AN ACCOUNT OF THE LIBERATED AFRICAN
ESTABLISHMENT AT ST. HELENA.

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LIBERATED AFRICAN ESTABLISHMENT AT ST. HELENA.

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CHAPTER IV.

First Night on board the Hospital Ship—Charles Fuller, the Overseer of the “Andorinha”—The Overseers and the Matrons on Shore—A Peep at the Kitchen and Messroom—Diet Roll—The Ration Boat—Remissness in supplying Clothing—Progress of Disease—Charles Fuller’s Sickness—William Smith’s Death—The Transference of my Quarters to the “Julia”—Suicide among the Africans—Improvement in their Appearance, and their Ravenous Propensities.

The first day of my residence in the Liberated African Establishment having been spent in visits of inspection that disclosed scenes of misery each succeeding one rivalling the preceding in some new feature of hideousness, it was with much satisfaction I hailed the approach of night, that was, as I imagined, to draw a veil of darkness, not only over the face of nature, but likewise over the sufferings of humanity. The calm and tranquillity of the night, so inviting to repose, I hoped, would exert their soothing effects over my excited frame, and bring me that slumber which I required so much for the restoration of my overlaboured energies. I courted sleep also as a source of forgetfulness, happy to find a Lethe from the scenes around me. But vain were all my endeavours to sleep. The long, tedious hours passed away, while I was still lying extended in my berth, in the cabin of the “Andorinha,” without being refreshed with one moment’s visitation from the dull but welcome god. How could he have possibly been tempted to enter into such an asylum of wretchedness? Separated from the sick by only a thin partition of loose deal boards, the groans of the afflicted and the shrieks of the dying, the cries of the smallpox patients, when any of their comrades would rise, and tread on, or fall over them, which they would often do, in consequence of the weakness of their limbs, not being able to support their bodies, and the shouts of combatants fighting for articles of clothing or victuals, were conveyed to where I lay with undiminished clamour, and with a most persevering defiance at interruption. In addition to the salutations made to my auditory organs, my olfactory

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nerves were as actively employed in receiving impressions much against my will, and greatly to my annoyance; and the active operation of these two senses would have been sufficient to banish sleep, had not my brain been also pertinaciously busy in recalling up the incidents of the day, and meditating on the wonderful changes which so brief a space of time had effected. It was an appropriate place to reflect upon the vicissitudes of fortune, and the vanities of the world; and the proud, the rich, and the powerful should have been there to learn the folly of arrogance, the worthlessness of wealth, and the weakness of human strength and authority. There was then on board, however, unknown to me at the time, an individual whose life was a perfect illustration of the appositeness of the foregoing remarks. He had been rich and powerful, and, no doubt, proud, and he had lived to prove the uselessness of all personal ambition. Capitango Dula, who was but lately a slave, and was now labouring under the effects of dysentery, emaciated and weak, the remnant of his former self, had been a great Benguela chiefman, and possessed of hundreds of slaves. Such is the uncertainty of human greatness, in every condition of society, amongst the barbarians of Africa, as well as the civilised communities of Europe, that instances to attest the proverbial inconstancy and blindness of Fortune are everywhere to be found. After being a long time allured by her smiles, committing frightful ravages by his incursions amongst neighbouring tribes, carrying off their populations into captivity, Dula at length experienced the withering influence of her frown; for having been taken prisoner in a sanguinary affray with a hostile party, he was sold as a slave to the Portuguese, and by them had been put on board the "Julia."

My only companion on board was the overseer, who had charge of the "Andorinha," and who occupied the only other berth in the small cabin. He, like myself, had been awake all night. On the first dawn of light, we rose, and examined the hold where the sick were stowed. We found two of the smallpox patients had died during the night. The task which now devolved upon him to get the place cleaned up was not an enviable one; but he acquitted himself of it, with the help of two strong healthy negroes, with admirable resignation and diligence. In the space of an hour, the lower deck was washed and scrubbed, and looked wonderfully well. The farina, coffee, and sugar, having been issued out for breakfast, Antonio, the negro cook, took charge of these articles, and was in a short time busy kindling a large wood fire, and manufacturing their morning meal.

