

THE EMIGRANT SHIP'S MATRON.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "EPISODES IN AN OBSCURE LIFE," "POVERTY PASTURES," ETC.



L y a fagot et fagot, and there are matrons and matrons. The unmarried feminine portion of an emigrant ship's human freight has, ere this, been unfortunate enough to find itself placed under the command of as fussy a mischief-maker as ever set a community of any kind by the ears. But there is no pleasure in writing about such disagreeable people.

Let us take the pleasanter case of, let us call her, Lydia Davis.

She was a widow, recently bereaved of her last child, as well as husband; she had no money, no near kinsfolk, no friends who could help her. She could not, like some fine ladies, sit down and indulge without stint in the luxury of grief, and then fling it off and forget almost all about it. She had to work for her living, and was most grateful that she had got work to do.

With a sore heart, longing for seclusion, as a sore eye longs for shade—wishing that she could show her lost ones all conventional respect—she shrank a little from the thought of going out into the world so soon to battle for her bread; but “*they* will know I do not love or miss them any the less,” she said within herself, “because I will not disgrace them by eating the bread of charity. No fear of my forgetting them; it is a mercy that I must do something, or I should go mad.”

These were her thoughts as she sat, on the night before starting for Plymouth, in an almost bare room in her dismantled Bristol home, reading a blue folio, bearing on the upper corner of its left margin—

“MATRON'S INSTRUCTIONS,

“18—.”

Dated—

“GOVERNMENT EMIGRATION BOARD,
“8, Park Street, Westminster, S.W.
“———, 18——.”

And beginning—

“The Emigration Commissioners, having appointed you matron on board the ship *Ark*,” &c.

Eddystone Light has flashed out astern. The emigrants, with three cheers and fluttering pocket-handkerchiefs, have somewhat defiantly bidden their native

shores farewell, and then, the weather changing from fair to foul, their mood also changes, and they become both sea-sick and home-sick, under the depressing influence of the drizzling rain. Some of the most chicken-hearted are some of the whilom most blustering of the single men: here and there a big fellow, who looks strong enough to fell an ox with his bare fist, is blubbering like a baby. He will be free enough with his fists and bullying tongue before the voyage is out; but at present he is quite cowed by discomforts and danger of a different kind from those to which he has been accustomed in his inland life. Perhaps, however, of all men on board the most miserable are the married men with young families. Only a shade less sea-sick than their limp, wretched wives, who, when they can find a voice, pathetically entreat, or frantically demand, to be put ashore that very instant, these unfortunates have to look after the toddlers, and nurse the babies. The way in which they handle them is “a caution.” It is a wonder they do not hold them upside down.

The matron gives both wives and husbands a word of comfort and counsel now and then as she passes, but of course she has her immediate charges to look after.

That night she has no difficulty in getting her flock into her fold; but she can get no rest in her little cabin which commands it. In spite of some little sea-going experience, she feels qualmish, but she cannot give in. She has others besides herself to think of. All night long the single women's quarters resound with noises which are far more like “cries and groans of the wounded” than the musical notes employed to represent the same in the old “Battle of Prague.”

