

CHAPTER LV.

MIDSHIPMEN ENTERING THE NAVY EARLY.

The allusion in the preceding chapter to the early age at which some of the midshipmen enter the Navy, suggests some thoughts relative to more important considerations.

A very general modern impression seems to be, that, in order to learn the profession of a sea-officer, a boy can hardly be sent to sea too early. To a certain extent, this may be a mistake. Other professions, involving a knowledge of technicalities and things restricted to one particular field of action, are frequently mastered by men who begin after the age of twenty-one, or even at a later period of life. It was only about the middle of the seventeenth century that the British military and naval services were kept distinct. Previous to that epoch the king's officers commanded indifferently either by sea or by land.

Robert Blake, perhaps one of the most accomplished, and certainly one of the most successful Admirals that ever hoisted a flag, was more than half a century old (fifty-one years) before he entered the naval service, or had aught to do, professionally, with a ship. He was of a studious turn, and, after leaving Oxford, resided quietly on his estate, a country gentleman, till his forty-second year, soon after which he became connected with the Parliamentary army.

The historian Clarendon says of him, "He was the first man that made it manifest that the science (seamanship) might be attained in less time than was imagined." And doubtless it was to his shore sympathies that the well-known humanity and kindness which Blake evinced in his intercourse with the sailors is in a large degree to be imputed.

Midshipmen sent into the Navy at a very early age are exposed to the passive reception of all the prejudices of the quarter-deck in favour of ancient usages, however useless or pernicious; those prejudices grow up with them, and solidify with their very bones. As they rise in rank, they naturally carry them up, whence the inveterate repugnance of many Commodores and Captains to the slightest innovations in the service, however salutary they may appear to landsmen.

It is hardly to be doubted that, in matters connected with the general welfare of the Navy, government has paid rather too much deference to the opinions of the officers of the Navy, considering them as men almost born to the service, and therefore far better qualified to judge concerning any and all questions touching it than people on shore. But in a nation under a liberal Constitution, it must ever be unwise to make too distinct and peculiar the profession of either branch of its military men. True, in a country like ours, nothing is at present to be apprehended of their gaining political rule; but not a little is to be apprehended concerning their perpetuating or creating abuses among their subordinates, unless civilians have full cognisance of their

administrative affairs, and account themselves competent to the complete overlooking and ordering them.

We do wrong when we in any way contribute to the prevailing mystification that has been thrown about the internal affairs of the national sea-service. Hitherto those affairs have been regarded even by some high state functionaries as things beyond their insight--altogether too technical and mysterious to be fully comprehended by landsmen. And this it is that has perpetuated in the Navy many evils that otherwise would have been abolished in the general amelioration of other things. The army is sometimes remodelled, but the Navy goes down from generation to generation almost untouched and unquestioned, as if its code were infallible, and itself a piece of perfection that no statesman could improve. When a Secretary of the Navy ventures to innovate upon its established customs, you hear some of the Navy officers say, "What does this landsman know about our affairs? Did he ever head a watch? He does not know starboard from larboard, girt-line from back-stay."

While we deferentially and cheerfully leave to Navy officers the sole conduct of making and shortening sail, tacking ship, and performing other nautical manoeuvres, as may seem to them best; let us beware of abandoning to their discretion those general municipal regulations touching the well-being of the great body of men before the mast; let us beware of being too much influenced by their opinions in matters where it is but natural to suppose that their long-established

prejudices are enlisted.