

**DORLING
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TAPRELL**

PINCHER MARTIN, O.D.: A
STORY OF THE INNER LIFE
OF THE ROYAL NAVY

Henry Dorling

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the Inner Life of the Royal Navy**

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H. Taprell Dorling

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PREFACE

This story was written in rather difficult circumstances, and subject to frequent interruption. Indeed, when the first chapters appeared in *Chambers's Journal* early in 1916 the narrative was barely half-finished. Sometimes I almost despaired of ever completing it, for it can perhaps be understood that writing on board a small ship actually at sea in time of war is impossible for more reasons than one.

The reader is cautioned against accepting the story as an official account of the part played by a certain section of the Navy during the war. Incidents described are true; but, for reasons which must be obvious, it has been necessary to give them fictitious colouring. It also seems desirable to add that all my characters are fictitious, and that each chapter was submitted to the censors at the Press Bureau before publication.

It should be added that a considerable amount of matter is contained in this volume which did not appear in *Chambers's Journal* when the story appeared in serial form.

More than ever am I deeply sensible of the very real debt which I owe to my wife, both for her help in revising and correcting the proofs, and for her many suggestions for improvements.

TAFFRAIL.

1916.

CHAPTER I

HIS FIRST SHIP

'There ye are, Martin. That's 'er.'

The leading seaman in charge of the party paused, and waved a hand toward a squat gray battleship lying on the other side of one of the basins in Portsmouth Dockyard.

The little expedition of which he was the leader consisted of himself; Martin, the man he had spoken to; and a small hand-cart propelled by another ordinary seaman, breathing heavily. The cart contained a sausage-shaped, khaki-coloured hammock, bound with its seven regulation turns of lashing, and a bulbous brown kit-bag. They were Martin's belongings. He was joining his first seagoing ship.

'Er?' he queried in answer to the leading seaman's remark, shivering and looking rather puzzled. 'Oo?'

He was a puny, undersized little rat of a man, with a pallid, freckled face and a crop of sandy hair. It was early winter, and the piercing wind bit through to his very marrow, while the drizzling rain had already found its way through his oilskin and down the back of his neck. It was distinctly chilly. The tip of his nose and his fingers were blue with cold, and he looked, and felt, supremely miserable.

He repeated his question as the leading seaman executed a few violent steps of a clog-dance, and flapped his arms like an elderly penguin to restore his circulation. 'Er?' he said at last, pausing for breath and seemingly rather surprised at Martin's ignorance. 'That there's the *Belligerent*. That's the ship we're goin' to join – you're goin' to join, that is.'

'That 'er?' Martin ejaculated, gazing with awe at the battleship's great bulk. 'That 'er? Gor' blimy!' He seemed rather appalled.

The leading seaman tittered and sucked his teeth. 'Lor!' he laughed, not unkindly, noticing the anxiety in the youngster's eyes, 'you needn't look like that. They can't eat yer; leastways not if you be'aves yourself they won't. 'Er commander's a werry nice gentleman; 'e wus shipmates along o' me in th' *Duncan* up the Straits¹ six year ago. 'E wus a lootenant then, an' a bit of a flyer; but 'e's a gent so long as you don't get in the rattle.'²

He paused and eyed the ordinary seaman with the hand-cart, who had released the shafts and was swinging his arms. 'Ere, young fella, not so much of it!' he ordered abruptly, quite forgetting that he had called the halt himself. 'Get a move on yer! You ain't no bloomin' baronite drivin' your own motor-car, to stop 'ere an' stop there has you thinks fit. You ain't wheelin' no perishin' whelk-barrer down Commercial Road neither. Show a leg, me lad!'

The ordinary seaman seized the shafts, and the procession moved forward.

Ten minutes later Martin, with his bag and hammock, was standing on the quarterdeck of his Majesty's first-class pre-Dreadnought battleship *Belligerent*. The leading seaman and the man with the hand-cart were already on their way back to the Royal Naval Barracks, and Pincher Martin, alone, for the first time, felt horribly nervous and uncomfortable. He had been received with scant courtesy or interest by the marine corporal of the watch, who had told him to remain where he was while he fetched a ship's corporal; and now, eyed critically by the grinning side-boy and the messenger, youngsters like himself, who made facetious, rather uncomplimentary, and very audible remarks about his personal appearance, he shivered and waited.

Over on the other side of the deck a tall officer, clad in a greatcoat and swinging a telescope, was walking up and down dodging the rain-drips from the awning. He was a lieutenant, from the two

¹ 'The Straits' = the Mediterranean.

² 'In the rattle' = in trouble.

gold stripes and the curl on his shoulder-straps, and was, as a matter of fact, the officer of the watch. Presently the merriment at Martin's expense became rather raucous, and the officer turned round and saw the messenger and the side-boy laughing together. The chubby-faced youths caught his eye roving over them, and immediately both became rigid, with an innocent expression on their faces.

'Come here, you two!' he called, beckoning with his telescope.

The two youngsters trotted up and halted before him with a salute.

'Skylarking again, eh?' the lieutenant asked.

'Oh no, sir. We wusn't skylarkin',' the elder of the two protested.

'Humph! I don't know so much about that. I suppose you were making fun of that man who's just joined, eh?'

'Oh no, sir. I only said to Horrigan' —

'I don't want to hear what you said to Horrigan, or what Horrigan said to you,' interrupted the officer of the watch, smiling to himself. 'Evidently the time hangs heavily on your hands, and I'll not have the quarterdeck turned into a bally music hall.' He looked round the deck, and noticed some untidy ends of rope near the ship's side.

'You, Bates,' he went on, 'can amuse yourself by coiling down the ends of these boats' falls and awning jiggers; and you, Horrigan, can broom all that water into the scuppers.' He waved his hand toward some pools of rain-water near the edge of the deck. 'When you've done that you can let me know, and I'll find you another job. Go on — away you go!'

The boys pattered off, and the lieutenant resumed his perambulation.

Presently a ship's corporal, accompanied by the marine who had gone in search of him, came through the battery door and went up to Martin.

'Name and rating?' he demanded abruptly, referring to a book in his hand.

'Martin. Ord'nary seaman.'