Charles Fuller, the overseer of the "Andorinha," was a stout-built, active man, with rather an intelligent cast of countenance. His early history is unknown. Some affirm that he is an American, and was formerly much engaged in smuggling, and surmises were not wanting respecting his having once adopted a still more reprehensible profession; but, like most of these speculations about strangers, these extraordinary conjectures entertained respecting his relation to smuggling or piratical adventures were most likely founded on not a shadow of truth. Perhaps, he was but an honest Englishman, after all—such, at least, he had ever been since his arrival in the island. Whatever may have
been his past career, he was, at least, an excellent sailor, and a bold independent man, with a desire equal to the ability of putting his usefulness into practice. On the present occasion he was peculiarly adapted for his situation; and to his active exertions and kind attentions to the sick, I feel unsheathed pleasure in bearing my sincere testimony. Although he had been previously only a boatman at James’-town, yet such was the difficulty of procuring proper persons to officiate in any capacity amongst the Africans, that £1 per diem was not considered too great a remuneration for his services; and after the expiration of three months, so disgusting were the duties he had to perform, and so annoying the restraints to which he, along with every other officer connected with the establishment, was subjected, that he resigned his situation, handsomely as it was remunerated.

After taking an account of the number of sick on board the "Andorinha," and ascertaining the nature of their different diseases, I repaired on board the "Julia," still occupied by the British crew, to join the prize officer at a déjeuner, which would scarcely have been relished at a Parisian restaurateur’s. On a hencoop were spread the materials of our repast, consisting of tea, bitter biscuits, boiled vermicelli, and salted mackerel. Hungry appetites, however, are not very nice, and we managed to breakfast heartily, in spite of the coarseness of the viands, and the rudeness of the style in which they were served. I suspect that half of the dyspeptic patients in the world, if obliged to make use of such fare for a month, would, by the expiration of that period, have most effectually recovered the tone of their stomachs, without the aid of tonic infusions, steel mixtures, or Kaye’s pills.

On my return to the shore, I became better acquainted with the character of the officials who were to assist me in conducting the business of the establishment. Five overseers and three matrons had been chosen to perform the duties consequent on the superintendence of the 150 Africans who had been landed. It is singularly true that more incompetent persons than these eight worthies could scarcely have been found in the whole population of St. Helena. Nevertheless, such as they were, I was obliged to accept of them, and employ them on different services for which they were pre-eminently unfitted. Four out of the five overseers were confirmed drunkards, and two of these frail and useless from advanced age, while the fifth was an ignorant, stupid boy, without the rudiments of education, or the possession of common sense. Of the three matrons I may observe, that the old adage of "least said is soonest mended" may be well applied to them, unless I make an exception in favour of Dirty Doll, alias Mrs. Brown, who was certainly industrious, and zealous to do as much as a frame shrivelled up by eighty tropic suns would allow her to accomplish. As for Molly Plato, who had joined herself in the holy bonds of wedlock with invalid Patrick Welsh by jumping over a broomstick, her merits consisted principally in doing exactly what she should not. Both were rare specimens of mulatto comeliness, and it would have been a subject for the Dardanian Shepherd’s connoisseurship to decide whether Dolly’s wrinkles or Molly’s dimples were entitled to the palm of beauty.
The farina, beans, and jerked beef, which had been put on board the "Julia" by the Portuguese for the maintainance of the slaves, had been landed, and were now locked up in the store-room under the charge of Lieutenant Matthew O'Connor, late of the East India Company's Service, now chief overseer of the establishment, a portion of whose duty it was to distribute these articles, together with rice, salted Cape cod, and ready-made soup, sent from James'-town, every day, for the use of the negroes. There was, indeed, a chef de cuisine, the invalid husband of the immaculate Molly Plato, and he, along with two negro assistants, was supposed to take charge of the provisions when issued, and get them cooked. This duty, however, they discharged with utter contempt for regulations of any sort. The negroes were served at any time, and in any way. There was no fixed hour for their meals, nor any system in preparing or dispensing the articles of their repast. They would come from cockerow to sunset to beg for farina, which inopportune applications of theirs would generally be complied with. Not only farina, but beans and beef; would be commiseratingly granted them by the kindhearted cuisiniers, either in a cooked or raw state, equally alike, for they would be devoured with little inquisitiveness on the part of the consumers to ascertain whether the articles had ever made acquaintance with the fiery element. Indeed, boiled farina is rejected by the negroes, who consider it little better than slops. They prefer to eat it raw, or simply with a quantity of boiling water poured over it, just sufficient to form it into a stiff paste, much in the same manner as pease brose is made in Scotland. The beans and jerked beef, however, are boiled, at least when fuel can be procured; the former being scattered over the parboiled farina, like plums in a Christmas pudding, and the latter torn into small shreds, and divided amongst the members of the mees, who esteem it as a relish to the other less savoury articles; and indeed, if pungency and rankness of taste are agreeable to the palate and excite the appetite, jerked beef, such as it is usually found on board of slavers, ought to be tried by epicures, and no doubt would be highly prized by them for all its characteristic qualities of exquisite parfum, and high-toned goût. The Africans, it might be thought, ought to have facilitated themselves on their present comfortable position, as far as diet was concerned; they were now living on clover, for besides the articles which constituted their common fare, they had now rice, cod-fish, and soup. These unknown dainties, however, they refused, and especially manifested a repugnance against the soup, which, though excellent in quality—as well it might be, for something like a shilling a pint was paid for it—was by no means adapted for their use. They accused it of aggravating their complaints, especially the cases of dysentery and cholera, and no doubt with reason; it was too gelatinous, rich, and nutritious, and even the rice was too emollient and mucilaginous, and both, acting as laxatives, kept up or increased the symptoms of those diseases. So convinced were the negroes themselves of their injurious effects, that pannfuls of both soup and rice were thrown about the ground. Any sudden change of diet is dangerous—in the present case it was peculiarly so, as
was proved by the increasing number of patients on each successive day's sick list, which was not diminished until the high-priced soup, fit for an alderman, was laid aside altogether.

