

CHAPTER LXXVII.

THE HOSPITAL IN A MAN-OF-WAR.

After running with a fine steady breeze up to the Line, it fell calm, and there we lay, three days enchanted on the sea. We were a most puissant man-of-war, no doubt, with our five hundred men, Commodore and Captain, backed by our long batteries of thirty-two and twenty-four pounders; yet, for all that, there we lay rocking, helpless as an infant in the cradle. Had it only been a gale instead of a calm, gladly would we have charged upon it with our gallant bowsprit, as with a stout lance in rest; but, as with man-kind, this serene, passive foe--unresisting and irresistible--lived it out, unconquered to the last.

All these three days the heat was excessive; the sun drew the tar from the seams of the ship; the awnings were spread fore and aft; the decks were kept constantly sprinkled with water. It was during this period that a sad event occurred, though not an unusual one on shipboard. But in order to prepare for its narration, some account of a part of the ship called the "sick-bay" must needs be presented.

The "sick-bay" is that part of a man-of-war where the invalid seamen are placed; in many respects it answers to a public hospital ashore. As with most frigates, the sick-bay of the Neversink was on the

berth-deck--the third deck from above. It was in the extreme forward part of that deck, embracing the triangular area in the bows of the ship. It was, therefore, a subterranean vault, into which scarce a ray of heaven's glad light ever penetrated, even at noon.

In a sea-going frigate that has all her armament and stores on board, the floor of the berth-deck is partly below the surface of the water. But in a smooth harbour, some circulation of air is maintained by opening large auger-holes in the upper portion of the sides, called "air-ports," not much above the water level. Before going to sea, however, these air-ports must be closed, caulked, and the seams hermetically sealed with pitch. These places for ventilation being shut, the sick-bay is entirely barred against the free, natural admission of fresh air. In the Neversink a few lungful were forced down by artificial means. But as the ordinary wind-sail was the only method adopted, the quantity of fresh air sent down was regulated by the force of the wind. In a calm there was none to be had, while in a severe gale the wind-sail had to be hauled up, on account of the violent draught flowing full upon the cots of the sick. An open-work partition divided our sick-bay from the rest of the deck, where the hammocks of the watch were slung; it, therefore, was exposed to all the uproar that ensued upon the watches being relieved.

An official, called the surgeon's steward, assisted by subordinates, presided over the place. He was the same individual alluded to as officiating at the amputation of the top-man. He was always to be found

at his post, by night and by day.

This surgeon's steward deserves a description. He was a small, pale, hollow-eyed young man, with that peculiar Lazarus-like expression so often noticed in hospital attendants. Seldom or never did you see him on deck, and when he did emerge into the light of the sun, it was with an abashed look, and an uneasy, winking eye. The sun was not made for him. His nervous organization was confounded by the sight of the robust old sea-dogs on the forecastle and the general tumult of the spar-deck, and he mostly buried himself below in an atmosphere which long habit had made congenial.

This young man never indulged in frivolous conversation; he only talked of the surgeon's prescriptions; his every word was a bolus. He never was known to smile; nor did he even look sober in the ordinary way; but his countenance ever wore an aspect of cadaverous resignation to his fate. Strange! that so many of those who would fain minister to our own health should look so much like invalids themselves.

Connected with the sick-bay, over which the surgeon's steward presided--but removed from it in place, being next door to the counting-room of the purser's steward--was a regular apothecary's shop, of which he kept the key. It was fitted up precisely like an apothecary's on shore, displaying tiers of shelves on all four sides filled with green bottles and gallipots; beneath were multitudinous drawers bearing incomprehensible gilded inscriptions in abbreviated

Latin.

He generally opened his shop for an hour or two every morning and evening. There was a Venetian blind in the upper part of the door, which he threw up when inside so as to admit a little air. And there you would see him, with a green shade over his eyes, seated on a stool, and pounding his pestle in a great iron mortar that looked like a howitzer, mixing some jallapy compound. A smoky lamp shed a flickering, yellow-fever tinge upon his pallid face and the closely-packed regiments of gallipots.