'You'll be in No. 47 mess,' said Ship's Corporal Puddicombe, 'and will be in the forecastle division, starboard watch, first part, first sub. The capten of your top — Petty Officer Casey's 'is name — will tell you off for your stations in your part of the ship. You'll stow your bag in the fore cable flat, starboard side, and your 'ammick in the starboard forecastle rack. I'll show you where to put 'em, and if you comes along to my office after tea to-day I'll give you a card with it all written on — see?'

'Yessir,' said Martin, looking very bewildered, for he had hardly understood a word of what the man had said.

'It's all right, me lad,' the corporal went on, more kindly. 'You needn't look so scared. You'll soon shake down. Is this your first ship?'

'Yessir.'

The corporal nodded and went off to report to the officer of the watch, who presently returned with him.

'Ord'nary Seaman Martin, sir. Come to join the ship from the barracks.'

The lieutenant eyed the new arrival critically. 'What division's he in, corporal?' he queried.

'Yours, sir. Forecastle division.'

'How long have you been in the service?' the officer asked next.

'Six an' a narf months, sir,' said Martin.

'Well, it's about time you got your hair cut, my lad. It's much too long. The forecastle division's my division, and the smartest in the ship, so look out you uphold its reputation. Is your kit complete, by the way?'

'Yessir, all but one pair o' socks.'

'All right; we'll see to that another day. Show him where to put his bag and hammock, corporal, and tell him where his mess is. You'd better introduce him to the barber, too. I can't have the men of my division looking like a beauty chorus. — You,' he added, addressing Martin, 'had better get yourself thoroughly warm. We don't want you to start off by catching a chill.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Come along o' me,' said the ship's corporal gruffly; and Pincher, picking up his bag and hammock, followed him along the deck.

In another minute they were on the mess-deck. It was a strange place to Martin, accustomed as he was to the large and airy rooms in the barracks ashore. It seemed cramped and restricted. The steel beams supporting the deck above were barely eighteen inches over his head, and every inch of space seemed occupied with something or other. But a sense of order and cleanliness prevailed; for, though the ship was in dockyard hands, and the first lieutenant would have described the mess-deck as 'filthy,' it seemed specklessly clean to an outsider. The glare of the electric lights shone on the spotless white enamel and polished metal-work, and every inch of wood-work which was not varnished and polished was well scrubbed and white.

Moving along a narrow gangway about eight feet wide, they passed the officers' and men's galleys or kitchens. These were placed amidships, and the great cooking-ranges, newly blacked and with their polished steel knobs and utensils winking in the glare, vomited wisps of steam and savoury smells. The black-and-white tiled floors were spotless, and so were the wooden slabs upon which the meat and the vegetables were cut up. Farther forward came small, curtained-off enclosures serving as messes for the chief petty officers; and then, forward again, white enamelled steel bulkheads stretching from floor to ceiling.

Extending out from the ship's side, with its row of scuttles and wooden mess shelves and boot-racks, were numbers of white wooden mess tables and narrow wooden forms. They were spaced at precisely equal intervals, and at the end of each table was a neatly rolled strip of white linoleum which served as a tablecloth at meal-times, a couple of shining tin mess kettles, and a teapot. On the deck at the foot of each table was a bread-barge, a squat-shaped tub, to contain the bread belonging to the mess. The barges were all exactly similar, having scrubbed teak sides and polished brass hoops, with the number of the mess in neat brass figures, and each stood at precisely the same distance from its own table.

From the ceiling or deck overhead hung racks for the reception of the men's circular, black-japanned cap-boxes, and others for their white straw hats – each in its duck cover to keep out dust and dirt – and the newly scrubbed ditty-boxes. These, of white wood, are the receptacles in which sailors keep their small personal belongings. They contain, as a rule, photographs of wives, sweethearts, relations, and friends; letters; and other purely private and valued relics; but, though provided with a lock and key, it is an unwritten and invariable law of the mess-deck that they shall be left unlocked. A man must show his trust in his messmates, and a thief has no place on board one of his Majesty's ships. If petty pilfering does occur, there is no mercy for the culprit, and he is speedily discovered and removed.

It was a Saturday afternoon, and, as the ship was in dockyard hands undergoing a refit, more than half the men were on leave, and the mess-deck was comparatively empty. Those men who were left on board were spending the half-holiday in blissful slumber, for many of the tables and forms bore sleeping figures wrapped in blankets or greatcoats. They snored melodiously and in many keys.

Here and there a man writing a letter or reading looked up with some curiosity as Martin passed, but otherwise he attracted little attention. The advent of another ordinary seaman was too common an occurrence to call for remark, though to the ordinary seaman himself the day of his arrival on board his first seagoing ship would thereafter be mentally marked with a red figure in the calendar of his life.

The ship's corporal, anxious to resume his interrupted sleep in the police-office, hurried on; and soon, after climbing down one slippery steel ladder and up another, they arrived in the foremost bag-flat. This compartment was provided with tiers of numbered racks stretching from deck above to deck below. Each division in the racks held its own brown canvas or painted kit-bag, with the brightly polished brass tally on the bottom stamped with the owner's name, all the tallies being set

at precisely the same angle. The guide halted and pointed to a vacant space. 'There you are,' he said. 'That's where you stow your bag.'

Martin dropped his hammock, and after some difficulty succeeded in insinuating his bag into its appointed place.

'Ere, that won't do,' observed the ship's corporal, shaking his head with a pained expression on his face. 'Slew 'er round till the letters on your tally are 'orizontal. The first lootenant'll 'ave a fit if 'e sees it shoved in any'ow like that.'

Martin did as he was told, and when at last he had stowed his bag to the corporal's satisfaction, was taken to another flat somewhere in the bowels of the ship, where he was shown where to put his hammock.

He was next taken to his mess, and was introduced to the leading seaman who acted as senior member and caterer. This worthy, a ruddy-faced, heavily built man called Strumbles, was discovered asleep on the table, and was none too pleased when the ship's corporal tapped him on the shoulder and woke him up.

'Strumbles,' he said, 'ere's another O.D.³ come to join your mess. Martin's 'is name. Just keep an eye on 'im. 'E's a bit noo to the service. 'E wants 'is 'air cut, too, so you might send 'im along to the 'aircutter after tea.'

Strumbles sat up sleepily and signified his willingness to perform these favours, but the moment the corporal was safely out of sight glared unpleasantly at the new arrival. 'Bit noo to the navy, are yer?' he demanded. 'Name o' Martin, eh?'