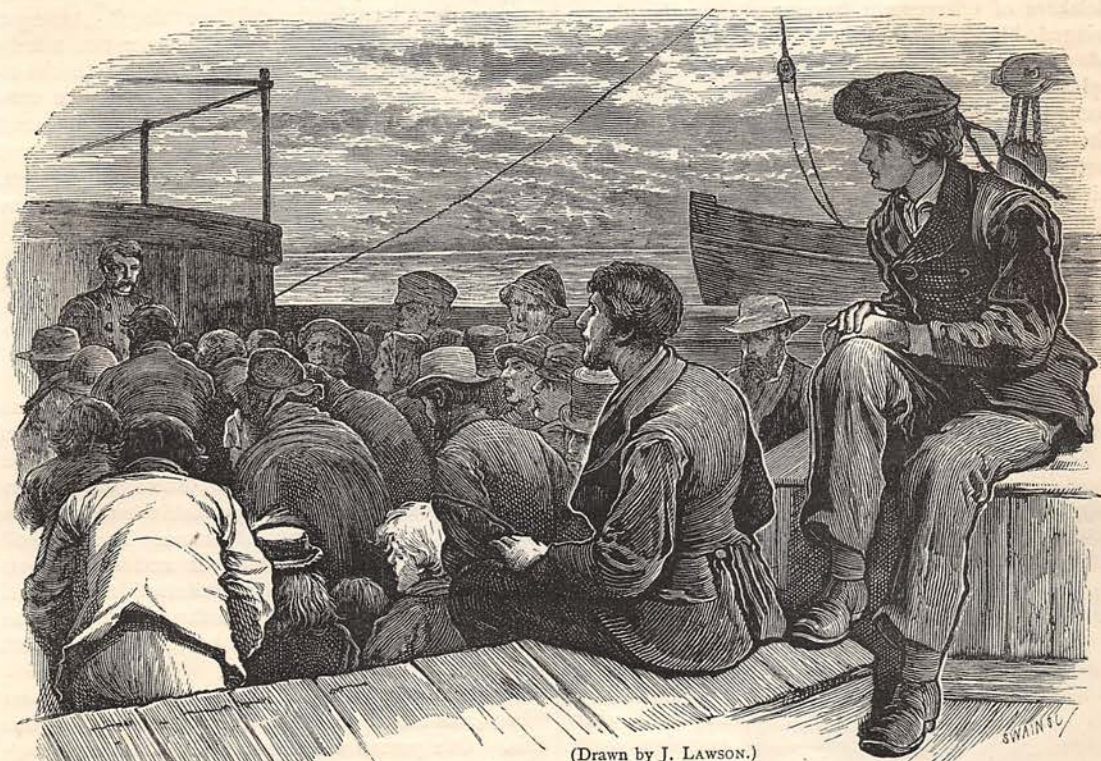
The dirty weather continues. Meals are a dreary make-believe; life generally a moistly-miserable muddle. The crew have shaken down into some kind of form; but the passengers continue in a state of complaining chaos. The kindly matron has her temper sorely tried. She is doing her very best to make things as comfortable as they can be under the circumstances, and yet her young women peevishly snarl at her, as if she were an accomplice of the emigration agents who, at this stage of their career, they affirm, have lured them out to certain destruction. “Ah, if I was only safe back in Old England, Missis Davis, you nor no one else should get me to set foot on board a ship again,” is a speech which the matron has often to put up with.

The nasty weather culminates in a storm. Almost before the officer of the watch can sing out, “Stand by the halyards!” the gale swoops upon the *Ark*, which appears for a time anything but an ark of safety. The canvas flies in rags from the bolt-ropes; spars snap like lucifer-matches; courses, emancipated from control, belly, collopse, and lash about their tacks and

sheets like sails gone mad ; hailstones, almost as big as old musket-balls, smash the skylights ; the leaden sky is cracked, like a pane of glass, by the zigzagging lightning, which seems to hiss when it plunges into the seething sea — and then comes the awful thunder, filling the whole heavens. No sleep on board that night. The ship reels to and fro like a drunken man, creaks like a crushed strawberry-pottle, flinches as if

Ark at home, "All well on board." The matron is certainly not the only passenger who thinks that in her or his case that announcement will not interest many.

In the evening the surgeon-superintendent is, for the first time, able to hold service. Some of his congregation smoke. His reading-desk is a salt-beef cask, but it is covered with the "meteor-flag of England ;"—and



(Drawn by J. LAWSON.)

"MANY A LESS IMPRESSIVE SERVICE IS PERFORMED THAT NIGHT."

stung when the wild waves thump against her bows. Tinware makes a dismal clatter. "She'll never come up again!" shriek the terrified girls, as the vessel heels over, almost dipping her yard-arms into the billows.

The matron, who is trying to quiet the panic-stricken, half believes herself that her last hour has come, but comforts herself with the thought that she has left no one at home to mourn her loss, and that she can rejoin those whom she has lost as easily from sea as land.

Next day, Sunday, the weather moderates. The *Ark* speaks a bewildered little schooner that has lost her longitude. The information she wants is given her in huge characters chalked on a black board hung over the side, and in return she is asked to report the

many a less impressive service is performed that night than his, as he reads the old familiar "Lighten our darkness," with the stars blossoming out of the twilight above his head.

On the following Monday, Madeira is sighted, veiled in silver gauze, and the matron avails herself of that chance of teaching geography practically, to open her girls' school. She has already won the children's hearts, and soon wins those of most of the mothers—who have found out all about her dead babies—except that they think "good Missis Davis is a bit too interferin' with the children's washin' and mendin', as if a mother didn't know best how to keep her own child tidy."

