

CHAPTER LXXIII.

NIGHT AND DAY GAMBLING IN A MAN-OF-WAR.

Mention has been made that the game of draughts, or checkers, was permitted to be played on board the *Neversink*. At the present time, while there was little or no shipwork to be done, and all hands, in high spirits, were sailing homeward over the warm smooth sea of the tropics; so numerous became the players, scattered about the decks, that our First Lieutenant used ironically to say that it was a pity they were not tessellated with squares of white and black marble, for the express benefit and convenience of the players. Had this gentleman had his way, our checker-boards would very soon have been pitched out of the ports. But the Captain--usually lenient in some things--permitted them, and so Mr. Bridewell was fain to hold his peace.

But, although this one game was allowable in the frigate, all kinds of gambling were strictly interdicted, under the penalty of the gangway; nor were cards or dice tolerated in any way whatever. This regulation was indispensable, for, of all human beings, man-of-war's-men are perhaps the most inclined to gambling. The reason must be obvious to any one who reflects upon their condition on shipboard. And gambling--the most mischievous of vices anywhere--in a man-of-war operates still more perniciously than on shore. But quite as often as the law against smuggling spirits is transgressed by the unscrupulous

sailors, the statutes against cards and dice are evaded.

Sable night, which, since the beginning of the world, has winked and looked on at so many deeds of iniquity--night is the time usually selected for their operations by man-of-war gamblers. The place pitched upon is generally the berth-deck, where the hammocks are swung, and which is lighted so stintedly as not to disturb the sleeping seamen with any obtruding glare. In so spacious an area the two lanterns swinging from the stanchions diffuse a subdued illumination, like a night-taper in the apartment of some invalid. Owing to their position, also, these lanterns are far from shedding an impartial light, however dim, but fling long angular rays here and there, like burglar's dark-lanterns in the fifty-acre vaults of the West India Docks on the Thames.

It may well be imagined, therefore, how well adapted is this mysterious and subterranean Hall of Eblis to the clandestine proceedings of gamblers, especially as the hammocks not only hang thickly, but many of them swing very low, within two feet of the floor, thus forming innumerable little canvas glens, grottoes, nooks, corners, and crannies, where a good deal of wickedness may be practiced by the wary with considerable impunity.

Now the master-at-arms, assisted by his mates, the ship's corporals, reigns supreme in these bowels of the ship. Throughout the night these policemen relieve each other at standing guard over the premises; and,

except when the watches are called, they sit in the midst of a profound silence, only invaded by trumpeters' snores, or the ramblings of some old sheet-anchor-man in his sleep.

The two ship's corporals went among the sailors by the names of Leggs and Pounce; Pounce had been a policeman, it was said, in Liverpool; Leggs, a turnkey attached to "The Tombs" in New York. Hence their education eminently fitted them for their stations; and Bland, the master-at-arms, ravished with their dexterity in prying out offenders, used to call them his two right hands.

When man-of-war's-men desire to gamble, they appoint the hour, and select some certain corner, in some certain shadow, behind some certain hammock. They then contribute a small sum toward a joint fund, to be invested in a bribe for some argus-eyed shipmate, who shall play the part of a spy upon the master-at-arms and corporals while the gaming is in progress. In nine cases out of ten these arrangements are so cunning and comprehensive, that the gamblers, eluding all vigilance, conclude their game unmolested. But now and then, seduced into unwariness, or perhaps, from parsimony, being unwilling to employ the services of a spy, they are suddenly lighted upon by the constables, remorselessly collared, and dragged into the brig there to await a dozen lashes in the morning.

Several times at midnight I have been startled out of a sound sleep by a sudden, violent rush under my hammock, caused by the abrupt breaking

up of some nest of gamblers, who have scattered in all directions, brushing under the tiers of swinging pallets, and setting them all in a rocking commotion.

It is, however, while laying in port that gambling most thrives in a man-of-war. Then the men frequently practice their dark deeds in the light of the day, and the additional guards which, at such times, they deem indispensable, are not unworthy of note. More especially, their extra precautions in engaging the services of several spies, necessitate a considerable expenditure, so that, in port, the diversion of gambling rises to the dignity of a nabob luxury.

