

CHAPTER LXXX.

THE LAST STITCH.

Just before daybreak, two of the sail-maker's gang drew near, each with a lantern, carrying some canvas, two large shot, needles, and twine. I knew their errand; for in men-of-war the sail-maker is the undertaker.

They laid the body on deck, and, after fitting the canvas to it, seated themselves, cross-legged like tailors, one on each side, and, with their lanterns before them, went to stitching away, as if mending an old sail. Both were old men, with grizzled hair and beard, and shrunken faces. They belonged to that small class of aged seamen who, for their previous long and faithful services, are retained in the Navy more as pensioners upon its merited bounty than anything else. They are set to light and easy duties.

"Ar'n't this the fore-top-man, Shenly?" asked the foremost, looking full at the frozen face before him.

"Ay, ay, old Ringrope," said the other, drawing his hand far back with a long thread, "I thinks it's him; and he's further aloft now, I hope, than ever he was at the fore-truck. But I only hopes; I'm afeard this ar'n't the last on him!"

"His hull here will soon be going out of sight below hatches, though, old Thrummings," replied Ringrope, placing two heavy cannon-balls in the foot of the canvas shroud.

"I don't know that, old man; I never yet sewed up a ship-mate but he spooked me arterward. I tell ye, Ring-rope, these 'ere corpses is cunning. You think they sinks deep, but they comes up again as soon as you sails over 'em. They lose the number of their mess, and their mess-mates sticks the spoons in the rack; but no good--no good, old Ringrope; they ar'n't dead yet. I tell ye, now, ten best--bower-anchors wouldn't sink this 'ere top-man. He'll be soon coming in the wake of the thirty-nine spooks what spooks me every night in my hammock--jist afore the mid-watch is called. Small thanks I gets for my pains; and every one on 'em looks so 'proachful-like, with a sail-maker's needle through his nose. I've been thinkin', old Ringrope, it's all wrong that 'ere last stitch we takes. Depend on't, they don't like it--none on 'em."

I was standing leaning over a gun, gazing at the two old men. The last remark reminded me of a superstitious custom generally practised by most sea-undertakers upon these occasions. I resolved that, if I could help it, it should not take place upon the remains of Shenly.

"Thrummings," said I, advancing to the last speaker, "you are right. That last thing you do to the canvas is the very reason, be sure of it, that brings the ghosts after you, as you say. So don't do it to this

poor fellow, I entreat. Try once, now, how it goes not to do it."

"What do you say to the youngster, old man?" said Thrummings, holding up his lantern into his comrade's wrinkled face, as if deciphering some ancient parchment.

"I'm agin all innowations," said Ringrope; "it's a good old fashion, that last stitch; it keeps 'em snug, d'ye see, youngster. I'm blest if they could sleep sound, if it wa'n't for that. No, no, Thrummings! no innowations; I won't hear on't. I goes for the last stitch!"

"S'pose you was going to be sewed up yourself, old Ringrope, would you like the last stitch then! You are an old, gun, Ringrope; you can't stand looking out at your port-hole much longer," said Thrummings, as his own palsied hands were quivering over the canvas.

"Better say that to yourself, old man," replied Ringrope, stooping close to the light to thread his coarse needle, which trembled in his withered hands like the needle, in a compass of a Greenland ship near the Pole. "You ain't long for the sarvice. I wish I could give you some o' the blood in my veins, old man!"

"Ye ain't got ne'er a teaspoonful to spare," said Thrummings. "It will go hard, and I wouldn't want to do it; but I'm afeard I'll have the sewing on ye up afore long!"

"Sew me up? Me dead and you alive, old man?" shrieked Ringrope. "Well, I've he'rd the parson of the old Independence say as how old age was deceitful; but I never seed it so true afore this blessed night. I'm sorry for ye, old man--to see you so innocent-like, and Death all the while turning in and out with you in your hammock, for all the world like a hammock-mate."

"You lie! old man," cried Thrummings, shaking with rage. "It's you that have Death for a hammock-mate; it's you that will make a hole in the shot-locker soon."

"Take that back!" cried Ringrope, huskily, leaning far over the corpse, and, needle in hand, menacing his companion with his aguish fist. "Take that back, or I'll throttle your lean bag of wind fer ye!"

"Blast ye! old chaps, ain't ye any more manners than to be fighting over a dead man?" cried one of the sail-maker's mates, coming down from the spar-deck. "Bear a hand!--bear a hand! and get through with that job!"

"Only one more stitch to take," muttered Ringrope, creeping near the face.

"Drop your 'palm,' then and let Thrummings take it; follow me--the foot of the main-sail wants mending--must do it afore a breeze springs

up. D'ye hear, old chap! I say, drop your palm, and follow me."

At the reiterated command of his superior, Ringrope rose, and, turning to his comrade, said, "I take it all back, Thrummings, and I'm sorry for it, too. But mind ye, take that 'ere last stitch, now; if ye don't, there's no tellin' the consekenses."

As the mate and his man departed, I stole up to Thrummings. "Don't do it--don't do it, now, Thrummings--depend on it, it's wrong!"

"Well, youngster, I'll try this here one without it for jist this here once; and if, arter that, he don't spook me, I'll be dead agin the last stitch as long as my name is Thrummings."

So, without mutilation, the remains were replaced between the guns, the union jack again thrown over them, and I reseated myself on the shot-box.