Military manners and customs

Farrer James Anson
MILITARY MANNERS AND CUSTOMS
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BY

JAMES ANSON FARRER

AUTHOR OF

"PRIMITIVE MANNERS AND CUSTOMS" "CRIMES AND PUNISHMENTS" ETC.

‘Homo homini res sacra’—Seneca

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PREFACE.

In the present volume I have attempted within the limits of the historical period and of our European civilisation, and without recognising any hard and fast line between ancient and modern, Christian and Pagan, to allude, in the places that seemed most appropriate, to all points in the history of war that appeared to be either of special interest or of essential importance. As examples of such points I may refer to the treatment of prisoners of war, or of surrendered garrisons; the rules about spies and surprises; the introduction of, and feeling about, new weapons; the meaning of parts of military dress; the origin of peculiar customs like the old one of kissing the earth before a charge; the prevalent rules of honour, as displayed in notions of justice in regard to reprisals, or of fairness in stratagems and deception. The necessity of observing in so vast a field the laws of proportion has enforced resort to such condensation, that on subjects which deserve or possess their tomes upon tomes, I have in many cases been unable to spend more than a page or a chapter. It is easier, how-
ever, to err on the side of length than of brevity, but on whichever side I have exceeded, I can only hope that others, who may feel the same interest with myself in the subject without having the same time to give to it, may derive a tithe of the pleasure from reading the following nine chapters that I have found in putting them together.

The study, of course, is no new one, but there can be no objection to calling it by the new name of Belology—a convenient term, quite capable of holding its own with Sociology or its congeneres. The only novelty I have aimed at is one of treatment, and consists in never losing sight of the fact that to all military customs there is a moral and human side which has been only too generally ignored in this connection. To read books like Grose’s ‘Military Antiquities,’ one would think their writers were dealing with the manners, not of men but of ninepins, so utterly do they divest themselves of all human interest or moral feeling, in reference to the customs they describe with so laudable but toneless an accuracy.

The starting-point of modern belological studies will, undoubtedly, always be the Parliamentary Blue Book, containing the reports (less full than one might wish) of the Military International Conference that met at Brussels in 1874, to discuss the existing laws and customs of war, and to consider whether any modification of them were either possible or desirable.
Most of the representatives appointed to attend by the several Powers were military men, so that we are carried by their conversation into the actual realities of modern warfare, with an authority and sense of truth that one is conscious of in no other military book. It is to be regretted that such a work, instructive as it is beyond any other on the subject, has never been printed in a form more popular than its official dress. It was from it that I first conceived the idea of the following pages, and in the sequel frequent reference will be made to it, as the source of the most trustworthy military information we possess, and as certain to be for some time to come the standard work on all the actual laws and customs of contemporary warfare.