'Yessir.'

'Don't call me "sir." My name's Strumbles. Nutty Strumbles they calls me. Is this yer first ship?'

'Yes.'

'Thought so. If it wasn't, you'd know better than to come wakin' up a bloke wot's 'avin' 'is Saturday arternoon caulk.'

'I'm sorry,' Martin stammered. 'It wusn't my fault. I didn't know' —

'Course you didn't. 'Owever, now you're 'ere you can just wake me up at seven bells. Know what seven bells is, eh?'

'Yes. 'Arf-parst three.'

'Right. At 'arf-parst three you wakes me up, an' when you done that you can go along to the galley an' wet the tea. Me, an' Ginger Strudwick, an' Nobby Clarke, an' one or two others, is the only blokes o' this 'ere mess aboard. Them two's on watch now, but they'll be down at eight bells clamourin' for their scran like a lot o' wolves; so look out you 'as it ready. When you've wetted the tea you can run along to the canteen an' git height heggs an' height rashers for our supper — I'll give you a *chit* for it when I wakes up; an' when you done that you can tidy up them there mess shelves an' polish the mess kettle an' teapot ready for the rounds to-morrow. Understan'?'

'Yes,' said Martin, hesitatingly.

'Orl rite, look out you does it, then,' remarked Strumbles, laying his head back and resuming his interrupted slumbers.

Martin began to feel rather sorry he had ever joined the navy, for as a young and very ordinary seaman on board a ship it appeared as if every one was his master. The recruiting posters which had been responsible for his entry had said something about 'seeing the world, with plenty of pocket-money.' This was what they meant, evidently. He sniffed dubiously. In the barracks where he had undergone his preliminary training he had been one of many others of his own age; but here he was cast entirely on his own resources. He felt lonely and miserable; nobody seemed to take any interest in him, and everybody ordered him about in a dictatorial way which he didn't like at all. He

³ O.D. = the slang term for 'ordinary seaman.' 'O.S.' is one official naval contraction, and 'Ord.' another. 'O.D.' is derived from the latter, in the same way as an able seaman is known as an 'A.B.'

gulped suspiciously, and then looked round with a nervous expression lest the slight sound should have awakened Strumbles.

When, seven months before, Martin had put on his bluejacket's uniform for the first time, he had felt immensely proud of himself. Everybody in his own small village had turned round to stare when he first appeared in it; and he was rather disappointed when, on his arrival in Portsmouth, people in the street neglected to notice him. He liked his jumper, with the V-shaped opening in front, and the blue woollen jersey underneath. He was proud of his blue jean collar with its three rows of narrow white tape, which, he had been told, commemorated Nelson's three great victories of the Nile, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar. He had heard, too, that the black silk handkerchief worn round his neck and tied in front was a badge of mourning for the same great naval hero. But both in the matter of the collar and the handkerchief he had been led into believing a very popular fallacy.

The square collar was first introduced in the latter portion of the eighteenth century as a means of preventing the grease and flour with which the sailors anointed their pigtailed heads from soiling their clothes. The three rows of tape, moreover, were placed upon it merely for ornament, for there is no evidence to support the belief that they commemorate the three famous victories. The black silk handkerchief came in at much the same time. In early sea-fights the heat on the gun-decks was stifling, so much so that the men were forced to strip to the waist. To prevent the perspiration from running down into their eyes and blinding them, they were in the habit of tying handkerchiefs round their foreheads, and at ordinary times these were worn round the neck for the sake of convenience. It is true that up till a few years ago our modern bluejackets wore their spare black silk handkerchiefs tied in a bow on the left arm when attending funerals; but there is nothing to support the theory that they were introduced as badges of mourning for the immortal Nelson.

But Martin believed these things implicitly, and perhaps, as it fostered the traditions of the service, it did him no harm.

Another portion of his attire of which he was inordinately proud was his bell-bottomed trousers. He firmly imagined that these had been introduced merely to give the sailor a rakish appearance, and was not aware that they were brought in so that the garments could conveniently be rolled up to the knee when their barefooted wearers were giving the decks their usual morning scrub.

Some few years ago a proposal was on foot to do away with the loose trousers, and to clothe the seamen in garments shaped like those in everyday use ashore. As a reason for the change it was urged, with some truth, that in modern ships the men seldom went barefooted, and that less flowing trousers would be less likely to catch in the intricate machinery with which modern ships were supposed to be crammed. But the storm of indignation with which the proposal was received by the men speedily caused it to be dropped. The seamen take no small pride in their nether garments; some of them even go to the trouble and expense of providing themselves with specially wide pairs in which to go ashore on leave.

The wide-brimmed straw hat, which constitutes the modern bluejacket's full-dress headgear, was first introduced in the West Indies early in the nineteenth century, but was not made an article of uniform until much later. Before that time, and up till thirty or forty years ago, shiny black tarpaulin hats, much the same shape as the straw 'boater' of commerce, were *de rigueur* in the navy. The term 'bluejacket,' too, owes its origin to the short, blue, brass-buttoned jacket – rather similar in shape to an Eton jacket, but with no point at the back – which was worn until 1891.

But all Martin's ideas as to his own importance were speedily knocked on the head. By the time he sought his hammock at nine-thirty on that first eventful day he had come to realise that he was very small beer indeed, a mere excrescence on the face of the earth; and that, like Agag, it behoved him to walk warily and with circumspection.

The captain of the fore-castle, Petty-Officer Casey – 'Mister Casey,' as he insisted on being called – had taken him to his bosom in a gruff, fatherly sort of way, and had given him a few words of advice.

'It's like this 'ere, me lad,' he had pointed out, but not unkindly. 'You're an ordinary seaman, an' wot you've got to do is to carry out other people's orders. If you're told off to do a thing, do it at once, an' cheerful like; don't slouch about th' ship like a ploughboy, nor yet a Portugee militiaman neither. 'Old yourself errec'; take a pride in yourself, an' obey all orders at the rush. If you gives no trouble I'm yer friend, remember that; but if you gits up agin me, an' starts givin' trouble, I won't raise a finger to 'elp you, an' you'd best stan' clear. Don't forget, neither, that I've got my eye on you the 'ole time; an' don't run away wi' the idea that you're doin' the navy a good turn by joinin', like so many on 'em do. It's the navy wot's doin' you a favour by 'avin' you. If you bears orl this in mind me an' you'll get along orl right, an' some day, p'r'aps, you'll be a petty-orficer the same as me.'

