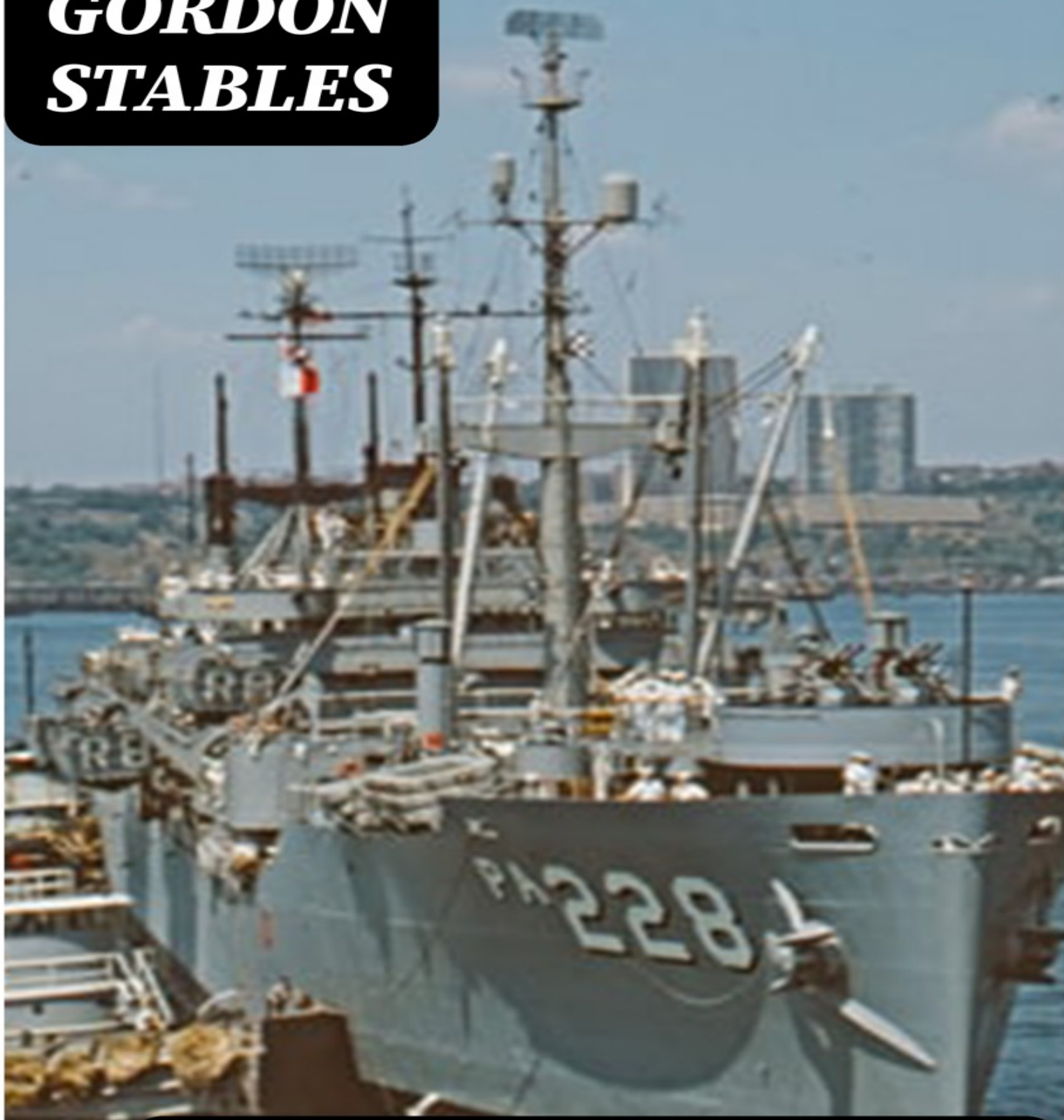


***GORDON
STABLES***



***MEDICAL LIFE
IN THE NAVY***

Gordon Stables

Medical Life in the Navy

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"Medical Life in the Navy"

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Chapter One.