During the day the master-at-arms and his corporals are continually prowling about on all three decks, eager to spy out iniquities. At one time, for example, you see Leggs switching his magisterial rattan, and lurking round the fore-mast on the spar-deck; the next moment, perhaps, he is three decks down, out of sight, prowling among the cable-tiers. Just so with his master, and Pounce his coadjutor; they are here, there, and everywhere, seemingly gifted with ubiquity.

In order successfully to carry on their proceedings by day, the gamblers must see to it that each of these constables is relentlessly dogged wherever he goes; so that, in case of his approach toward the spot where themselves are engaged, they may be warned of the fact in time to make good their escape. Accordingly, light and active scouts are selected to follow the constable about. From their youthful

alertness and activity, the boys of the mizzen-top are generally chosen for this purpose.

But this is not all. Onboard of most men-of-war there is a set of sly, knavish foxes among the crew, destitute of every principle of honour, and on a par with Irish informers. In man-of-war parlance, they come under the denomination of fancy-men and white-mice, They are called fancy-men because, from their zeal in craftily reporting offenders, they are presumed to be regarded with high favour by some of the officers. Though it is seldom that these informers can be certainly individualised, so secret and subtle are they in laying their information, yet certain of the crew, and especially certain of the marines, are invariably suspected to be fancy-men and white-mice, and are accordingly more or less hated by their comrades.

Now, in addition to having an eye on the master-at-arms and his aids, the day-gamblers must see to it, that every person suspected of being a white-mouse or fancy-man, is like-wise dogged wherever he goes. Additional scouts are retained constantly to snuff at their trail. But the mysteries of man-of-war vice are wonderful; and it is now to be recorded, that, from long habit and observation, and familiarity with the guardo moves and manoeuvres of a frigate, the master-at-arms and his aids can almost invariably tell when any gambling is going on by day; though, in the crowded vessel, abounding in decks, tops, dark places, and outlandish corners of all sorts, they may not be able to pounce upon the identical spot where the gamblers are hidden.

During the period that Bland was suspended from his office as master-at-arms, a person who, among the sailors, went by the name of Sneak, having been long suspected to have been a white-mouse, was put in Bland's place. He proved a hangdog, sidelong catch-thief, but gifted with a marvellous perseverance in ferreting out culprits; following in their track like an inevitable Cuba blood-hound, with his noiseless nose. When disconcerted, however, you sometimes heard his bay.

"The muffled dice are somewhere around," Sneak would say to his aids; "there are them three chaps, there, been dogging me about for the last half-hour. I say, Pounce, has any one been scouting around you this morning?"

"Four on 'em," says Pounce. "I know'd it; I know'd the muffled dice was rattlin'!"

"Leggs!" says the master-at-arms to his other aid, "Leggs, how is it with you--any spies?"

"Ten on' em," says Leggs. "There's one on 'em now--that fellow stitching a hat."

"Halloo, you, sir!" cried the master-at-arms, "top your boom and sail large, now. If I see you about me again, I'll have you up to the mast."

"What am I a-doin' now?" says the hat-stitcher, with a face as long as a rope-walk. "Can't a feller be workin' here, without being 'spected of Tom Coxe's traverse, up one ladder and down t'other?"

"Oh, I know the moves, sir; I have been on board a guardo. Top your boom, I say, and be off, or I'll have you hauled up and riveted in a clinch--both fore-tacks over the main-yard, and no bloody knife to cut the seizing. Sheer! or I'll pitch into you like a shin of beef into a beggar's wallet."

It is often observable, that, in vessels of all kinds, the men who talk the most sailor lingo are the least sailor-like in reality. You may sometimes hear even marines jerk out more salt phrases than the Captain of the Forecastle himself. On the other hand, when not actively engaged in his vocation, you would take the best specimen of a seaman for a landsman. When you see a fellow yawning about the docks like a homeward-bound Indiaman, a long Commodore's pennant of black ribbon flying from his mast-head, and fetching up at a grog-shop with a slew of his hull, as if an Admiral were coming alongside a three-decker in his barge; you may put that man down for what man-of-war's-men call a damn-my-eyes-tar, that is, a humbug. And many damn-my-eyes hum-bugs there are in this man-of-war world of ours.