Martin remembered Casey's words of wisdom, and derived no small benefit therefrom.

CHAPTER II

THE DAILY ROUND

I

A considerable amount of art is necessary in laying out a kit for inspection; but when he had folded his clothes, and had placed the neat rolls and bundles, together with his cap-box, ditty-box, hairbrush, comb, toothbrush, type, and other small belongings, in the exact order prescribed by the clothing regulations, Martin was by no means dissatisfied with his attempt.

Now, Mr Midshipman Taut, R.N., was used to the wiles and deceptions of those men who would sooner do anything than purchase new clothes. He had known individuals who borrowed garments from their friends to make up for the deficiencies in their own kits when these were being inspected. Sometimes, to heighten the deception, they even went to the trouble of marking the loaned clothes with their own names. The regulations on the subject lay it down that blue articles shall be marked with white paint and white garments in black, each man being provided with a wooden type inscribed with his name for this purpose. But the gay deceivers had discovered that white chalk and ordinary boot-blackening were very efficient substitutes for the paint, for the temporary markings so caused could easily be brushed out before the garments were returned to their rightful owners after kit inspection. Moreover, unless the mustering officer was particularly inquisitive or suspicious, the chances were fully fifty-four to one that the deception would never be noticed.

But the midshipman, though he had left the college at Dartmouth less than a year before, was up to all these dodges. He kept the divisional clothing-book, wherein was recorded the contents of the bag of each seaman in the division, whether the clothes therein were in a state of thorough repair and cleanliness, and whether the condition of the man's hammock was 'V.G.', 'G.', 'Mod.' or merely 'Bad.' He regarded all men with a certain amount of suspicion unless he had positive truth that they were guileless; while newly joined ordinary seamen, in particular, were brands to be snatched from the burning.

'Serge jumpers?' he asked, sucking his pencil.

'Two 'ere, sir,' said Martin, holding up a couple of neat bundles; 'an' one on.'

The officer took one, unrolled it, and lifted the square collar to look at the marking underneath. There was no deception, for the name W. Martin stared at him in large white letters. He gently rubbed it with a finger, but it did not brush off; and, holding the garment up by its sleeves, he examined it with a critical eye. There was nothing the matter with it.

'That's all right,' he remarked, handing it back, and making a note in the book. 'Let me see your serge trousers.'

One by one the articles comprising Martin's kit, even down to his 'pusser's dagger' or seaman's knife, the more intimate garments of underwear, towels, socks, toothbrush, blacking-brushes, were minutely examined. The midshipman even went to the length of producing a tape measure, wherewith he measured the distance between the three rows of tape on the collars, the depth of the V-shaped opening in the front of the jumpers, and the width of the trousers at the foot. But nothing was really wrong. One pair of socks was missing and another required darning, one flannel shirt was unwashed, a pair of white duck trousers had been left unmarked, and one pair of blue serge ditto proved slightly wider in the leg than was permissible; but everything else was in good order and of the proper uniform pattern.

He seemed slightly surprised. 'Hm,' he observed, making further hieroglyphics in the clothing-book; 'not at all bad. Look out you keep it so.'

He went off to make his report to the lieutenant of the division, who presently arrived to make his own inspection. But he also was tolerably satisfied, and Martin was told that he could restore his belongings to his bag, and report himself to Petty Officer Casey for work.

For many a long day Pincher was sorely puzzled by the different varieties of uniform he was called upon to wear. They were all designated by numbers, and the 'rig of the day' was always piped at breakfast-time, when the men were allowed the necessary extra minutes to change their clothes. On Sundays, for instance, the boatswain's mates, after a preliminary twitter on their pipes, would bellow, 'Dress o' the day, No. 1, an' 'ats!' This meant that the men were required to array themselves in their best blue serge suits, with gold good-conduct badges and badges of rating, and their white straw hats, for the Sunday inspection by the captain. These garments constituted the seamen's full dress, for the expensive blue cloth trousers, worn over the jumper and tied behind with black silk ribbons, had been obsolete for some time. They are retained, however, in the royal yachts; and here, also, as a distinctive mark, the men wear their badges in silver and white, instead of the customary gold and red.

Dress No. 2, Martin found, was a similar rig to No. 1, except that a cap was usually worn instead of the hat, and the badges were red instead of gold. No. 3, again, was the same as No. 2, except that the jumper was not buttoned at the wrists; while No. 4 (known as 'night clothing') was an old suit of No. 3, worn without the collar. No. 5 was of white duck, and was worn without the collar, and with a white-topped cap. The suit was washable, and hence was usually donned by men doing dirty work or in hot weather in the summer. White caps, or blue caps with white covers, both of which were kept pipeclayed for the sake of appearance, were worn at home from May to the end of September, or with white clothing at other times.

The *Belligerent*, like every other large vessel in the navy, carried a stock of ready-made garments of various sizes, besides underclothing, boots, shoes, stockings, socks, shirts, collars, rolls of serge and flannel, and sixty-and-one other articles necessary to the bodily comfort and personal adornment of the ship's company. There was hardly a thing in the clothing line which could not be obtained from the paymaster; and the 'slops,' as they were called, were issued about once a month, their value being deducted from the men's pay.

When Martin joined his first ship, toward the end of 1913, ready-made garments, supplied by the Government, were almost universally worn. Within the past fifteen years or so the blue-jackets have lost much of their original handiness with the needle and the sewing-machine. It is hardly to be wondered at, for in the days of sailing-ships the men were sailors pure and simple. Now they are seamen-specialists, with an expert and highly technical knowledge of gunnery, torpedo-work, electricity, wireless telegraphy, signals, or some other highly important subject. They are essentially busy men, with little time to spend on making their own clothes. Twenty years ago one afternoon of the week (Thursday) was always set aside as a half-holiday, or 'make and mend clothes afternoon.' Then it was no uncommon sight to see the sheltered corners of the upper deck and mess-deck crowded with men, some busy with sewing-machines, making clothes from the raw serge or duck as issued from the store; others furbishing up their wardrobes; and the rest either sleeping or looking on. The term 'jewing,' as sewing is still called, came in because the men with the machines manufactured their shipmates' clothes for a consideration, such things as 'reach-me-downs' being still undreamt of. By Pincher's day, however, the 'make and mend' day had been altered to Saturday, to allow the men to indulge at intervals in the week-end habit. Moreover, most of the clothes were issued ready-made, being afterwards altered to fit individuals by the ship's tailors, seamen with sewing-machines, who had a special aptitude for the work, and were entitled to charge stipulated sums for their labours. They were still known as 'jews,' and, like the 'snobs' (bootmakers) and the barbers, often had considerable sums standing to their credit in the savings bank.

