

CHAPTER LI.

ONE OF "THE PEOPLE" HAS AN AUDIENCE WITH THE COMMODORE AND THE CAPTAIN ON THE QUARTER-DECK.

We had not lain in Rio long, when in the innermost recesses of the mighty soul of my noble Captain of the Top--incomparable Jack Chase--the deliberate opinion was formed, and rock-founded, that our ship's company must have at least one day's "liberty" to go ashore ere we weighed anchor for home.

Here it must be mentioned that, concerning anything of this kind, no sailor in a man-of-war ever presumes to be an agitator, unless he is of a rank superior to a mere able-seaman; and no one short of a petty officer--that is, a captain of the top, a quarter-gunner, or boatswain's mate--ever dreams of being a spokesman to the supreme authority of the vessel in soliciting any kind of favor for himself and shipmates.

After canvassing the matter thoroughly with several old quarter-masters and other dignified sea-fencibles, Jack, hat in hand, made his appearance, one fine evening, at the mast, and, waiting till Captain Claret drew nigh, bowed, and addressed him in his own off-hand, polished, and poetical style. In his intercourse with the quarter-deck, he always presumed upon his being such a universal favourite.

"Sir, this Rio is a charming harbour, and we poor mariners--your trusty sea-warriors, valiant Captain! who, with you at their head, would board the Rock of Gibraltar itself, and carry it by storm--we poor fellows, valiant Captain! have gazed round upon this ravishing landscape till we can gaze no more. Will Captain Claret vouchsafe one day's liberty, and so assure himself of eternal felicity, since, in our flowing cups, he will be ever after freshly remembered?"

As Jack thus rounded off with a snatch from Shakspeare, he saluted the Captain with a gallant flourish of his tarpaulin, and then, bringing the rim to his mouth, with his head bowed, and his body thrown into a fine negligent attitude, stood a picture of eloquent but passive appeal. He seemed to say, Magnanimous Captain Claret, we fine fellows, and hearts of oak, throw ourselves upon your unparalleled goodness.

"And what do you want to go ashore for?" asked the Captain, evasively, and trying to conceal his admiration of Jack by affecting some haughtiness.

"Ah! sir," sighed Jack, "why do the thirsty camels of the desert desire to lap the waters of the fountain and roll in the green grass of the oasis? Are we not but just from the ocean Sahara? and is not this Rio a verdant spot, noble Captain? Surely you will not keep us always tethered at anchor, when a little more cable would admit of our cropping the herbage! And it is a weary thing, Captain Claret, to be

imprisoned month after month on the gun-deck, without so much as smelling a citron. Ah! Captain Claret, what sings sweet Waller:

'But who can always on the billows lie?

The watery wilderness yields no supply.'

compared with such a prisoner, noble Captain,

'Happy, thrice happy, who, in battle slain,

Press'd in Atrides' cause the Trojan pain!'

Pope's version, sir, not the original Greek."

And so saying, Jack once more brought his hat-rim to his mouth, and slightly bending forward, stood mute.

At this juncture the Most Serene Commodore himself happened to emerge from the after-gangway, his gilded buttons, epaulets, and the gold lace on his chapeau glittering in the flooding sunset. Attracted by the scene between Captain Claret and so well-known and admired a commoner as Jack Chase he approached, and assuming for the moment an air of pleasant condescension--never shown to his noble barons the officers of the ward-room--he said, with a smile, "Well, Jack, you and your shipmates are after some favour, I suppose--a day's liberty, is it not?"

Whether it was the horizontal setting sun, streaming along the deck,

that blinded Jack, or whether it was in sun-worshipping homage of the mighty Commodore, there is no telling; but just at this juncture noble Jack was standing reverentially holding his hat to his brow, like a man with weak eyes.

"Valiant Commodore," said he, at last, "this audience is indeed an honour undeserved. I almost sink beneath it. Yes, valiant Commodore, your sagacious mind has truly divined our object. Liberty, sir; liberty is, indeed, our humble prayer. I trust your honourable wound, received in glorious battle, valiant Commodore, pains you less today than common."

"Ah! cunning Jack!" cried the Commodore, by no means blind to the bold sortie of his flattery, but not at all displeased with it. In more respects than one, our Commodore's wound was his weak side.

"I think we must give them liberty," he added, turning to Captain Claret; who thereupon, waving Jack further off, fell into confidential discourse with his superior.

"Well, Jack, we will see about it," at last cried the Commodore, advancing. "I think we must let you go."

"To your duty, captain of the main-top!" said the Captain, rather stiffly. He wished to neutralise somewhat the effect of the Commodore's condescension. Besides, he had much rather the Commodore had been in his cabin. His presence, for the time, affected his own supremacy in

his ship. But Jack was nowise cast down by the Captain's coldness; he felt safe enough; so he proceeded to offer his acknowledgments.

"Kind gentlemen," he sighed, "your pains are registered where every day I turn the leaf to read'--Macbeth, valiant Commodore and Captain!--what the Thane says to the noble lords, Ross and Angus."

And long and lingeringly bowing to the two noble officers, Jack backed away from their presence, still shading his eyes with the broad rim of his hat.

"Jack Chase for ever!" cried his shipmates, as he carried the grateful news of liberty to them on the forecastle. "Who can talk to Commodores like our matchless Jack!"