The chief overseer, having been furnished with no measures, scales, or weights, was obliged to issue out the rations at hazard, guessing the quantity that might be required for each day's consumption. No diet roll had yet been made out to be conformed to in the distribution of provisions. Nevertheless, it was expected by the Collector of Customs that the chief overseer should give a correct account of the expenditure of each article. Not being able to do so, he, to save himself the shame of being accused of inaccuracy, and be spared the dishonour of being dismissed, very wisely resigned his situation two weeks after he had entered into the duties of it. Had every requisite instruction been furnished to him, and every conveniency afforded, I question very much if he would have been able to acquit himself of the task assigned to him; for though he had been a lieutenant in the army, it is literally true that he was miserably deficient in the science of arithmetic, and was but a poor adept at even writing.

All these abuses had to be corrected. In order, then, to avert the irregularity that prevailed with regard to the issuing, cooking, and distribution of the provisions, to substitute a diet more suitable for the Africans, and to avoid for the future the confusion in which the accounts had been involved, I had to introduce regulations, which, though they met with opposition at first, at length were adopted, and happily attained the objects in view.

As the guidance of the establishment was committed to me, subjecting my acts merely to the approval of the Collector of Customs, I ordered the overseers and matrons to go round the dwellings of the Africans, and rouse them every morning at six o'clock, and after conducting them in distinct parties to the stream that flows through the valley, to perform their ablutions, to march them all down to the Battery. There they assembled, and arranged themselves into two long files, composed of males and females; and there the muster was regularly taken, the persons and clothes inspected, the sick separated and conducted to their allotted quarters, and all the eventualities of the last four-and-twenty hours ascertained. If any were found dirty, they were commanded to repair to the stream again, and the whole were detained at the muster, which they much disliked, until the delinquent returned perfectly clean. Hence they took particular care to wash themselves so as to meet my approbation, otherwise they would incur the displeasure and provoke the anger of their comrades for being the cause of their detention at muster.

The muster being completed and the people dismissed, the chief overseer was directed to issue the provisions required for the day, which was accurately done, after I had succeeded, by my urgent representations, to get the utensils for the purpose,—for measures, scales, and weights were at last sent us. Patrick Welsh received a few salutary intimations respecting the necessity of preparing the victuals in a manner fit for human mastication and digestion, of having them ready
at the proper time, and of distributing them so as not to raise the
impression that he was feeding swine.

The chief overseer and myself were then employed in calculating the
accounts of provisions given out, clothing issued, and stores expended;
in inscribing all these particulars in the book belonging to the station,
and in making out the daily return, which had regularly to be sent to
the Custom-house, and which not only contained the matters described
above, but all circumstances relating to the deaths, fresh cases of sick-
ness, and discharges from hospital.

