

CHAPTER LXXIX.

HOW MAN-OF-WAR'S-MEN DIE AT SEA.

Shenly, my sick mess-mate, was a middle-aged, handsome, intelligent seaman, whom some hard calamity, or perhaps some unfortunate excess, must have driven into the Navy. He told me he had a wife and two children in Portsmouth, in the state of New Hampshire. Upon being examined by Cuticle, the surgeon, he was, on purely scientific grounds, reprimanded by that functionary for not having previously appeared before him. He was immediately consigned to one of the invalid cots as a serious case. His complaint was of long standing; a pulmonary one, now attended with general prostration.

The same evening he grew so much worse, that according to man-of-war usage, we, his mess-mates, were officially notified that we must take turns at sitting up with him through the night. We at once made our arrangements, allotting two hours for a watch. Not till the third night did my own turn come round. During the day preceding, it was stated at the mess that our poor mess-mate was run down completely; the surgeon had given him up.

At four bells (two o'clock in the morning), I went down to relieve one of my mess-mates at the sick man's cot. The profound quietude of the

calm pervaded the entire frigate through all her decks. The watch on duty were dozing on the carronade-slides, far above the sick-bay; and the watch below were fast asleep in their hammocks, on the same deck with the invalid.

Groping my way under these two hundred sleepers, I entered the hospital. A dim lamp was burning on the table, which was screwed down to the floor. This light shed dreary shadows over the white-washed walls of the place, making it look look a whited sepulchre underground. The wind-sail had collapsed, and lay motionless on the deck. The low groans of the sick were the only sounds to be heard; and as I advanced, some of them rolled upon me their sleepless, silent, tormented eyes.

"Fan him, and keep his forehead wet with this sponge," whispered my mess-mate, whom I came to relieve, as I drew near to Shenly's cot, "and wash the foam from his mouth; nothing more can be done for him. If he dies before your watch is out, call the Surgeon's steward; he sleeps in that hammock," pointing it out. "Good-bye, good-bye, mess-mate," he then whispered, stooping over the sick man; and so saying, he left the place.

Shenly was lying on his back. His eyes were closed, forming two dark-blue pits in his face; his breath was coming and going with a slow, long-drawn, mechanical precision. It was the mere foundering hull of a man that was before me; and though it presented the well-known features of my mess-mate, yet I knew that the living soul of Shenly

never more would look out of those eyes.

So warm had it been during the day, that the Surgeon himself, when visiting the sick-bay, had entered it in his shirt-sleeves; and so warm was now the night that even in the lofty top I had worn but a loose linen frock and trowsers. But in this subterranean sick-bay, buried in the very bowels of the ship, and at sea cut off from all ventilation, the heat of the night calm was intense. The sweat dripped from me as if I had just emerged from a bath; and stripping myself naked to the waist, I sat by the side of the cot, and with a bit of crumpled paper--put into my hand by the sailor I had relieved--kept fanning the motionless white face before me.

I could not help thinking, as I gazed, whether this man's fate had not been accelerated by his confinement in this heated furnace below; and whether many a sick man round me might not soon improve, if but permitted to swing his hammock in the airy vacancies of the half-deck above, open to the port-holes, but reserved for the promenade of the officers.

At last the heavy breathing grew more and more irregular, and gradually dying away, left forever the unstimulating form of Shenly.

Calling the Surgeon's steward, he at once told me to rouse the master-at-arms, and four or five of my mess-mates. The master-at-arms approached, and immediately demanded the dead man's bag, which was

accordingly dragged into the bay. Having been laid on the floor, and washed with a bucket of water which I drew from the ocean, the body was then dressed in a white frock, trowsers, and neckerchief, taken out of the bag. While this was going on, the master-at-arms--standing over the operation with his rattan, and directing myself and mess-mates--indulged in much discursive levity, intended to manifest his fearlessness of death.

Pierre, who had been a "chummy" of Shenly's, spent much time in tying the neckerchief in an elaborate bow, and affectionately adjusting the white frock and trowsers; but the master-at-arms put an end to this by ordering us to carry the body up to the gun-deck. It was placed on the death-board (used for that purpose), and we proceeded with it toward the main hatchway, awkwardly crawling under the tiers of hammocks, where the entire watch-below was sleeping. As, unavoidably, we rocked their pallets, the man-of-war's-men would cry out against us; through the mutterings of curses, the corpse reached the hatchway. Here the board slipped, and some time was spent in readjusting the body. At length we deposited it on the gun-deck, between two guns, and a union-jack being thrown over it for a pall, I was left again to watch by its side.

I had not been seated on my shot-box three minutes, when the messenger-boy passed me on his way forward; presently the slow, regular stroke of the ship's great bell was heard, proclaiming through the calm the expiration of the watch; it was four o'clock in the morning.

Poor Shenly! thought I, that sounds like your knell! and here you lie becalmed, in the last calm of all!

Hardly had the brazen din died away, when the Boatswain and his mates mustered round the hatchway, within a yard or two of the corpse, and the usual thundering call was given for the watch below to turn out.

"All the starboard-watch, ahoy! On deck there, below! Wide awake there, sleepers!"

But the dreamless sleeper by my side, who had so often sprung from his hammock at that summons, moved not a limb; the blue sheet over him lay unwrinkled.

A mess-mate of the other watch now came to relieve me; but I told him I chose to remain where I was till daylight came.