

## THE MAINTOPMAN'S DEATH-BED.

BY EDWARD HOWARD,  
AUTHOR OF "RATTLIN THE REEFER," ETC.

THE assistant-surgeon, and the overgrown and womanish-looking youth who tended upon the afflicted, were the only persons in the sick-bay, excepting the departing seaman, John Rockwood. The evening breezes dallied gently with the white and extended sails, and made a melancholy music, peculiarly their own, among the tightened and well-stretched standing and running rigging. The sounds from these rough and noble harpstrings might, fancy aided, have been thought to breathe a requiem of the most soothing melody to the dying maintopman.

There was that awful hush throughout the populous ship which, though not absolute silence, might be said to be something more still. The low moaning of the gentle winds, the faint plashings of the waves, and the careful tread of the few officers who were moving about, indicated that life and action still existed, but existed with a subdued solemnity, well befitting the quiet death-bed of the humble and the good.

The hardy and stalwart seamen were at quarters, and they whispered to each other in sorrowful accents that their ship-mate was "going aloft," was "under weigh for the right place," "had tripped his anchor for glory," and in many sea-taught and quaint expressions, intimated their conviction that he "was down in the good behaviour list," and had ensured "a berth," where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary find rest.

The men had been mustered, whilst the slanting sunbeams streamed through the port-holes upon their glistening cutlasses; all the dreadful appurtenances belonging to "glorious war; had been reported ready for action, and secured for the night, and Captain Dabricourt was on the point of ordering the first lieutenant to "beat the retreat," when the assistant-surgeon walked slowly and lightly across the quarter deck, and whispered to the surgeon, who approached the captain and communicated with him in a low tone.

The commander of the *Majestic* bowed his head sorrowfully at this information, and approaching the break of the quarter deck, commanded, in a subdued tone of voice, that the boatswain's mates should pass the word fore and aft, for the men to disperse themselves quietly. One man on board was to hear no more the cheerful rattle of doubling drum.

Attended by the surgeon and his assistant, Captain Dabricourt proceeded to the sick-bay, and was soon standing near the hammock, where swung, on his death-bed, the honest, and once blythe maintopman, John Rockwood.

There was no chaplain on board. At the time of which we were speaking, there were, at most,

but three or four clergymen dispersed among many ships, and it was seldom that a single cruiser was so fortunate as to possess one. As Captain Dabricourt stood over the dying man, gazing wistfully in the wan countenance beneath him, he held open the prayer-book at the service of the visitation of the sick.

"Is he rational enough to benefit by divine consolation?" said the captain, addressing the surgeon.

"I hardly know, Captain Dabricourt. The poor fellow fancies that he is overlooking a party of agricultural laborers who are mowing down the grass in the green fields of his native village. He is very restless. Listen!"

"The scythes want sharpening, lubbers all!" murmured Rockwood. "See, the waving grass rises again fast—fast as they sweep it down. A ropeyarn for such mowers! They do no more than the summer wind as it sweeps over the fields;—there—there—there! and he pointed to the dancing waves, all green and joyous, which rose and fell not unlike the bending and rising grass in a meadow ready for the scythe.

Rockwood was then silent for a space, gazing intently through the port-hole upon the sea, and feebly nodding his head and waving his attenuated hand to the motion of the waters. "Yes," he continued, "I know that I am very ill, and it is terrible to die here, away from my gallant ship, and my jolly, jolly messmates. I always hoped to be buried in the cool blue seas, a thousand thousand fathoms down, below all the sharks. What a quiet roomy, pleasant grave! No mould, no dirt, no filthy worms. But now, poor Jack will be huddled into the church-yard, among the bones of a parcel of shore-going sinners, to rot in a six feet deep grave. How I hate that rotting! Mow away, mow away, ye lubbers! You see the grass is up again before ye have time to bring your scythes round."

An expressive look passed between the captain and the surgeon, which plainly indicated that they thought the poor fellow in extremity, and that they ought not to pray with, but for him. The captain then commenced, with a solemn voice, reading the prayers for the sick at the point of departure. When he came to the words—"We humbly commend the soul of this thy servant, our dear brother," the sailor rallied at the word brother amazingly, for very strongly had the captain emphasized it.

"Brother! my brother! Where is he? and where am I? No, no, no—your honor; you are not my brother;" and he made an abortive effort at the accustomed pluck at the fore lock—the mark of deference to his commander; "I know better nor that: you are my captain—God bless you, sir."

"Your brother—your friend and brother, believe it," said the captain, placing much stress upon the words, "your friend and brother!"