On the afternoon of the day on which he had had his kit inspected Martin found himself detailed as a member of a working-party told off to draw stores from the dockyard. Eleven other men went with him; and, taking a small hand-cart, the little expedition set off at one-thirty P.M. in the charge

of a petty officer. The rain had stopped, and it was a sunny winter day, with a touch of frost; and, as it gave him an opportunity of looking about him, Martin rather enjoyed the experience. Before joining the navy he had lived in the depths of the country, and had spent most of his days trundling the local baker's hand-cart. His experience of the sea and ships had been limited to a single visit to Skegness as a member of the village choir; and even during his training in the barracks he had seen practically nothing of men-of-war. Now for the first time in his life he came across battleships, cruisers, destroyers, torpedo-boats, and submarines at close quarters.

'Gosh!' he ejaculated, marvelling exceedingly.

'Ullo! Wot's up wi' you, Pincher?' asked another ordinary seaman, Hawkins by name. Martin had already been nicknamed, and 'Pincher,' he understood, was the sobriquet accorded to all men with his particular surname.

'I was only wonderin' to meself if' – he hesitated timidly.

'Wonderin' wot?' persisted his companion.

'Wonderin' if this wus the 'ole navy. There seems plenty o' ships 'ere.'

'Lawks, 'ark at 'im!' exclaimed the other youngster, going off into a shrill cackle of amusement 'Jist 'ark at 'im, you blokes! Arskin' if the 'ole navy is 'ere. 'Strewth! there ain't a quarter nor a 'undredth of 'em in this 'ere bunch.'

Martin, rather ashamed of his ignorance, reddened and nodded. 'Wot's that there?' he asked, changing the subject, and pointing to a gray, cigar-shaped vessel lying in a dry dock, with dockyard 'maties' swarming on board her.

'That there's a submarine,' Hawkins explained; 'one o' them there craft wot goes under water.'

'Gosh! She's a funny-lookin' thing. Wot sort o' blokes serves in 'em?'

'Matloes,⁴ Pincher, the same as you an' me. They doesn't carry O.D.'s, though; only A.B.'s an' E.R.A.'s,⁵ an' such like. They get extra pay for wot they does. It's a bit dangerous like.'

Martin thought for a minute, looking interestedly at the submarine as they trundled past. "Ow does men jine 'em?" he asked eventually.

"Ow does they qualify for 'em, d'you mean?" Hawkins queried.

Martin nodded.

'Well,' his neighbour explained, with a broad grin on his face, and inventing a still broader fiction on the spur of the moment, 'they fu'st ties a five-'underweight sinker to yer feet an' a rope round yer neck. Then they lowers you down to nineteen fathom, an' leaves you there for two minutes. – Let's see, Shorty,' he added, pretending to consider, and, turning to another ordinary seaman with a solemn wink, 'is it two minutes or three minutes they leaves yer down?'

'Three minutes, chum,' answered the other unblushingly.

'Well, they leaves you down three minutes, an' they pulls you up again, an' if yer nose ain't bleedin' they reckons as 'ow you're fit an' proper for submarines. If you are bleedin' you ain't no good – see?'

'That's a bit 'ard, ain't it?' Martin queried innocently.

'Yus, it is a bit 'ard,' Hawkins replied, without a smile on his face. 'But then, o' course, the men wot man the submarines 'as to be extra special sort o' blokes wot 'as got plenty o' guts.'

Martin drank it all in; but at that moment the story-teller's face failed him, and he burst into uncontrollable laughter. 'Oh Pincher!' he gasped, spluttering, 'I believes you'd swaller anythink any one tells yer!'

'D' you mean that wot you said ain't true?' Martin asked.

⁴ The term 'matlo,' derived from the French for 'sailor,' is always used by bluejackets in referring to themselves.

⁵ E.R.A. = engine-room artificer.

'Course it ain't, fat'ead. I wus only kiddin' yer,' guffawed the other, with tears of amusement trickling down his cheeks. 'Lawks! you'll be the death o' me yet. – Did yer 'ear wot he arsked, you blokes?'

But the 'blokes' had no opportunity of replying, for at that instant Petty Officer Simpson turned round. 'Not so much noise there!' he ordered abruptly. – ' 'Awkins, if I sees you larfin' an' shoutin' agen I takes you before the orficer of the watch when we gets back to the ship!'

Their faces fell. There was dead silence.

Rattling over the cobbled roadways and railway lines, they presently came to a store, where, in return for paper demand-notes handed in by the petty officer, they received sundry drums of paint, turpentine, and varnish. Then on again to another building, where an apoplectic-looking storekeeper condescended to allow them to load the cart still further with coils of rope and spun-yarn, and hanks of cod and mackerel line. Presently there came another stoppage to receive a bundle of broomsticks and some boathook staves. By this time the cart was heavily laden, and its manipulators were perspiring and far from cheerful; but, stopping again, they were solemnly presented with half-a-dozen shallow tin baths. They were the 'baths, sponge, thirty inches, pattern seventeen,' commonly seen suspended from the ceilings in the officers' cabins on board a man-of-war; and Martin, as he helped to drag the conveyance back to the ship, with the last consignment lodged precariously on the summit of the other articles and threatening every instant to descend in a noisy avalanche, wondered vaguely to himself if the dockyard was a sort of glorified general store, and if, by the simple presentation of a demand-note, they could obtain, say, half-a-dozen kippers or a cargo of tinned salmon. He was frightened to ask the question for fear of having his leg pulled again; but as everything in the way of ironmongery, furniture, ship's stores, paint, rope, and blocks seemed obtainable, why not also provisions?

