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A Matter for Congratulations (A Vignette from the Old Navy)

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The *Madawaska* was accepted by the Navy Department after her trial trip and was promptly laid up in ordinary. In 1869 her name was changed to *Tennessee* at the same time that many other names peculiar to the Civil War period were changed to others that in most cases were certainly not more appropriate.

During the first two years of this vessel's service on the North Atlantic station the writer, then fresh from the Naval Academy, gained on her decks and in her engine-room his first practical ideas of the naval customs and practices of his country. The *Tennessee* was then the largest vessel in commission in the American navy and the era of mastless steel cruisers was yet so far away that she was not suspected, by the youngsters at least, of being obsolete and stood as the type of all that was excellent and majestic in ship construction. And the routine and discipline observed in the daily life of the ship was in perfect accord with the era her type represented, which period is commonly designated as that pertaining to the old navy. The admiral lived in stately splendor in spacious apartments far aft on the gun deck, into which few but his orderlies and servants ever ventured to intrude, and his appearance abroad in the world of the ship's life always produced the bustle and commotion incident to a great and unusual event. The captain, an officer of magnificent physique, whose fame from the Civil War clothed him in the eyes of his subordinates with all the attributes of heroism, was likewise surrounded with all the ceremonials of a court, and, like the admiral, did not walk forth into his kingdom except at times when something was going to happen. Even the ward-room was a semi-sacred and exclusive precinct; it was separated from the junior officers' space by

Taken from *The Steam Navy of the United States. A History of the Growth of the Steam Vessel of War in the U.S. Navy, and of the Naval Engineer Corps* by Frank M. Bennett, Pittsburgh, Pa.: Press of W.T. Nicholson, 1896, pp. 544-560.

only a thin pine partition, but that to all intents and purposes was more impassable and impervious than the heavy steel water-tight bulkheads of the present day.

All the punctillious etiquette of the old regime was religiously followed: the direction of the wind determined which side of the spar deck and which side of the gun deck might properly be used as a thoroughfare; the junior, or "steerage," officers knew only the port gangway and had their liberty boats, two boats being necessary to take officers on shore even though there would be but one from the ward-room and one from the steerage to go; no enlisted man ever risked his freedom by venturing to windward of an officer. The arrival of eight bells in the morning and of sunset in the evening marked the unflinching and unvarying performance of certain rites with boats, masts and spars. No steam capstan gave warning with its rapid rattle of the coming of a power more potent and trustworthy than the brawn of men, and in consequence the function of getting underway approached the sublime in its gravity; when the grizzled old boatswain and his troop of weather-beaten mates gathered about the main hatch and made the ship echo with their shrill calls and hoarse shout in unison, "All hands up anchor!" it meant all hands; none could look on. The great cable came in link by link laboriously keeping time to the measured tramp of more than four hundred men walking around on the capstan bars and urged meanwhile to more rapid exertion by the rollicking strains of "Rory O'More" and "Lannigan's Ball" from the band. In all the memories of that long-vanished cruise nothing lingers with more vividness than the echo of the voices of those boatswain's mates and the rhythmic tremble of the decks beneath the tread of the men tramping round and round about the capstans; and it is good to have had an experience of such things, for they were picturesque and typical of a system that most excellently served its purpose in its own time, and has now passed away.

The ship was huge and roomy, affording ample space for all except the junior officers, who were herded into two narrow and noisome dens on the berth deck, hot in summer, cold in winter, unlighted save by candles or dim, smoky lamps, and unventilated except by two or three very small bull's eyes so nearly awash that they could not be opened except in dead smooth water or in a dry-dock. Those were the days of an unlimited number of midshipmen, cadet midshipmen and cadet engineers, not to mention a bountiful supply of ensigns and staff officers of that grade, so these steerages were always densely populated; more so than those of other ships probably from the circumstance of the *Tennessee* being on the home station and easily reached without any great outlay for mileage on account of officers ordered to join her.

The average number of young officers crowded into those darksome dens was about twenty-five, and there they stowed their clothes, performed their ablutions, wrote their letters and notebooks, ate, and as many as possible slept. Had an equal or a considerably smaller number of Chinese attempted to

live in a cellar in any American city under precisely similar sanitary conditions they would have been promptly jailed; still, the young gentlemen survived their surroundings and without any cares worth worrying about managed to have a reasonably good time. The writer, for one, is rather glad at this distance of having had the experience and the opportunity, then almost the last one, of learning by actual contacts just what the life and habits of the old navy were. Nevertheless, he thinks that the youth of the new navy are to be congratulated on the practical impossibility of such a condition of naval affairs ever returning.

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