

CHAPTER XLI.

A MAN-OF-WAR LIBRARY.

Nowhere does time pass more heavily than with most men-of-war's-men on board their craft in harbour.

One of my principal antidotes against ennui in Rio, was reading. There was a public library on board, paid for by government, and intrusted to the custody of one of the marine corporals, a little, dried-up man, of a somewhat literary turn. He had once been a clerk in a post-office ashore; and, having been long accustomed to hand over letters when called for, he was now just the man to hand over books. He kept them in a large cask on the berth-deck, and, when seeking a particular volume, had to capsize it like a barrel of potatoes. This made him very cross and irritable, as most all librarians are. Who had the selection of these books, I do not know, but some of them must have been selected by our Chaplain, who so pranced on Coleridge's "High German horse."

Mason Good's Book of Nature--a very good book, to be sure, but not precisely adapted to tarry tastes--was one of these volumes; and Machiavel's Art of War--which was very dry fighting; and a folio of Tillotson's Sermons--the best of reading for divines, indeed, but with little relish for a main-top-man; and Locke's Essays--incomparable

essays, everybody knows, but miserable reading at sea; and Plutarch's Lives--super-excellent biographies, which pit Greek against Roman in beautiful style, but then, in a sailor's estimation, not to be mentioned with the Lives of the Admirals; and Blair's Lectures, University Edition--a fine treatise on rhetoric, but having nothing to say about nautical phrases, such as "splicing the main-brace," "passing a gammoning," "pudding the dolphin," and "making a Carrick-bend;" besides numerous invaluable but unreadable tomes, that might have been purchased cheap at the auction of some college-professor's library.

But I found ample entertainment in a few choice old authors, whom I stumbled upon in various parts of the ship, among the inferior officers. One was "Morgan's History of Algiers," a famous old quarto, abounding in picturesque narratives of corsairs, captives, dungeons, and sea-fights; and making mention of a cruel old Dey, who, toward the latter part of his life, was so filled with remorse for his cruelties and crimes that he could not stay in bed after four o'clock in the morning, but had to rise in great trepidation and walk off his bad feelings till breakfast time. And another venerable octavo, containing a certificate from Sir Christopher Wren to its authenticity, entitled "Knox's Captivity in Ceylon, 1681"--abounding in stories about the Devil, who was superstitiously supposed to tyrannise over that unfortunate land: to mollify him, the priests offered up buttermilk, red cocks, and sausages; and the Devil ran roaring about in the woods, frightening travellers out of their wits; insomuch that the Islanders

bitterly lamented to Knox that their country was full of devils, and consequently, there was no hope for their eventual well-being. Knox swears that he himself heard the Devil roar, though he did not see his horns; it was a terrible noise, he says, like the baying of a hungry mastiff.

Then there was Walpole's Letters--very witty, pert, and polite--and some odd volumes of plays, each of which was a precious casket of jewels of good things, shaming the trash nowadays passed off for dramas, containing "The Jew of Malta," "Old Fortunatus," "The City Madam." "Volpone," "The Alchymist," and other glorious old dramas of the age of Marlow and Jonson, and that literary Damon and Pythias, the magnificent, mellow old Beaumont and Fletcher, who have sent the long shadow of their reputation, side by side with Shakspeare's, far down the endless vale of posterity. And may that shadow never be less! but as for St. Shakspeare may his never be more, lest the commentators arise, and settling upon his sacred text like unto locusts, devour it clean up, leaving never a dot over an I.

I diversified this reading of mine, by borrowing Moore's "Loves of the Angels" from Rose-water, who recommended it as "de charmingest of volumes;" and a Negro Song-book, containing Sittin' on a Rail, Gumbo Squash, and Jim along Josey, from Broadbit, a sheet-anchor-man. The sad taste of this old tar, in admiring such vulgar stuff, was much denounced by Rose-water, whose own predilections were of a more elegant nature, as evinced by his exalted opinion of the

literary merits of the "Loves of the Angels."

I was by no means the only reader of books on board the *Neversink*. Several other sailors were diligent readers, though their studies did not lie in the way of belles-lettres. Their favourite authors were such as you may find at the book-stalls around Fulton Market; they were slightly physiological in their nature. My book experiences on board of the frigate proved an example of a fact which every book-lover must have experienced before me, namely, that though public libraries have an imposing air, and doubtless contain invaluable volumes, yet, somehow, the books that prove most agreeable, grateful, and companionable, are those we pick up by chance here and there; those which seem put into our hands by Providence; those which pretend to little, but abound in much.