They got back to the *Belligerent* without further incident, and the articles were carried on board and stowed in the various storerooms.

II

At first, until he got used to it, the regular routine of the ship was not altogether to Martin's liking. At five-thirty each morning they were all roused out of their warm hammocks by the strident shouting of the boatswain's mates and the ship's corporals. 'All hands! turn out, turn out, turn out! show a leg, show a leg, show a leg!' they yelled with insistent monotony. He soon learnt, from being shot violently out of his hammock, and from sundry threats of being taken before the officer of the watch for slackness in turning out, that it did not pay to disregard the noisy summons to wake up. Other men had tried the game, and it generally ended in their being turned out at five A.M. for several days together.

By five-forty-five, therefore, Martin had stowed his hammock, had given his face and neck a perfunctory dab with a damp towel, and was having a bowl of steaming hot ship's cocoa in his mess. Splendid stuff this, so thick that a spoon would nearly stand upright in it; and he little realised that the long-suffering cooks were turned out of their hammocks at about three each morning to prepare it. The cocoa was issued in large slabs the best part of an inch thick. It was the best of its kind; and though it required a deal of boiling, it was an excellent drink wherewith to start the day's work.

At six o'clock both watches were piped to fall in on the upper deck; and when parties had been told off for various other odd jobs, the rest of the men were detailed to scrub decks under the supervision of their petty officers. Cold work this, with the thermometer nearly down to freezing, the hoses spouting water, and one's feet bare and trousers turned up to the knee. Lines of men armed with hard, short-haired brooms went solemnly up and down, scrubbing as they went, and woe betide the hapless individual who did not exhibit the necessary energy! On Saturdays the routine was varied, for then the decks were sprinkled with sand and were well holystoned. This work was more back-breaking and chilly than ever, for one had to get down on one's knees and manipulate a heavy holystone in each hand.

When Martin joined, the ship was in dockyard hands, and a special routine was in force; and at seven o'clock, by which time the men who had been granted night-leave had returned, the decks had been finished and the guns cleaned. A quarter of an hour later the bugle sounded off 'Cooks,' when the men detailed as cooks of messes went to the galley to procure their own and their messmates' breakfasts; and at seven-twenty-five the boatswain's mates heralded the first meal by more shrill whistling, and the hungry men trooped below.

Breakfast, Martin always thought, was quite the most satisfactory meal of the day, and with the addition of a couple of canteen kippers, or eggs and bacon, he generally managed to acquit himself pretty well. The dietary of the modern bluejacket is a liberal one, while a paternal Government allows each man the sum of fourpence a day with which to purchase extra articles. An hour was allowed for the meal, for washing, for changing into the 'rig of the day,' and for smoking; and at eight-twenty-five the men were once more summoned to work. Shortly before nine o'clock the guard of marines and the band marched on to the quarterdeck; and when two bells struck, the marine bugler sounded the 'Attention,' the guard presented arms, the band played 'God Save the King,' and every officer and man on deck stood rigidly at the salute while the White Ensign was slowly hoisted. This ceremony is carried out at nine A.M. in winter, and an hour earlier in summer.

At nine-five came a warning blast on the bugle, followed five minutes afterwards by 'Divisions.' This was the usual morning muster, at which the entire ship's company – seamen, marines, stokers, and artisan ratings – fell in in their respective groups. The seamen themselves were divided up into four 'parts of the ship' – forecastlemen, foretopmen, maintopmen, and quarterdeckmen; and each was responsible for, and so far as possible manned, the guns in its own particular portion of the vessel. Each division, moreover, had its own lieutenant in charge, one or two midshipmen, and its quota of petty officers and leading seamen.

Now, Martin knew all about saluting. He had learnt how to do it by spending many weary hours in a windy barrack square at Portsmouth paying obeisance to a red brick wall under the horny eye of an irascible gunner's mate. He was aware that one saluted when addressed by an officer, when meeting an officer in uniform ashore, and the first time each morning one passed any particular officer on board ship. He had also been taught that it was customary to raise a hand to one's cap when the band played 'God Save the King,' and, for some reason unknown to him, whenever one had occasion to go on the quarterdeck. He was not aware that in medieval days the ship's shrine or crucifix was always kept on the quarterdeck under the break of the poop, and that, on passing, officers and men made an obeisance. Hence the origin of 'saluting the quarterdeck.'

But all this was nothing to the saluting which took place every morning at divisions.

The game started by the 'captain of the top' – the senior petty officer – calling the division to attention, saluting, and reporting it 'Present' to the midshipman, Mr Henry Taut. The midshipman, returning the salute, produced a notebook, mustered the men by name, and satisfied himself that the petty officer's statement was correct; and then, touching his cap, made known the fact to Lieutenant Tobias Tickle, R.N. The lieutenant, walking round the ranks, found fault with irregularities in the men's attire, or asked searching and personal questions as to when they had last washed, shaved, or had their hair cut, and requested the midshipman to make a note of the delinquents' names.

Taut acquiesced, with a salute.

The inspection complete, Taut saluted Tickle, and Tickle saluted Taut, and the lieutenant then walked aft to the quarterdeck, saluted as he reached it, approached the commander, saluted again, and reported his men 'Present.'

The commander returned the courtesy, and murmured, 'Thank you.'

When all the divisions had been reported present, the commander, in his turn, reported the fact to the captain, with another salute. The latter raised his hand to his gold-peaked cap and muttered, 'Carry on, please;' whereupon the commander held up his hand, a bugle blew, some one forward tolled a bell, the band on the after shelter-deck played a lively march, and the divisions marched aft to the quarterdeck for prayers. Here they were halted, and presently the chaplain appeared from one of the after-hatches, with his surplice flapping in the breeze. He did not salute. He was bareheaded.

'Ship's company! 'Shun!' from the commander. 'Off caps! Stand easy!'

The chaplain read the prayers, followed by the usual intercession for those at sea: 'O Eternal Lord God, who alone spreadest out the heavens, and rulest the raging of the sea; who hast compassed the waters with bounds until day and night come to an end: Be pleased to receive into Thy almighty and most gracious protection the persons of us Thy servants, and the fleet in which we serve. Preserve us from the dangers of the sea and from the violence of the enemy; that we may be a safeguard unto our most gracious Sovereign Lord King George and his Dominions, and a security for such as pass on the seas upon their lawful occasions.'...