Nine o’clock was appointed by me the hour for breakfast, which the
Africans no longer partook of in a desultory, careless, or irregular way.
They had to form into messes of ten persons each, and seated in a
circle on the ground, in the absence of tables and benches, each mess
was supplied with its complement of pots and pans, with a large dish
in the centre, containing the materials of the meal. No mess was served
until they had all formed and were seated; and any noise or fighting
was punished by the offender’s being turned out of the mess, and for-
feiting his portion to his comrades. When all had finished, and not
till then, they were allowed to rise up and depart. On the same plan
were the dinner and supper served out to them—the former at two
o’clock in the afternoon, the latter at seven. When the last meal, how-
ever, was taken away, which it was at the expiration of about a month,
the dinner was retarded to four and sometimes five o’clock. By this
simple expedient of substituting order and quietness for irregularity and
calamity, the business of preparing and dispensing food to hundreds of
barbarians became an easy task, and accompanied with so little confu-
sion, that six months afterwards, when the quarantine had expired, and
visitors were admitted into the establishment, they expressed to me
their surprise and pleasure at witnessing so much order and decorum
during meals, and there were at that time upwards of a thousand negroes at the station. They expected to have found the people, like
what they were at their arrival, little better than wild beasts, quarrel-
ing and scuffling for the largest shares, and were most agreeably disap-
pointed at meeting with such becoming behaviour.

Patrick Welsh having been thus taught a lesson in the science of
cookery and the art of attendance on the table—having become a per-
fect cuisiniere and an accomplished maitre de ceremonie, and the Africans
having learned the beauty and usefulness of polite manners, much to
their mutual edification, and the new chief overseer having been initi-
ated into the mysteries of numbers, by which the accounts were daily
made up with accuracy, and transmitted with regularity to the Custom-
house, for the information of the officers there, it remained for me to
accomplish a task as useful as the former. I had to find out the food
that was best adapted for the negroes under the peculiar circumstances
in which they were placed, and to ascertain the amount of rations each
individual would require, and the routine of fare that would be most
suitable. I accordingly made out a diet roll with all these particulars
comprised, and proposed to put it in operation forthwith. Lord Chester-
field’s precepts having been found advantageous in improving the out-
ward demeanour, it was hoped a little attention to the principles of Hygiene would be equally useful in correcting the vitiated state of the interior economy. The Collector acquiesced in the propriety of my suggestion; but upon my furnishing him with a victualling scale, such as I considered best adapted for the people, and such as it subsequently proved to be, the expensive and objectionable article of "mock turtle" being excluded from it, he very unaccountably returned me the document, and referred me to the Colonial Surgeon and the Health Officer, as the persons whom I should consult respecting the diet of the Africans. This reference to medical officers, who at that time had no connexion with the establishment, for their advice about the adoption of a measure which required but his concurrence, was only useful to the contractor, who supplied the objectionable articles of food, by allowing him a longer period to draw his profits from the same. This diet roll, after a good deal of shuffling, was eventually adopted, and that too without ascertaining the opinion or procuring the consent of the gentlemen whose co-operation was at first so inexplicably required.

To establish a communication between the station and the Custom-house, from which all the supplies were drawn, a boat was put in commission, manned by a crew of Lascars, and commanded by a policeman. This boat arrived every day with the provisions, and brought the despatches from the seat of power for the regulation of affairs at Lemon Valley. At the period of her arrival at Lemon Valley, none of the Africans were permitted to approach near the shore. All the things she brought were landed on the rocks, and the reports about the business of the establishment and the requisitions for articles needed for the use of the Africans were carried down by an overseer, and deposited by him in a little tin box, which the policeman held out at the end of a long stick, so as to obviate the necessity of a close approach. When the boat had departed, the Africans would go down to the beach, and bring up the bags of biscuit and rice, casks of salted meat, packages of clothing, and everything else that had been sent.

