

CHAPTER XXXII

THE NARRATIVE OF CAPTAIN ALEXANDER COFFIN

IN 1807 Dr. Mitchell, of New York published a small volume entitled: "The Destructive Operation of Foul Air, Tainted Provisions, Bad Water, and Personal Filthiness, Upon Human Constitutions, Exemplified in the Unparalleled Cruelty of the British to the American Captives at New York During the Revolutionary War, on Board their Prison and Hospital ships. By Captain Alexander Coffin, Junior, One of the Surviving Sufferers. In a Communication to Dr. Mitchell, dated September 4th, 1807."

Truly our ancestors were long-winded! A part of this narrative is as follows: "I shall furnish you with an account of the treatment that I, with other of my fellow citizens, received on board the Jersey and John prison ships, those monuments of British barbarity and infamy. I shall give you nothing but a plain simple statement of facts that cannot be controverted. And I begin my narrative from the time of my leaving the South Carolina frigate.

"In June, 1782, I left the above-mentioned frigate in the Havana, on board of which I had long served as a mid-ship-man, and made several trading voyages. I sailed early in September, from Baltimore, for the Havana, in a fleet of about forty sail, most of which were captured, and we among the rest, by the British frigate, Ceres, Captain Hawkins, a man in every sense of the word a perfect brute.

"Though our commander, Captain Hughes, was a very gentlemanly man, he was treated in the most

shameful and abusive manner by said Hawkins, and ordered below to mess with the petty officers. Our officers were put into the cable tier, with the crew, and a guard placed at the hatchway to prevent more than two going on deck at a time. The provisions were of the very worst kind, and very short allowance even of them. They frequently gave us pea-soup, that is pea-water, for the pease and the soup, all but about a gallon or two, were taken for the ship's company, and the coppers filled up with water, and brought down to us in a strap-tub. And Sir, I might have defied any person on earth, possessing the most acute olfactory powers and the most refined taste to decide, either by one or the other or both of these senses, whether it was pease and water, slush and water, or swill.

"After living and being treated in this way, subject to every insult and abuse for ten or twelve days, we fell in with the *Champion*, a British twenty gun ship, which was bound to New York to refit, and were all sent on board of her. The Captain was a true seaman and a gentleman, and our treatment was so different from what we had experienced on board the *Ceres*, that it was like being removed from Purgatory to Paradise. His name, I think, was Edwards.

"We arrived about the beginning of October in New York and were immediately sent on board the prison-ship in a small schooner, called, ironically enough, the *Relief*, commanded by one Gardner, an Irishman.

"This schooner *Relief* plied between the prison ship and New York, and carried the water and provisions from that city to the ship. In fact the said schooner might emphatically be called the *Relief*, for

the execrable water and provisions she carried relieved many of my brave but unfortunate countrymen by death, from the misery and savage treatment they daily endured.

"Before I go on to relate the treatment we experienced on board the Jersey, I will make one remark, and that is if you were to rake the infernal regions, I doubt whether you could find such another set of demons as the officers and men who had charge of the Old Jersey Prison-ship, and, Sir, I shall not be surprised if you, possessing the finer feelings which I believe to be interwoven in the composition of men, and which are not totally torn from the *piece*, till by a long and obstinate perseverance in the meanest, the basest, and cruellest of all human acts, a man becomes lost to every sense of honor, of justice, of humanity, and common honesty; I shall not be surprised, I say, if you, possessing these finer feelings, should doubt whether men could be so lost to their sacred obligations to their God; and the moral ties which ought to bind them to their duty toward their fellow men, as those men were, who had the charge, and also who had any agency in the affairs of the Jersey prison-ship.

"On my arrival on board the Old Jersey, I found there about 1,100 prisoners; many of them had been there from three to six months, but few lived over that time if they did not get away by some means or other. They were generally in the most deplorable situation, mere walking skeletons, without money, and scarcely clothes to cover their nakedness, and overrun with lice from head to feet.

"The provisions, Sir, that were served out to us, was not more than four or five ounces of meat, and

about as much bread, all condemned provisions from the ships of war, which, no doubt, were supplied with new in their stead, and the new, in all probability, charged by the commissaries to the Jersey. They, however, know best about that; and however secure they may now feel, they will have to render an account of that business to a Judge who cannot be deceived. This fact, however, I can safely aver, that both the times I was confined on board the prison ships, there never were provisions served out to the prisoners that would have been eatable by men that were not literally in a starving situation.

"The water that we were forced to use was carried from the city, and I positively assert that I never after having followed the sea thirty years, had on board of any ship, (and I have been three years on some of my voyages,) water so bad as that we were obliged to use on board the Old Jersey; when there was, as it were to tantalize us, as pure water, not more than three cables length from us, at the Mill in the Wallabout, as was perhaps ever drank.

