

CHAPTER XL.

SOME OF THE CEREMONIES IN A MAN-OF-WAR UNNECESSARY AND INJURIOUS.

The ceremonials of a man-of-war, some of which have been described in the preceding chapter, may merit a reflection or two.

The general usages of the American Navy are founded upon the usages that prevailed in the navy of monarchical England more than a century ago; nor have they been materially altered since. And while both England and America have become greatly liberalised in the interval; while shore pomp in high places has come to be regarded by the more intelligent masses of men as belonging to the absurd, ridiculous, and mock-heroic; while that most truly august of all the majesties of earth, the President of the United States, may be seen entering his residence with his umbrella under his arm, and no brass band or military guard at his heels, and unostentatiously taking his seat by the side of the meanest citizen in a public conveyance; while this is the case, there still lingers in American men-of-war all the stilted etiquette and childish parade of the old-fashioned Spanish court of Madrid. Indeed, so far as the things that meet the eye are concerned, an American Commodore is by far a greater man than the President of twenty millions of freemen.

But we plain people ashore might very willingly be content to leave these commodores in the unmolested possession of their gilded penny whistles, rattles, and gewgaws, since they seem to take so much pleasure in them, were it not that all this is attended by consequences to their subordinates in the last degree to be deplored.

While hardly any one will question that a naval officer should be surrounded by circumstances calculated to impart a requisite dignity to his position, it is not the less certain that, by the excessive pomp he at present maintains, there is naturally and unavoidably generated a feeling of servility and debasement in the hearts of most of the seamen who continually behold a fellow-mortal flourishing over their heads like the archangel Michael with a thousand wings. And as, in degree, this same pomp is observed toward their inferiors by all the grades of commissioned officers, even down to a midshipman, the evil is proportionately multiplied.

It would not at all diminish a proper respect for the officers, and subordination to their authority among the seamen, were all this idle parade--only ministering to the arrogance of the officers, without at all benefiting the state--completely done away. But to do so, we voters and lawgivers ourselves must be no respecters of persons.

That saying about levelling upward, and not downward, may seem very fine to those who cannot see its self-involved absurdity. But the truth is, that, to gain the true level, in some things, we must cut

downward; for how can you make every sailor a commodore? or how raise the valleys, without filling them up with the superfluous tops of the hills?

Some discreet, but democratic, legislation in this matter is much to be desired. And by bringing down naval officers, in these things at least, without affecting their legitimate dignity and authority, we shall correspondingly elevate the common sailor, without relaxing the subordination, in which he should by all means be retained.