; inasmuch as the devout operator has to down with them on his knees.

Finally, a grand flooding takes place, and the decks are remorselessly thrashed with dry swabs. After which an extraordinary implement--a sort of leathern hoe called a "squilgee"--is used to scrape and squeeze the last dribblings of water from the planks. Concerning this "squilgee," I think something of drawing up a memoir, and reading it before the Academy of Arts and Sciences. It is a most curious affair.

By the time all these operations are concluded it is eight bell's,

and all hands are piped to breakfast upon the damp and every-way disagreeable decks.

Now, against this invariable daily flooding of the three decks of a frigate, as a man-of-war's-man, White-Jacket most earnestly protests. In sunless weather it keeps the sailors' quarters perpetually damp; so much so, that you can scarce sit down without running the risk of getting the lumbago. One rheumatic old sheet-anchor-man among us was driven to the extremity of sewing a piece of tarred canvas on the seat of his trowsers.

Let those neat and tidy officers who so love to see a ship kept spick and span clean; who institute vigorous search after the man who chances to drop the crumb of a biscuit on deck, when the ship is rolling in a sea-way; let all such swing their hammocks with the sailors; and they would soon get sick of this daily damping of the decks.

Is a ship a wooden platter, that is to be scrubbed out every morning before breakfast, even if the thermometer be at zero, and every sailor goes barefooted through the flood with the chilblains? And all the while the ship carries a doctor, well aware of Boerhaave's great maxim "keep the feet dry." He has plenty of pills to give you when you are down with a fever, the consequence of these things; but enters no protest at the outset--as it is his duty to do--against the cause that induces the fever.

During the pleasant night watches, the promenading officers, mounted on their high-heeled boots, pass dry-shod, like the Israelites, over the decks; but by daybreak the roaring tide sets back, and the poor sailors are almost overwhelmed in it, like the Egyptians in the Red Sea.

Oh! the chills, colds, and agues that are caught. No snug stove, grate, or fireplace to go to; no, your only way to keep warm is to keep in a blazing passion, and anathematise the custom that every morning makes a wash-house of a man-of-war.

Look at it. Say you go on board a line-of-battle-ship: you see everything scrupulously neat; you see all the decks clear and unobstructed as the sidewalks of Wall Street of a Sunday morning; you see no trace of a sailor's dormitory; you marvel by what magic all this is brought about. And well you may. For consider, that in this unobstructed fabric nearly one thousand mortal men have to sleep, eat, wash, dress, cook, and perform all the ordinary functions of humanity. The same number of men ashore would expand themselves into a township. Is it credible, then, that this extraordinary neatness, and especially this unobstructedness of a man-of-war, can be brought about, except by the most rigorous edicts, and a very serious sacrifice, with respect to the sailors, of the domestic comforts of life? To be sure, sailors themselves do not often complain of these things; they are used to them; but man can become used even to the hardest usage. And it is because he is used to it, that sometimes he does not complain of it.

Of all men-of-war, the American ships are the most excessively neat, and have the greatest reputation for it. And of all men-of-war the general discipline of the American ships is the most arbitrary.

In the English navy, the men liberally mess on tables, which, between meals, are triced up out of the way. The American sailors mess on deck, and pick up their broken biscuit, or midshipman's nuts, like fowls in a barn-yard.

But if this unobstructedness in an American fighting-ship be, at all hazards, so desirable, why not imitate the Turks? In the Turkish navy they have no mess-chests; the sailors roll their mess things up in a rug, and thrust them under a gun. Nor do they have any hammocks; they sleep anywhere about the decks in their gregoes. Indeed, come to look at it, what more does a man-of-war's-man absolutely require to live in than his own skin? That's room enough; and room enough to turn in, if he but knew how to shift his spine, end for end, like a ramrod, without disturbing his next neighbour.

Among all men-of-war's-men, it is a maxim that over-neat vessels are Tartars to the crew: and perhaps it may be safely laid down that, when you see such a ship, some sort of tyranny is not very far off.

In the Neversink, as in other national ships, the business of holy-stoning the decks was often prolonged, by way of punishment to the men, particularly of a raw, cold morning. This is one of the

punishments which a lieutenant of the watch may easily inflict upon the crew, without infringing the statute which places the power of punishment solely in the hands of the Captain.

The abhorrence which men-of-war's-men have for this protracted holy-stoning in cold, comfortless weather--with their bare feet exposed to the splashing inundations--is shown in a strange story, rife among them, curiously tinged with their proverbial superstitions.

The First Lieutenant of an English sloop of war, a severe disciplinarian, was uncommonly particular concerning the whiteness of the quarter-deck. One bitter winter morning at sea, when the crew had washed that part of the vessel, as usual, and put away their holy-stones, this officer came on deck, and after inspecting it, ordered the holy-stones and prayer-books up again. Once more slipping off the shoes from their frosted feet, and rolling up their trowsers, the crew kneeled down to their task; and in that suppliant posture, silently invoked a curse upon their tyrant; praying, as he went below, that he might never more come out of the ward-room alive. The prayer seemed answered: for shortly after being visited with a paralytic stroke at his breakfast-table, the First Lieutenant next morning was carried out of the ward-room feet foremost, dead. As they dropped him over the side--so goes the story--the marine sentry at the gangway turned his back upon the corpse.

To the credit of the humane and sensible portion of the roll of

American navy-captains, be it added, that they are not so particular in keeping the decks spotless at all times, and in all weathers; nor do they torment the men with scraping bright-wood and polishing ring-bolts; but give all such gingerbread-work a hearty coat of black paint, which looks more warlike, is a better preservative, and exempts the sailors from a perpetual annoyance.