

**ON THE PRESERVATION OF THE
HEALTH OF SEAMEN,
ESPECIALLY OF THOSE
FREQUENTING CALCUTTA AND
THE OTHER INDIAN PORTS**

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On the Preservation of the Health of Seamen, Especially of Those Frequenting Calcutta and the other Indian ports by Norman Chevers

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THE PRESERVATION
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HEALTH OF SEAMEN,

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BY

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BEING

A LECTURE READ TO AN AUDIENCE OF SEAMEN AT
THE FLOATING LIBRARY, CALCUTTA,

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TO

JOHN FORSYTH, C. B.,

LATE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE BENGAL MEDICAL
DEPARTMENT,

THESE PAGES ARE DEDICATED

IN WARM ADMIRATION AND AFFECTIONATE ESTEEM,

BY

HIS FAITHFUL SECRETARY AND FRIEND,

THE AUTHOR.



ON

THE MEANS OF PRESERVING THE HEALTH OF SEAMEN.

As the son and pupil of a naval surgeon who passed a long life among his brother sailors, and who did his duty (which was not a little) in a frigate at Howe's Victory, and in a line-of-battle ship at Trafalgar; having myself served an apprenticeship in the great hospital at Haslar, and having now to spend some hours of every one of my days in attending upon sick seamen, I have often given a great deal of thought to the question—*How are the Diseases from which sea-faring men suffer caused, and how may they be prevented?*

If you will spare me a few minutes' attention, I will endeavour to make clear to you several of the results of my reading and thinking on this subject; and I hope, in doing so, to tell you some things which may interest you, and which may, probably, be useful to you.

The British Seaman ought to be,—and, when placed under favorable circumstances, is,—one of the healthiest of mankind. It is believed that some diseased and weakly men, who could not earn their living by labour in cities or at the plough-tail, now and then find their way

into the army; and, in very old times, when it was found so difficult to man our navy that the sea was made penal service, and crimping and pressing were constantly at work, many King John's men and jail birds became food for powder afloat, and were taken by Yellow Jack or Bengal dysentery into Davy Jones' locker,—which locker I understand to be, in the West Indies, a shark's belly, and, in the East, the tap of a Flag Street punch house. Still, it is in the nature of things that, at starting, a man who tackles to a sea-faring life is strong and healthy. One would as soon expect to see a cur leap into a mill race, as to find an ill-built sickly-constitutioned boy seeking or obtaining a berth on ship-board. Then, although the sailor must take his chance of visiting and remaining some time in unhealthy climates, his life is mainly spent in rushing through the sweetest, purest, and wholesomest air under heaven.

Accordingly, where circumstances are favorable, sailors do enjoy a very tolerably high standard of health. As a proof of this, we may take the fact that, between the years 1839 and 1853, there died, annually, upwards of 17 in the thousand* among the effective men of all ages of the army serving at Home. A short time before this, between 1830 and 1836, the rate of death, yearly, among the seamen at the Home Stations of the

* 17·5 per 1,000.

† 8·8 per 1000.

navy was under 9 in the thousand,†—little more than half the army rate.

The principal causes of disease and death among sailors are bad feeding and bad air on ship-board, exposure to the effects of unhealthy climates, and, perhaps, above all, drunkenness and other evil habits when on shore. Of course these various causes of sickness often act together in ruining the health of those seamen who are long exposed to their united influence.

Hard as the seaman's lot may be in the present day, there can be no doubt that he now lives under a greatly improved system. Therefore, to judge how far the above-named causes of disease are capable of breaking down the health and efficiency of a navy, we must try back to the evil old times, before ventilators, lime-juice, and the Mercantile Marine Act were ever dreamt of, and when rapacious men,—picaroons, crimps, and land-sharks of various degrees, used to fasten and prey upon poor Jack as the remora fish sticks to the whale, and as the jackal gorges himself upon the dead lion.*

Bad feeding on long voyages has caused the death of thousands of British seamen. The disease which this cause produced was Sea-scurvy. This dreadful malady is not, however, by any means confined to sea-faring men. It was very common, throughout England and the other Northern coun-

* See Appendix A.—*The wrongs under which sea-faring men suffered during the XVIIIth Century.*

tries of Europe, up to about two hundred and fifty years ago, as long as the poor lived chiefly upon bad grain, with only a little over-salted meat and scarcely any variety of green vegetables. It still appears, occasionally, in impoverished districts at Home; and, at the present moment, it prevails extensively in many parts of India, especially in spots where the water is brackish, and such vegetables as turnips, potatoes, cabbage, and carrots, are scarce.

Much less than a hundred years ago, the manner in which sailors were fed at sea was simply frightful. Most ships had a "Fish Room," in which was stored a supply of half-putrid stock-fish. Salt junk was never issued until after it had been for years in pickle. I recollect to have seen some of this meat exposed for sale, thirty years ago, in the window of a low marine store shop in Portsmouth. It looked like a heap of dirty, rotten, sodden brown paper pulp. The biscuit was flinty and perfectly decayed and mouldy from long keeping, and so full of maggots that, when I was young, no old sailor ever eat even the finest biscuit without first knocking each morsel upon the table, as if to shake the weevils out. The water was filthy stuff. A sailor once said of such water that,—when a fellow had swallowed enough, which was very soon,—he was obliged to *bite it off*. It was stored in un-charred wooden casks, in which it putrefied so thoroughly that the foul gas used to be burnt off at the bung-hole. The introduction of the plan