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By Rail to London. Little Moonface. Euston Square.

I chose the navy. I am not at all certain what it was that determined my choice; probably this—I have a mole on my left arm, which my gossiping old nurse (rest the old lady's soul!) used to assert was a sure sign that I was born to be a rover. Then I had been several voyages to the Arctic regions, and therefore knew what a sea-life meant, and what it didn't mean; that, no doubt, combined with an extensive acquaintance with the novels of Captain Marryat, had much to do with it. Be this as it may, I did choose that service, and have never yet repented doing so.

Well, after a six weeks' preparatory read-up I packed my traps, taking care not to forget my class-tickets—to prove the number of lectures attended each course—a certificate of age and another of virtue, my degree in surgery (M.Ch.), and my M.D. or medical degree; and with a stick in my hand, and a porter at my side, I set out for the nearest railway station. Previously, of course, I had bidden double adieus to all my friends, had a great many blessings hurled after me, and not a few old shoes; had kissed a whole family of pretty cousins, ingeniously commencing with the grandmother, although she happened to be as yellow as a withered dock-leaf, and wrinkled as a Malaga raisin; had composed innumerable verses, and burned them as soon as written.

“Ticket for London, please,” said I, after giving a final wipe to my eyes with the cuff of my coat.

“Four, two, six,” was the laconic reply from the Jack-in-the-box; and this I understood to mean 4 pounds 2 shillings 6 pence of the sterling money of the realm—for the young gentleman, like most of his class, talked as if he were merely a column in a ledger and had pound shilling penny written on his classic brow with indelible marking ink, an idea which railway directors ought to see carried out to prevent mistakes.

I got on board the train, a porter banged-to the door so quickly that my coat-tails were embraced between the hinges; the guard said “all right,” though it wasn’t all right; the whistle shrieked, the engine puffed, the wheels went round with a groan and a grunt, and presently we were rattling over the bridge that spans the romantic Dee, with the white walls of the Granite City glimmering in the moonlight far behind us. After extricating my imprisoned garment, I leant over the window, and began to feel very dull and sentimental. I positively think I would have wept a little, had not the wind just then blown the smoke in my face, causing me to put up the window in disgust. I had a whole first-class compartment to myself, so I determined to make the best of it. Impressed with this idea, I exchanged my hat for a Glengarry, made a pillow of my rug, a blanket of my plaid, and laid me down to sleep—“perchance to dream.” Being rather melancholy, I endeavoured to lull myself to slumber by humming such cheering airs as ‘Kathleen: Mavourneen,’ ‘Home, sweet home,’ etc—“a vera judeecious arrangement,” had it continued. Unfortunately

for my peace of mind it did not; for, although the night train to London does not stop more than half-a-dozen times all the way, at the next station, and before my eyes had closed in sleep, the door of the compartment was opened, a lady was bundled in, the guard said “all right” again, though I could have sworn it wasn’t, and the train, like the leg of the wonderful merchant of Rotterdam, “got up and went on as before.”

Now, I’m not in the habit of being alarmed at the presence of ladies—no British sailor is—still, on the present occasion, as I peered round the corner of my plaid, and beheld a creature of youth and beauty, I *did* feel a little squeamish; “for,” I reasoned, “if she happens to be good, ‘all right,’ as the guard said, but if not then all decidedly wrong; for why? she might take it into her head, between here and London, to swear that I had been guilty of manslaughter, or suicide, or goodness knows what, and then I feared my certificate of virtue, which I got from the best of aged Scottish divines, might not save me.” I looked again and again from below my Highland plaid. “Well,” thought I, “she seems mild enough, any how;” so I pretended to sleep, but then, gallantry forbade. “I may sleep in earnest,” said I to myself, “and by George I don’t like the idea of sleeping in the company of any strange lady.”

Presently, however, she relieved my mind entirely, for she showed a marriage-ring by drawing off a glove, and hauling out a baby—not out of the glove mind you, but out of her dress somewhere. I gave a sigh of relief, for there was cause and effect at once—a marriage-ring and a baby. I had

in my own mind grievously wronged the virtuous lady, so I immediately elevated my prostrate form, rubbed my eyes, yawned, stretched myself, looked at my watch, and in fact behaved entirely like a gentleman just awakened from a pleasant nap.