'The dangers of the sea,' 'the violence of the enemy,' 'a safeguard,' 'a security.' The words conveyed little to Martin's mind when first he heard them. Less than a year later, in the autumn of 1914, he had come to learn their true meaning.

The short service was over by nine-twenty, and was followed by a quarter of an hour's hard physical drill, conducted by the lieutenants of divisions. This strenuous exercise was a daily feature of the routine, and there was no doubt that it kept the men in excellent condition. At any rate, Pincher was generally perspiring freely by the time it was over.

This finished, both watches were piped to fall in, and the various parties of men were detailed for the day's work. The commander, with a notebook, would be present on the quarterdeck, and would hold a hurried conversation with the first lieutenant, the gunner, the boatswain, and the carpenter, all of whom required men for the performance of various odd jobs.

'Party painting on the mess-deck yesterday, fall in aft!' would come the first order. A group of about a dozen men and a petty officer, clad in ancient, paint-stained overalls, would detach themselves

from the remainder. The first lieutenant, in charge of the mess-decks, gave his detailed orders to the petty officer, and he, in turn, doubled his men off to their work. 'Two hands from each part of the ship of the starboard watch, and a leading hand from the foretop, fall in aft!' The captain of the top told off the men, who were then taken charge of by the gunner – a warrant officer – who required them for restowing the small-arm magazine. Next the boatswain wanted a party, some for refitting rigging, and others for drawing stores from the dockyard; and, lastly, the carpenter took his toll for some purpose best known to himself.

The Royal Marines, meanwhile, had been sent down below to clean the flats, under the orders of their own non-commissioned officers; and when the various flat-sweepers and the mess-deck sweepers had been detached to their work, the remainder of the seamen were detailed for their labours, under the direction and supervision of their petty officers. There were always a hundred and one different jobs to be done. Nobody was ever idle in working-hours, and sometimes Martin found himself armed with a pot of gray paint and a brush to touch up bare portions of the superstructure. On other mornings he was detailed to scrape and red-lead rusty plates on the ship's side, or to holystone a particularly obstinate section of deck which was not quite up to the mark. At other times he found himself told off as assistant to a fully qualified A.B., one Joshua Billings, who was quite the best hand in the ship at splicing or putting an eye in a wire hawser, neither of which is a job for an amateur. Martin liked this sort of work, for he was keen and anxious to learn, and the able seaman taught him far more in an hour than he could pick up elsewhere in a fortnight.

The worthy Joshua, by reason of an inordinate thirst and capacity for malt liquor, had served in his present rank for seven years, and did not hesitate to give the youngster good advice. 'It's like this 'ere,' he would remark, deftly tucking in an obstinate strand of springy wire. 'It's beer wot's bin the ruin o' me, and I don't mind ownin' it. I've bin in the navy ten years come January, and most o' them men wot served along o' me as boys in the trainin'-ship is now petty oficers. I reckons I'm as good a man as they is aboard a ship; but, though I was rated leadin' seaman once, I dipped the killick⁶ abart six weeks later for comin' off drunk. It's beer wot done it; I can't keep orf it, some'ow, w'en I gits ashore. Give us that there ball o' spun-yarn, young fella.'

"Ard luck," Martin murmured, handing the spun-yarn across.

The hoary-headed old sinner shook his head and gave vent to a throaty sigh. 'No,' he said sadly, 'I reckons it wus orl right. The commander 'e sez to me, "Billings," 'e sez, "w'y is it you can't go ashore without gittin' a skinful?" "It's like this 'ere, sir," I tells 'im. "I 'as the rheumatics werry bad, an' as soon as I gits 'longside a pub I comes orl over a tremble, an' directly I gits inside I meets with hevil companions." "Rheumatics!" 'e sez. "I've 'eard that yarn before; an' has for your hevil companions, my man, you ain't a baby!" "No, sir," sez I, gittin' rattled, "I ain't; but directly I gits a pint inside me my legs orl gits dizzy like." "A pint!" sez 'e, werry surprised. "Surely it wus more'n a pint?" "Well, sir," I sez to 'im, "maybe it wus a quart; I can't 'xactly remember." "Several quarts, I should think," sez 'e, waggin' 'is 'ead; "you wus werry drunk." "No, sir, not drunk, only a bit shaky like," I sez, though I knowed orl the time I'd bin properly tin 'ats. "Well," 'e sed, shakin' 'is 'ead werry sad, "I should 'ave liked to 'ave given you another chance; but I'm afraid you ain't fit to be a leadin' seaman. You must go before the capt'in." I sees the owner, an' has a consequence wus dipped to A.B.; an' now I shall never be anythin' else. Sad 'istory, ain't it?' concluded Joshua sadly. 'But it's beer wot's done it, so look out you don't git meetin' with hevil companions.' He solemnly winked one eye.

Now, Joshua Billings, A.B., though officially a bad hat, was one of the best seamen in the ship when there was any work on hand, and the commander knew it. Only that fatal predilection for beer kept him from rising to the top of the tree. Martin took his advice to heart, and was rather proud to have him as a friend.

⁶ A 'killick' is an anchor, which is the badge worn by a leading seaman. 'Dipping the killick' means that the badge is removed, and that its wearer has been disgraced to A.B.

At ten-thirty in the forenoon came a ten-minute stand easy for smoking; after which work was resumed until eleven-forty-five, when the decks were cleared up and the bugle sounded 'Cooks.' At noon there was dinner, the staple meal of the day; and half-an-hour later the cooks of messes were summoned on deck to receive the allowance of grog for the members of their messes. The rum, mingled with its due proportion of water, was served out with some ceremony. It stood in a huge brass-bound tub bearing in brass letters the words, 'The King: God bless him;' and when the recipients had assembled in a long queue with their mess kettles and other receptacles, the liquid was solemnly measured out by the ship's steward, under the supervision of the warrant officer and the petty officer of the day. Martin, being under twenty, was not officially allowed to partake of the beverage. He tasted it once, and it made him cough and splutter.

