

## CHAPTER LXXVIII.

### DISMAL TIMES IN THE MESS.

It was on the first day of the long, hot calm which we had on the Equator, that a mess-mate of mine, by the name of Shenly, who had been for some weeks complaining, at length went on the sick-list.

An old gunner's mate of the mess--Priming, the man with the hare-lip, who, true to his tribe, was charged to the muzzle with bile, and, moreover, rammed home on top of it a wad of sailor superstition--this gunner's mate indulged in some gloomy and savage remarks--strangely tinged with genuine feeling and grief--at the announcement of the sick-ness of Shenly, coming as it did not long after the almost fatal accident befalling poor Baldy, captain of the mizzen-top, another mess-mate of ours, and the dreadful fate of the amputated fore-top-man whom we buried in Rio, also our mess-mate.

We were cross-legged seated at dinner, between the guns, when the sad news concerning Shenly was first communicated.

"I know'd it, I know'd it," said Priming, through his nose. "Blast ye, I told ye so; poor fellow! But dam'me, I know'd it. This comes of having thirteen in the mess. I hope he arn't dangerous, men? Poor Shenly! But, blast it, it warn't till White-Jacket there comed into the

mess that these here things began. I don't believe there'll be more nor three of us left by the time we strike soundings, men. But how is he now? Have you been down to see him, any on ye? Damn you, you Jonah! I don't see how you can sleep in your hammock, knowing as you do that by making an odd number in the mess you have been the death of one poor fellow, and ruined Baldy for life, and here's poor Shenly keeled up. Blast you, and your jacket, say I."

"My dear mess-mate," I cried, "don't blast me any more, for Heaven's sale. Blast my jacket you may, and I'll join you in that; but don't blast me; for if you do, I shouldn't wonder if I myself was the next man to keel up."

"Gunner's mate!" said Jack Chase, helping himself to a slice of beef, and sandwiching it between two large biscuits--"Gunner's mate! White-Jacket there is my particular friend, and I would take it as a particular favour if you would knock off blasting him. It's in bad taste, rude, and unworthy a gentleman."

"Take your back away from that 'ere gun-carriage, will ye now, Jack Chase?" cried Priming, in reply, just then Jack happening to lean up against it. "Must I be all the time cleaning after you fellows? Blast ye! I spent an hour on that 'ere gun-carriage this very mornin'. But it all comes of White-Jacket there. If it warn't for having one too many, there wouldn't be any crowding and jamming in the mess. I'm blessed if we ar'n't about chock a' block here! Move further up there, I'm sitting

on my leg!"

"For God's sake, gunner's mate," cried I, "if it will content you, I and my jacket will leave the mess."

"I wish you would, and be ---- to you!" he replied.

"And if he does, you will mess alone, gunner's mate," said Jack Chase.

"That you will," cried all.

"And I wish to the Lord you'd let me!" growled Priming, irritably rubbing his head with the handle of his sheath-knife.

"You are an old bear, gunner's mate," said Jack Chase.

"I am an old Turk," he replied, drawing the flat blade of his knife between his teeth, thereby producing a whetting, grating sound.

"Let him alone, let him alone, men," said Jack Chase. "Only keep off the tail of a rattlesnake, and he'll not rattle."

"Look out he don't bite, though," said Priming, snapping his teeth; and with that he rolled off, growling as he went.

Though I did my best to carry off my vexation with an air of

indifference, need I say how I cursed my jacket, that it thus seemed the means of fastening on me the murder of one of my shipmates, and the probable murder of two more. For, had it not been for my jacket, doubtless, I had yet been a member of my old mess, and so have escaped making the luckless odd number among my present companions.

All I could say in private to Priming had no effect; though I often took him aside, to convince him of the philosophical impossibility of my having been accessory to the misfortunes of Baldy, the buried sailor in Rio, and Shenly. But Priming knew better; nothing could move him; and he ever afterward eyed me as virtuous citizens do some notorious underhand villain going unhung of justice.

Jacket! jacket! thou hast much to answer for, jacket!