After I had benignly eyed her sleeping progeny for the space of half a minute, I remarked blandly, and with a soft smile, "Pretty baby, ma'am." (I thought it as ugly as sin.)

"Yes, sir," said she, looking pleasedly at it with one eye (so have I seen a cock contemplate a bantam chick). "It is so like its papa!"

"Is it indeed, ma'am? Well, now, do you know, I thought it just the very image of its mamma!"

"So he thinks," replied the lady; "but he has only seen its carte-de-visite."

"Unfortunate father!" thought I, "to have seen only the shadowy image of this his darling child—its carte-de-visite, too! wonder, now, if it makes a great many calls? shouldn't like the little cuss to visit me."

"Going far, ma'am?" said I aloud.

And now this queer specimen of femininity raised her head from the study of her sleeping babe, and looked me full in the face, as if she were only aware of my presence for the first time, and hadn't spoken to me at all. I am proud to say I bore the scrutiny nobly, though it occupied several very long seconds, during which time I did not disgrace my certificate of virtue by the ghost of a blush, till, seeming satisfied, she replied, apparently in deep thought,—*"To Lon—don."*

"So am I, ma'am."

“I go on to Plymouth,” she said. “I expect to go there myself soon,” said I.

“I am going abroad to join my husband.”

“Very strange!” said I, “and I hope to go abroad soon to join my,” (she looked at me now, with parted lips, and the first rays of a rising smile lighting up her face, expecting me to add “wife”)—“to join my ship;” and she only said “Oh!” rather disappointedly I thought, and recommenced the contemplation of the moonfaced babe.

“Bah!” thought I, “there is nothing in you but babies and matrimony;” and I threw myself on the cushions, and soon slept in earnest, and dreamt that the Director-General, in a bob-wig and drab shorts, was dancing Jacky-tar on the quarter-deck of a seventy-four, on the occasion of my being promoted to the dignity of Honorary-Surgeon to the Queen—a thing that is sure to happen some of these days.

When I awoke, cold and shivering, the sun had risen and was shining, as well as he could shine for the white mist that lay, like a veil of gauze, over all the wooded flats that skirt for many miles the great world of London. My companion was still there, and baby had woken up, too, and begun to crow, probably in imitation of the many cocks that were hallooing to each other over all the country. And now my attention was directed, in fact riveted, to a very curious pantomime which was being performed by the young lady; I had seen the like before, and often have since, but never could solve the mystery. Her eyes were fixed on baby, whose eyes in turn were fastened on her, and she was bobbing her head up and down on the perpendicular, like a wax figure or automaton; every time that she elevated she

pronounced the letter “a,” and as her head again fell she remarked “gue,” thus completing the word “ague,” much to the delight of little moonface, and no doubt to her own entire satisfaction. “A-gue! a-gue!”

Well, it certainly was a morning to give any one ague, so, pulling out my brandy-flask, I made bold to present it to her. “You seem cold, ma’am,” said I; “will you permit me to offer you a very little brandy?”

“Oh dear, no! thanks,” she answered quickly.

“For baby’s sake, ma’am,” I pleaded; “I am a doctor.”

“Well, then,” she replied, smiling, “just a tiny little drop. Oh dear! not so much!”

It seemed my ideas of “a tiny little drop,” and hers, did not exactly coincide; however, she did me the honour to drink with me: after which I had a tiny little drop to myself, and never felt so much the better of anything.

Euston Square Terminus at last; and the roar of great London came surging on my ears, like the noise and conflict of many waters, or the sound of a storm-tossed ocean breaking on a stony beach. I leapt to the platform, forgetting at once lady and baby and all, for the following Tuesday was to be big with my fate, and my heart beat flurriedly as I thought “what if I were plucked, in spite of my M.D., in spite of my C.M., in spite even of my certificate of virtue itself?”