Several times when I felt in need of a little medicine, but was not ill enough to report myself to the surgeon at his levees, I would call of a morning upon his steward at the Sign of the Mortar, and beg him to give me what I wanted; when, without speaking a word, this cadaverous young man would mix me my potion in a tin cup, and hand it out through the little opening in his door, like the boxed-up treasurer giving you your change at the ticket-office of a theatre.

But there was a little shelf against the wall of the door, and upon this I would set the tin cup for a while, and survey it; for I never was a Julius Caesar at taking medicine; and to take it in this way, without a single attempt at dis-guising it; with no counteracting little morsel to hurry down after it; in short to go to the very apothecary's in person, and there, at the counter, swallow down your dose, as if it were a nice mint-julep taken at the bar of a

hotel--this was a bitter bolus indeed. But, then, this pallid young apothecary charged nothing for it, and that was no small satisfaction; for is it not remarkable, to say the least, that a shore apothecary should actually charge you money--round dollars and cents--for giving you a horrible nausea?

My tin cup would wait a long time on that little shelf; yet "Pills," as the sailors called him, never heeded my lingering, but in sober, silent sadness continued pounding his mortar or folding up his powders; until at last some other customer would appear, and then in a sudden frenzy of resolution, I would gulp clown my sherry-cobbler, and carry its unspeakable flavour with me far up into the frigate's main-top. I do not know whether it was the wide roll of the ship, as felt in that giddy perch, that occasioned it, but I always got sea-sick after taking medicine and going aloft with it. Seldom or never did it do me any lasting good.

Now the Surgeon's steward was only a subordinate of Surgeon Cuticle himself, who lived in the ward-room among the Lieutenants, Sailing-master, Chaplain, and Purser.

The Surgeon is, by law, charged with the business of overlooking the general sanitary affairs of the ship. If anything is going on in any of its departments which he judges to be detrimental to the healthfulness of the crew, he has a right to protest against it formally to the Captain. When a man is being scourged at the gangway, the Surgeon

stands by; and if he thinks that the punishment is becoming more than the culprit's constitution can well bear, he has a right to interfere and demand its cessation for the time.

But though the Navy regulations nominally vest him with this high discretionary authority over the very Commodore himself, how seldom does he exercise it in cases where humanity demands it? Three years is a long time to spend in one ship, and to be at swords' points with its Captain and Lieutenants during such a period, must be very unsocial and every way irksome. No otherwise than thus, at least, can the remissness of some surgeons in remonstrating against cruelty be accounted for.

Not to speak again of the continual dampness of the decks consequent upon flooding them with salt water, when we were driving near to Cape Horn, it needs only to be mentioned that, on board of the *Neversink*, men known to be in consumptions gasped under the scourge of the boatswain's mate, when the Surgeon and his two attendants stood by and never interposed. But where the unscrupulousness of martial discipline is maintained, it is in vain to attempt softening its rigour by the ordaining of humanitarian laws. Sooner might you tame the grizzly bear of Missouri than humanise a thing so essentially cruel and heartless.

But the Surgeon has yet other duties to perform. Not a seaman enters the Navy without undergoing a corporal examination, to test his soundness in wind and limb.

One of the first places into which I was introduced when I first entered on board the Neversink was the sick-bay, where I found one of the Assistant Surgeons seated at a green-baize table. It was his turn for visiting the apartment. Having been commanded by the deck officer to report my business to the functionary before me, I accordingly hemmed, to attract his attention, and then catching his eye, politely intimated that I called upon him for the purpose of being accurately laid out and surveyed.

"Strip!" was the answer, and, rolling up his gold-laced cuff, he proceeded to manipulate me. He punched me in the ribs, smote me across the chest, commanded me to stand on one leg and hold out the other horizontally. He asked me whether any of my family were consumptive; whether I ever felt a tendency to a rush of blood to the head; whether I was gouty; how often I had been bled during my life; how long I had been ashore; how long I had been afloat; with several other questions which have altogether slipped my memory. He concluded his interrogatories with this extraordinary and unwarranted one--"Are you pious?"

It was a leading question which somewhat staggered me, but I said not a word; when, feeling of my calves, he looked up and incomprehensibly said, "I am afraid you are not."

At length he declared me a sound animal, and wrote a certificate to that effect, with which I returned to the deck.

