

CHAPTER XLVIII.

PURSER, PURSER'S STEWARD, AND POSTMASTER IN A MAN-OF-WAR.

As the Purser's steward so conspicuously figured at the unsuccessful auction of my jacket, it reminds me of how important a personage that official is on board of all men-of-war. He is the right-hand man and confidential deputy and clerk of the Purser, who intrusts to him all his accounts with the crew, while, in most cases, he himself, snug and comfortable in his state-room, glances over a file of newspapers instead of overhauling his ledgers.

Of all the non-combatants of a man-of-war, the Purser, perhaps, stands foremost in importance. Though he is but a member of the gun-room mess, yet usage seems to assign him a conventional station somewhat above that of his equals in navy rank--the Chaplain, Surgeon, and Professor. Moreover, he is frequently to be seen in close conversation with the Commodore, who, in the Neversink, was more than once known to be slightly jocular with our Purser. Upon several occasions, also, he was called into the Commodore's cabin, and remained closeted there for several minutes together. Nor do I remember that there ever happened a cabinet meeting of the ward-room barons, the Lieutenants, in the Commodore's cabin, but the Purser made one of the party. Doubtless the important fact of the Purser having under his charge all the financial

affairs of a man-of-war, imparts to him the great importance he enjoys. Indeed, we find in every government--monarchies and republics alike--that the personage at the head of the finances invariably occupies a commanding position. Thus, in point of station, the Secretary of the Treasury of the United States is deemed superior to the other heads of departments. Also, in England, the real office held by the great Premier himself is--as every one knows--that of First Lord of the Treasury.

Now, under this high functionary of state, the official known as the Purser's Steward was head clerk of the frigate's fiscal affairs. Upon the berth-deck he had a regular counting-room, full of ledgers, journals, and day-books. His desk was as much littered with papers as any Pearl Street merchant's, and much time was devoted to his accounts. For hours together you would see him, through the window of his subterranean office, writing by the light of his perpetual lamp.

Ex-officio, the Purser's Steward of most ships is a sort of postmaster, and his office the post-office. When the letter-bags for the squadron--almost as large as those of the United States mail--arrived on board the Neversink, it was the Purser's Steward that sat at his little window on the berth-deck and handed you your letter or paper--if any there were to your address. Some disappointed applicants among the sailors would offer to buy the epistles of their more fortunate shipmates, while yet the seal was unbroken--maintaining that the sole and confidential reading of a fond, long, domestic letter

from any man's home, was far better than no letter at all.

In the vicinity of the office of the Purser's Steward are the principal store-rooms of the Purser, where large quantities of goods of every description are to be found. On board of those ships where goods are permitted to be served out to the crew for the purpose of selling them ashore, to raise money, more business is transacted at the office of a Purser's Steward in one Liberty-day morning than all the dry goods shops in a considerable village would transact in a week.

Once a month, with undeviating regularity, this official has his hands more than usually full. For, once a month, certain printed bills, called Mess-bills, are circulated among the crew, and whatever you may want from the Purser--be it tobacco, soap, duck, dungaree, needles, thread, knives, belts, calico, ribbon, pipes, paper, pens, hats, ink, shoes, socks, or whatever it may be--down it goes on the mess-bill, which, being the next day returned to the office of the Steward, the "slops," as they are called, are served out to the men and charged to their accounts.

Lucky is it for man-of-war's-men that the outrageous impositions to which, but a very few years ago, they were subjected from the abuses in this department of the service, and the unscrupulous cupidity of many of the pursers--lucky is it for them that now these things are in a great degree done away. The Pursers, instead of being at liberty to make almost what they pleased from the sale of their wares, are now

paid by regular stipends laid down by law.

Under the exploded system, the profits of some of these officers were almost incredible. In one cruise up the Mediterranean, the Purser of an American line-of-battle ship was, on good authority, said to have cleared the sum of \$50,000. Upon that he quitted the service, and retired into the country. Shortly after, his three daughters--not very lovely--married extremely well.

The ideas that sailors entertain of Pursers is expressed in a rather inelegant but expressive saying of theirs: "The Purser is a conjurer; he can make a dead man chew tobacco"--insinuating that the accounts of a dead man are sometimes subjected to post-mortem charges. Among sailors, also, Pursers commonly go by the name of nip-cheeses.

No wonder that on board of the old frigate Java, upon her return from a cruise extending over a period of more than four years, one thousand dollars paid off eighty of her crew, though the aggregate wages of the eighty for the voyage must have amounted to about sixty thousand dollars. Even under the present system, the Purser of a line-of-battle ship, for instance, is far better paid than any other officer, short of Captain or Commodore. While the Lieutenant commonly receives but eighteen hundred dollars, the Surgeon of the fleet but fifteen hundred, the Chaplain twelve hundred, the Purser of a line-of-battle ship receives thirty-five hundred dollars. In considering his salary, however, his responsibilities are not to be over-looked; they are by no

means insignificant.

There are Purser in the Navy whom the sailors exempt from the insinuations above mentioned, nor, as a class, are they so obnoxious to them now as formerly; for one, the florid old Purser of the Neversink--never coming into disciplinary contact with the seamen, and being withal a jovial and apparently good-hearted gentleman--was something of a favourite with many of the crew.