I had received very peremptory orders to prevent the negroes from approaching the boat on these occasions, and to report any of the crew who might land and wander about on shore any distance from the boat. In conformity with these instructions, I reported the conduct of the boatmen one day, who had walked up the road leading to the Battery, and lain down among some straw belonging to the establishment. The straw had been used by the negroes for bedding, for at that time the houses they occupied were not boarded, and the straw served as a protection against the cold earthen floor. It was now spread out to air, and of course ought to have been shunned by the boatmen, from its liability to communicate the infection of smallpox. Instead of meeting with the approbation of the inhabitants of James'-town for this punctual discharge of my duty, which was the means of securing their safety from disease, I received abuse from every quarter, for what they were pleased to term my officiousness, and the policeman and Lascars actually refused for several days afterwards to bring the provisions I was in the habit of daily receiving, on my own account, from James'-town.
So wretchedly was the establishment constituted when I took the
management of it, that almost every article was wanting. No foresight
had been exercised to discover what would be necessary, and to provide
it before it would be wanted; but the station was put in quarantine,
and left to find out its wants as it could, and these were only supplied
after repeated application. Among the omissions may be conspicuously
noticed the want of a boat, to establish a communication between the
"Andorinha" and the shore. For many days I was obliged to have re-
course to the boat belonging to the British crew of the "Julia," and even
to avail myself of their services to row me backwards and forwards.
Provisions and water, and stores of different kinds, had continually to
be carried off to the hospital ships, and their boat was always put in
requisition for the purpose, until I felt ashamed and grieved at imposing
so much on their kindness. At length my earnest solicitations were
complied with, and a boat was furnished us, and I was permitted to add
Lieutenant O'Connor's two eldest sons to the overseers on the establish-
ment, and employ them as boatmen.

The third evening after my arrival was distinguished by a jollification
amongst the overseers on shore, who had contrived to get a lot of Cape
wine sent them from town, of which having partaken in doses rather
too liberal, the well-known modus operandi of the alchoholic infusion
was exhibited in many strange physiological effects. Amongst them
was the augmented power of every corporeal function, manifested by the
extraordinary activity of the organs of sight, hearing, and especially of
speech and locomotion. Low, vulgar exclamations were yelled out to
prove the strength of lungs, and grotesque antics and ridiculous gestures
were displayed to show the flexibility of the muscular system; while
wonderful illustrations were given of the principle of rotatory motion,
combined with various elliptical, triangular, and other mathematical
figures, which demonstrated that the inferior members had acquired sup-
pleness in the same ratio that the head had gained an increased sense
of the ludicrous and picturesque. There seemed, however, to be such
a total absence of the sublime and beautiful about them, that it would
have put Burke and Alison into fits to have beheld them. The scene
was rich in comic effect, and Cruikshank ought to have been there
with his pencil. Imagine four or five drunken overseers, vociferating
at the top of their pipes, and stimulating by their cries a half-naked
negro to exhibit the wildness of the war dance, accompanied by the
screams of upwards of one hundred Africans, old and young, shouting
with their united voices the most terrific sounds, while a din louder than
usual would mark the chorus. Such was the picture that met my view
on the occasion. Aided by a little wild imagery from a poetical imagi-
nation, the scene would have formed not an inappropriate illustration of
what might be supposed to take place sometimes in Pandemonium.
While these performances were transacting on shore, the tender-hearted
Molly Plato had fled from the endearments of conjugal affection, and
being of opinion that "none but the brave deserve the fair," was coquet-
ting with the utmost assiduity the whole squadron of gallant blue-jackets
on board the "Julia."
The Collector of Customs had most probably been reading Milton's "Paradise Lost," and of late been studying that particular passage where the bard gives a description of our first mother, in all the loveliness of naked charms—"when unadorned, adorned the most," and thought the opinion of the poet might, with equal propriety, be applied to the case of the liberated Africans. Unfortunately for the support of his hypothesis, the negresses were not quite so beautiful as Eve, and Milton never applied his observations to Adam, whom he must have thought considerably improved by the investiture of fig-leaves. No other motive could have retarded so long a time, and in so many instances, the furnishing of clothing to the Africans, who were almost always allowed to revel in the full luxuriance of unfettered limbs, and in the complete exposure of every personal attraction, for about two weeks after their arrival. This delay in providing them with what in England is punished with imprisonment for being destitute of, I raised my voice most clamorously, but ineffectually, to obviate. I represented to the Collector the benefit that would accrue to the health of the people, who really could not stand the climate of St. Helena, which is very variable and sometimes very cold, without the protection afforded by clothing. I knew it was vain, and therefore did not attempt to make use of any arguments drawn from motives of decency, for custom is the regulator of what is becoming and modest, and to have talked of vitiating the morals of the negroes by keeping them naked would have been scouted as a most preposterous idea. Indeed, if any excuse could have been found for the neglect, it was the circumstance of the union of sentiments entertained on the subject by both masters and men, by the directors of the establishment and many of the Africans themselves, who, unaccustomed to the use of garments, and impeded in their movements by them, would prefer, especially if the weather were warm, to disem-barrass themselves of those incumbrances. The Collector was then most likely labouring under the impression of the uselessness of habiliments, or their tendency to transform symmetry into deformity, when he informed me, in reply to my applications for supplies of clothing, that the discretion and responsibility of the measure must rest on myself, and that all needless outlay of the public fund should be avoided. What inconsistency, to talk of the expenditure of the public money when the most indispensable articles of dress were demanded, and forget all allusions to economy when the price of the articles had to be stipulated for and paid! Of course I accepted the responsibility, and exercised my discretion; and I fancy by so doing I did not incur the displeasure of the Government, nor militate against any principles of sound policy, nor offend the current opinions respecting decency and decorum. By the success of my exertions on their behalf, the Africans were allowed not only checked cotton shirts, and Osnaburg trousers, and calico chemises, and printed frocks, but Guernseys and flannel undergowns; these last articles being required on account of the inclemency of the weather at that season of the year. The sun would shine oppressively hot during the day, without a breeze to cool the intensity of its rays, and without a cloud to moderate the light and glare; but when the night would set
in, storms would arise, accompanied with torrents of rain, and violent
gusts of wind; and as these last came rushing from the high lands, where
the temperature was colder by many degrees than on the shore, they
would come with an uncomfortable sensation of frigidity, which could
not fail to be injurious to negroes who had just left the burning climate
of Africa.