This Assistant Surgeon turned out to be a very singular character, and when I became more acquainted with him, I ceased to marvel at the curious question with which he had concluded his examination of my person.

He was a thin, knock-kneed man, with a sour, saturnine expression, rendered the more peculiar from his shaving his beard so remorselessly, that his chin and cheeks always looked blue, as if pinched with cold. His long familiarity with nautical invalids seemed to have filled him full of theological hypotheses concerning the state of their souls. He was at once the physician and priest of the sick, washing down his boluses with ghostly consolation, and among the sailors went by the name of The Pelican, a fowl whose hanging pouch imparts to it a most chop-fallen, lugubrious expression.

The privilege of going off duty and lying by when you are sick, is one of the few points in which a man-of-war is far better for the sailor than a merchantman. But, as with every other matter in the Navy, the whole thing is subject to the general discipline of the vessel, and is conducted with a severe, unyielding method and regularity, making no allowances for exceptions to rules.

During the half-hour preceding morning quarters, the Surgeon of a frigate is to be found in the sick-bay, where, after going his rounds among the invalids, he holds a levee for the benefit of all new

candidates for the sick-list. If, after looking at your tongue, and feeling of your pulse, he pronounces you a proper candidate, his secretary puts you down on his books, and you are thenceforth relieved from all duty, and have abundant leisure in which to recover your health. Let the boatswain blow; let the deck officer bellow; let the captain of your gun hunt you up; yet, if it can be answered by your mess-mates that you are "down on the list," you ride it all out with impunity. The Commodore himself has then no authority over you. But you must not be too much elated, for your immunities are only secure while you are immured in the dark hospital below. Should you venture to get a mouthful of fresh air on the spar-deck, and be there discovered by an officer, you will in vain plead your illness; for it is quite impossible, it seems, that any true man-of-war invalid can be hearty enough to crawl up the ladders. Besides, the raw sea air, as they will tell you, is not good for the sick.

But, notwithstanding all this, notwithstanding the darkness and closeness of the sick-bay, in which an alleged invalid must be content to shut himself up till the Surgeon pronounces him cured, many instances occur, especially in protracted bad weather, where pretended invalids will submit to this dismal hospital duration, in order to escape hard work and wet jackets.

There is a story told somewhere of the Devil taking down the confessions of a woman on a strip of parchment, and being obliged to stretch it longer and longer with his teeth, in order to find room for

all the lady had to say. Much thus was it with our Purser's steward, who had to lengthen out his manuscript sick-list, in order to accommodate all the names which were presented to him while we were off the pitch of Cape Horn. What sailors call the "Cape Horn fever," alarmingly prevailed; though it disappeared altogether when we got into the weather, which, as with many other invalids, was solely to be imputed to the wonder-working effects of an entire change of climate.

It seems very strange, but it is really true, that off Cape Horn some "sogers" of sailors will stand cupping, and bleeding, and blistering, before they will budge. On the other hand, there are cases where a man actually sick and in need of medicine will refuse to go on the sick-list, because in that case his allowance of grog must be stopped.

On board of every American man-of-war, bound for sea, there is a goodly supply of wines and various delicacies put on board--according to law--for the benefit of the sick, whether officers or sailors. And one of the chicken-coops is always reserved for the Government chickens, destined for a similar purpose. But, on board of the Neversink, the only delicacies given to invalid sailors was a little sago or arrow-root, and they did not get that unless severely ill; but, so far as I could learn, no wine, in any quantity, was ever prescribed for them, though the Government bottles often went into the ward-room, for the benefit of indisposed officers.

And though the Government chicken-coop was replenished at every port,

yet not four pair of drum-sticks were ever boiled into broth for sick sailors. Where the chickens went, some one must have known; but, as I cannot vouch for it myself, I will not here back the hardy assertion of the men, which was that the pious Pelican--true to his name--was extremely fond of poultry. I am the still less disposed to believe this scandal, from the continued leanness of the Pelican, which could hardly have been the case did he nourish himself by so nutritious a dish as the drum-sticks of fowls, a diet prescribed to pugilists in training. But who can avoid being suspicious of a very suspicious person? Pelican! I rather suspect you still.