"There were hogs kept in pens on the Gun-deck for their own use; and I have seen the prisoners watch an opportunity, and with a tin pot steal the bran from the hogs' trough, and go into the Galley and when they could get an opportunity, boil it over the fire, and eat it, as you, Sir, would eat of good soup when hungry. This I have seen more than once, and there are now living besides me, who can bear testimony to the same fact. There are many other facts equally abominable that I could mention, but the very thought of those things brings to my recollection scenes the most distressing.

"When I reflect how many hundreds of my brave

and intrepid countrymen I have seen, in all the bloom of health, brought on board of that ship, and in a few days numbered with the dead, in consequence of the savage treatment they there received, I can but adore my Creator that He suffered me to escape; but I did not escape, Sir, without being brought to the very verge of the grave.

"This was the second time I was on board, which I shall mention more particularly hereafter. Those of us who had money fared much better than those who had none. I had made out to save, when taken, about twenty dollars, and with that I could buy from the bumboats, that were permitted to come alongside, bread, fruit, etc.; but, Sir, the bumboatmen were of the same kidney as the officers of the Jersey and we got nothing from them without paying through the nose for it, and I soon found the bottom of my purse; after which I fared no better than the rest. I was, however, fortunate in one respect; for after having been there about six weeks, two of my countrymen, (I am a Nantucket man) happened to come to New York to endeavor to recover a whaling sloop that had been captured, with a whaling license from Admiral Digby; and they found means to procure my release, passing me for a Quaker, to which I confess I had no pretensions further than my mother being a member of that respectable society. Thus, Sir, I returned to my friends, fit for the newest fashion, after an absence of three years.

"For my whole wardrobe I carried on my back, which consisted of a jacket, shirt, and trousers, a pair of old shoes and a handkerchief, which served me for a hat, and had more than two months, for I lost my hat the day we were taken, from the main-top-gallant yard, furling the top-gallant sail.

"My clothing, I forgot to mention, was completed laced with locomotive tinsel, and moved as by instinct, in all directions; but as my mother was not fond of such company, she furnished me with a suit of my father's, who was absent at sea, and condemned my laced suit for the benefit of all concerned.

"Being then in the prime of youth, about eighteen years of age, and naturally of a roving disposition; I could not bear the idea of being idle at home. I therefore proceeded to Providence, R. I., and shipped on board the brig *Betsy and Polly*, Captain Robert Folger, bound for Virginia and Amsterdam. We sailed from Newport early in February, 1783; and were taken five days after, off the capes of Virginia, by the *Fair American* privateer, of those parts, mounting sixteen six-pounders, and having 85 men, commanded by one Burton, a refugee, most of whose officers were of the same stamp. We were immediately handcuffed two and two, and ordered into the hold in the cable-tier. Having been plundered of our beds and bedding, the softest bed we had was the soft side of a water cask, and the coils of a cable.

"The *Fair American*, after having been handsomely dressed by an United States vessel of half of her force, was obliged to put into New York, then in possession of the British army, to refit, and we arrived within the Hook about the beginning of March, and were put on board a pilot boat, and brought up to this city. The boat hauled up alongside the Crane-wharf, where we had our irons knocked off, the mark of which I carry to this day; and were put on board the same schooner, *Relief*, mentioned in a former part of this narrative, and sent up once more to the prison-ship.

"It was just three months from my leaving the

Old Jersey to my being again a prisoner on board of her, and on my return I found but very few of the men I had left three months before. Some had made their escape; some had been exchanged; but the greater part had taken up their abode under the surface of the hill, which you can see from your windows, where their bones are mouldering to dust, mingled with mother earth; a lesson to Americans, written *in capitals, on British cruelty and injustice*.

"I found, on my return on board the Jersey, more prisoners than when I left her; and she being so crowded, they were obliged to send about 200 of us on board the John, a transport-ship of about 300 tons.

"There we were treated worse, if possible, than on board the Jersey, and our accommodations were infinitely worse, for the Jersey, being an old, condemned 64 gun ship had two tiers of ports fore and aft, air-ports, and large hatchways, which gave a pretty free circulation of air through the ship; whereas the John, being a merchant-ship, and with small hatchways, and the hatchways being laid down every night, and no man being allowed to go on deck * * * the effluvia arising from these, together with the already contaminated air, occasioned by the breath of so many people so pent up together, was enough to destroy men of the most healthy and robust constitutions. All the time I was on board this ship, not a prisoner eat his allowance, bad as it was, cooked, more than three or four times; but eat it raw as it came out of the barrel. * * * In the middle of the ship, between decks, was raised a platform of boards about two and a half feet high, for those prisoners to sleep on who had no hammocks. On this

they used frequently to sit and play at cards to pass the time. One night in particular, several of us sat to see them play until about ten o'clock, and then retired to our hammocks. About one A. M, we were called and told that one Bird was dying; we turned out and went to where he lay, and found him just expiring. Thus, at 10 P. M, the young man was apparently as well as any of us, and at one A. M. had paid the debt to nature. Many others went off in the same way. It will perhaps be said that men die suddenly anywhere. True, but do they die suddenly anywhere from the same cause? After all these things it is, I think, impossible for the mind to form any other conclusion than that there was a premeditated design to destroy as many Americans as they could on board the prison-ships; the treatment of the prisoners warrants the conclusion; but it is mean, base, and cowardly, to endeavor to conquer an enemy by such infamous means, and truly characteristic of base and cowardly wretches. The truly brave will always treat their prisoners well.