The progress of disease amongst the members of our small community
was frightful to contemplate; the smallpox was increasing in violence,
and dysentery committing additional ravages. It was a sad spectacle to
behold the daily diminution of ranks at muster; each revolution of the
earth around its axis, that brought an alteration of light and darkness,
brought no revival of life, but the repulsive gloom of the tomb. Death
was reaping a rich harvest. Many, apparently healthy in appearance,
would be taken sick, and in the brief space of a few hours be cut down
like the flowers of the field. One instance of the rapidity of the passage
between life and death was presented to my notice at the time, and has
never been forgotten; not that there was anything unusual in his seizure,
for many died in the same manner, but because it was the first case of
the sort, and was brought before my notice by the sailors belonging
to the "Julia," with whom he had been a particular favourite. Poor
Paulo was seemingly in the possession of health at dinner-time, yet
before the approach of night he had expired in the greatest agonies,
complaining of severe pain across the abdomen. Indeed, disease had
assumed so formidable a malignity, that I despaired for a while of seeing
an end to the depredations of the Destroyer, until there would be no
more victims for him to slay. It appeared that the Angel of Death had
received a commission to proceed on with his terrible work of destruc-
tion here, and intended to acquit himself of the task with vengeance.
From being a secluded spot, the seat of solitude, Lemon Vale had become
converted into the busy mart of pestilence; it was literally the "valley
of the shadow of death"—"a real Golgotha"—"a place of skulls."
Never had I reason to deplore so much the inefficacy of human know-
ledge and skill, and the uselessness of medical science.

Sickness, so prevalent amongst the Africans, was not confined to them.
Charles Fuller, not being able to endure the noise and smell that dis-
turbed our repose in the cabin of the "Andorinha," made his bed upon
deck, in spite of my remonstrances. Just as I had predicted, so it hap-
pened to him. The cold wet night, after the heat of the day, induced an
attack of pleurisy, which incapacitated him from farther exertions, and
the whole charge of the hospital ship devolved upon me. I was glad to
think I had been prudent in remaining below, and that I had put up
with the annoyances, to escape from which Fuller had acted in the
manner described, and incurred the penalty of a severe illness. After
he had been laid up for some days, it was necessary for me to procure
assistance. A man of the name of William Smith was sent from James-
town for the purpose. Whether it was his previously-debauched habits
that brought on his complaint, or whether he had caught it on board, I
could not say, but he fell ill within a week of his arrival to take charge
of the "Andorinha," and four days from the invasion of the malady,