Fortunately the doctor and the matron pull together ; but the *Ark*, like Noah's, carries a very miscellaneous living freight, and the crew and some of the male emigrants are for a time a great trouble to our poor friend. They are insolent to her, and try to urge her young women on to mutiny. The latter at

first are a very unruly lot. They prefer clandestine flirtations to the needlework which the matron serves out to them, to keep Satan from finding some mischief still for idle hands to do. "Why should they make up things for other folk?" they say. "It would be different if they could keep the things themselves."

In the tropics—when the heat makes almost everybody lazy and irritable, when the skin peels off noses in curly shavings, hair is being cut wholesale, and the drinkers of effervescent beverages envy the glassy-winged, blue-backed, silver-bellied flying fish, when after their brief flight they drop again with a flashing splash of diamond spray into the sea—Mrs. Davis has a hard time of it. On the night of the crossing—the-Line Saturnalia, the captain and chief officer, as well as the doctor, have to assist her in maintaining discipline. But she is so kind, as well as firm, that long before the black-striped white Cape pigeons flit

about the *Ark*, she has got a hold on almost everybody on board. The male emigrants try to make amends for their previous rudeness by sometimes almost ludicrous politeness; the sailors deferentially make the matron their arbitress in the funny disputes about the spelling of a word or the pronunciation of a proper name, which from time to time arise in the fore-castle now-a-days; the married women, whose shiftlessness she has done her best to remedy, half worship her—all the more because they can pity her as a "poor, dear, lorn, lonely, childless thing." Amongst the unmarried women, all, except one or two utterly bad girls, willingly and gratefully bend their necks to her light yoke. She finds time to nurse a poor consumptive young fellow in the "sick bay," who dies and is buried just before Australian land is sighted; and when she is pulled ashore in Sydney Cove, officers, crew, and emigrants still on board give her three hearty cheers.

HOW TO NURSE THE SICK.



EVER since Sir Walter Scott wrote his well-known lines on "Woman," men seem to think they have an authorised right to expect that all women will prove the "ministering angels" required when occasion calls for angelic ministrations, and "pain and anguish wring the brow," and sad

it is to say that oftener than not they are woefully disappointed. The best intentions and most kindly feeling may be present, but the requisite knowledge of the best thing to do, and the right way to do it, is absent, and in its place an astonishing prejudice frequently exists in favour of the worst thing possible.

There was a great outcry raised a little while ago, because a scientific man suggested the advisability of taking steps to hasten the departure of those whose recovery is considered hopeless. Public feeling rose at once, and rightly, against this, and so decidedly opposed it that the idea was suppressed almost as soon as it was given utterance to. It is, however, much to be feared that ignorant nurses do gradually and unconsciously what clever men are not allowed to speak of, and that the return to health of numberless patients is either rendered hopeless or postponed indefinitely for want of proper and intelligent nursing.

Nevertheless things are mending. Mrs. Gamp and her tribe are being slowly improved from the face of the civilised world, though it is more than probable that many a sufferer in obscure corners and country places will have to endure unspeakable horrors before they have quite taken their departure. There is still a wonderful amount of ignorance and carelessness about nursing, both among professed nurses and tolerably educated women; and the sooner these can be removed, the better it will be for the sick, both amongst the poor and the rich.

It has been said that true nurses, like poets, are "born, not made," and there is a good deal of truth in this. One person will enter a sick room and, though meaning kindly, will worry the patient and make him feel uneasy and unsettled; and another will come in and very quietly, and without any fuss, bring an atmosphere of repose with her, and find out and do exactly what is wanted.

This gift of nursing lies a great deal in the power of putting oneself in the place of, and entering into the feelings of, another; and repressed sympathy goes a long way in the sick-room. Indeed, to my mind one of the principal qualifications of a good nurse consists in the fact that she has been ill herself, and knows what sickness is. Still sympathy is not everything; and as the necessity arises at one time or another to almost every woman to minister to the need of those she loves when they are sick and weak, it is well worth while to find out in what the secret of good nursing lies, so that we may be ready to practise it when needed.

Good nursing, then, consists first in seeing that the proper remedies and medicines are administered, and afterwards in securing to the patient, without any trouble to himself, pure air, suitable nourishment, quiet, and warmth, together with perfect cleanliness about his person, his room, and his surroundings.