"There were two or three hospital-ships near the prison-ships; and so soon as any of the prisoners complained of being sick, they were sent on board of one of them; and I verily believe that not one out of a hundred ever returned or recovered. I am sure I never knew but one to recover. Almost, and in fact I believe I may say every morning, a large boat from each of the hospital ships went loaded with dead bodies, which were all tumbled together into a hole dug for the purpose, on the hill where the national navy-yard now is.

"A singular affair happened on board of one of the hospital-ships, and no less true than singular. All the

prisoners that died after the boat with the load had gone ashore were sewed up in hammocks, and left on deck till next morning. As usual, a great number had thus been disposed of. In the morning, while employed in loading the boat, one of the seamen perceived motion in one of the hammocks, just as they were about launching it down the board plack for that purpose from the gunwale of the ship into the boat, and exclaimed, 'Damn my eyes! That fellow isn't dead!' and if I have been rightly informed, and I believe I have, there was quite a dispute between the man and the others about it. They swore he was dead enough, and should go into the boat; he swore he should not be launched, as they termed it, and took his knife and ripped open the hammock, and behold, the man was really alive. There had been a heavy rain during the night; and as the vital functions had not totally ceased, but were merely suspended in consequence of the main-spring being out of order, this seasonable moistening must have given tone and elasticity to the great spring, which must have communicated to the lesser ones, and put the whole machinery again into motion. You know better about this than I do, and can better judge of the cause of the re-animation of the man. * * * He was a native of Rhode Island; his name was Gavot. He went to Rhode Island in the same flag of truce as myself, about a month afterwards. I felt extremely ill, but made out to keep about until I got home. My parents then lived on the island of Nantucket. I was then taken down, and lay in my bed six weeks in the most deplorable situation; my body was swelled to a great degree, and my legs were as big round as my body now is, and affected with the most excruciating pains.

What my disorder was I will not pretend to say; but Dr. Tupper, quite an eminent physician, and a noted tory, who attended me, declared to my mother that he knew of nothing that would operate in the manner that my disorder did, but poison. For the truth of that I refer to my father and brothers, and to Mr. Henry Coffin, father to Captain Peter Coffin, of the Manchester Packet of this point.

"Thus, Sir, in some haste, without much attention to order or diction, I have given you part of the history of my life and sufferings, but I endeavored to bear them as became an American. And I must mention before I close, to the everlasting honor of those unfortunate Americans who were on board the Jersey, that notwithstanding the savage treatment they received, and death staring them in the face, every attempt which was made by the British to persuade them to enter their ships of war or in their army, was treated with the utmost contempt; and I saw only one instance of defection while I was on board, and that person was hooted at and abused by the prisoners till the boat was out of hearing. Their patriotism in preferring such treatment, and even death in its most frightful shapes, to the service of the British, and fighting against their own country has seldom been equalled, certainly never excelled, and if there be no monument raised with hands to commemorate the virtue of those men, it is stamped in capitals on the heart of every American acquainted with their merit and sufferings, and will there remain as long as the blood flows from its fountains."

We have already seen that many of the prisoners on board the Jersey were impressed into the service of British men-of-war, and that others voluntarily en-

listed for garrison duty in the West Indies. It seems probable, however, that, as Captain Coffin asserts, few enlisted in the service to fight against their own countrymen, and those few were probably actuated by the hope of deserting. It is certain that thousands preferred death to such a method of escaping from prison, as is proved by the multitudes of corpses interred in the sand of the Wallabout, all of whom could, in this way, have saved their lives. Conditions changed on board the Jersey, from time to time. Thus, the water supply that was at one time brought by the schooner Relief from New York, was, at other times, procured from a beautiful spring on Long Island, as we will see in our next chapter.

Some of the prisoners speak of the foul air on board the prison ship caused by the fact that all her port holes were closed, and a few openings cut in her sides, which were insufficient to ventilate her. Coffin says there was a good passage of air through the vessel from her port holes. It is probable that the Jersey became so notorious as a death trap that at last, for very shame, some attempt was made to secure more sanitary conditions. Thus, just before peace was established, she was, for the first time, overhauled and cleaned, the wretched occupants being sent away for the purpose. The port holes were very probably opened, and this is the more likely as we read of some of the prisoners freezing to death during the last year of the war. From that calamity, at least, they were safe as long as they were deprived of outer air.