At one-ten the bugle sounded 'Out pipes,' and the decks were cleared up; and at one-thirty the forenoon's work was resumed. At three-forty-five labour, except for odd jobs done by the watch on board, was over for the day; and at four o'clock came 'evening quarters,' a repetition of the morning 'divisions,' without the prayers and the music. Immediately afterwards the men went to tea, and the watch whose turn it was to go ashore were sent on leave till seven o'clock the next morning. Each man, provided his character was good, thus got leave every alternate night; but Martin, with the rest of the newly joined ordinary seamen, was not allowed out of the ship after ten P.M.

Saturday afternoon was generally a half-holiday, and a portion of the ship's company went away till seven o'clock on the following Monday; while on Sundays those men left on board had the usual service in the forenoon, and did no work that was not absolutely necessary.

Every day of the week supper came at seven-fifteen P.M., and after this the hammocks were piped down and were slung on the mess-decks. At eight-thirty came another clearing up of the ship, and at nine o'clock the commander, preceded by the master-at-arms with a lighted lantern, and followed by the sergeant-major of marines, made his final rounds of the ship to see that everything was correct for the night, and that the galley fires were extinguished. At ten o'clock the boatswain's mates 'piped down,' and everybody was chased off to his hammock. So ended the day.

III

In a mixed company of eight hundred and fifty odd souls, comprising seamen, marines, and stokers; boiler-makers, copper-smiths, and moulders; blacksmiths, plumbers, shipwrights, caulkers, carpenters, and joiners; butchers, bakers, and bandsmen; signalmen and telegraphists; ship's police, stewards, and writers – men of all ranks and ratings, of forty-and-one different trades and persuasions – it took Martin some little time to find his own level. The subtle little differences between the various grades and ranks were rather puzzling, and, as a new-comer fresh to the navy and its traditions, he was constantly making mistakes. At first he imagined that any one who wore clothes of the ordinary shore-going cut, with a collar and tie, was a person to be respected and called 'sir.' On one never-to-be-forgotten occasion he used the title in addressing a 'dusty-boy,' or ship's steward's assistant, a youth scarcely older than himself. For this he was seriously taken to book by his messmates, and had his leg pulled unmercifully.

Some of his shipmates, moreover, were not slow to take advantage of his ignorance as a 'softy' to amuse themselves at his expense. One ordinary seaman in particular, a fresh-complexioned Irish youth of bullying propensities, rejoicing in the name of Peter Flannagan, regarded a newly joined ordinary seaman as a gift sent from heaven for his especial amusement, though he himself had joined the ship only a few months before. He was for ever devising new schemes of petty persecution, until Martin's soul grew bitter, and he longed to retaliate. But Flannagan was larger and heavier than himself, and a direct assault could only end in defeat; so for a fortnight he stood the ragging without complaint, and nursed his grievance in silence. Then one morning he came late to breakfast to find powdered soap mingled with his food, pepper in his coffee, and Flannagan sniggering on an adjacent seat. He did nothing at the time, but that morning sought the advice of Joshua Billings.

That same afternoon Flannagan happened to be watch ashore. He had asked a messmate to sling a hammock for him, and when, at ten o'clock, he returned to the ship he promptly undressed and turned in. He had barely had time to get comfortably to sleep, however, when his foot lanyard gave an ominous crack. He knew what was about to happen, and tried to save himself, but in an instant found himself precipitated abruptly to the deck, feet first. Falling from a height of five odd feet, and landing in rather scanty attire across the sharp edge of a mess-table, is necessarily a painful business; and Martin, who was lying four tiers away, with one cautious eye peering over the edge of his hammock, could hardly restrain his merriment as the victim hopped round on one leg, swearing and rubbing a badly barked shin.

'Wot yer makin' all that bally row abart?' demanded the Irishman's next-door neighbour with a chuckle. 'Fallen out o' yer 'ammick, 'ave yer?'

'Did you cut me foot lanyard?' demanded the angry Flannagan.

'Me? Lord, no!' guffawed the other.

'Well, you knows 'oo did it, any'ow!'

'I knows nothin',' retorted the A.B., getting angry in his turn. 'If yer says I did it you're a bally liar. I'll give yer a clip 'longside the ear'ole if you ain't careful. Don't act so wet. Wot 'ave I to do wi' yer rotten 'ammick?'

'Some one's cut it,' the Irishman replied furiously, examining a clean cut through two strands of the rope. 'If it ain't you wot done it, you must know 'oo it was. 'Oo was it? tell us.' He looked round to see if anybody else was awake, but every one seemed to be snoring peacefully. Sailors are very heavy sleepers sometimes.

It took Flannagan fully a quarter of an hour to repair damages and turn in again. It was bitterly cold, and he cursed vehemently.

But his troubles were not over yet. Towards eleven-thirty, when he had got thoroughly warm and was dozing off, he felt an uncomfortable, prickly sensation down his back and legs. He sat up blinking,

and put a hand under the blanket to find a thin film of something warm and sticky. It resembled glue. The best part of a pound of finely ground brown sugar, cunningly insinuated between the bedclothes, is not a pleasant bedfellow. It melts with the heat of the body. The results are nasty in the extreme.

He leapt out, fuming. "Ere!" he shouted, violently shaking the A.B. next to him. "Ave you bin puttin' sugar in my 'ammick?"

'Look 'ere!' exclaimed the newly awakened man, 'I'm fair sick o' yer. I told you afore I 'adn't touched yer 'ammick, an' I sed I'd give yer a thick ear if yer went on worryin' me. Now I'm goin' to do it.' He hopped out, gave the astonished Irishman a box on the ear which sent him sprawling, and then stood over him with clenched fists. 'D'you want any more?' he asked grimly.

Flannagan did not.

Martin and the other men in the neighbourhood, meanwhile, had been waked by the disturbance, and were enjoying the fun. 'Go on, Ginger! Give 'im another!' somebody advised the A.B. 'Give 'im a clip under the lug! Slosh 'im one on the ruddy boko! Wakin' of us orl up at this time o' night!'

'Look 'ere, you blokes,' protested the still recumbent victim, 'some one 'as put sugar in my 'ammick!'

A roar of laughter greeted his words. His hearers were not sympathetic. They longed to see a really good fight, and there would have been more bloodshed if Flannagan, terrorised by the A.B.'s fists, had not thought discretion the better part of valour. He retired grumbling, to spend the rest of the chilly night on the hard mess-table, wrapped in a greatcoat.

At five-forty-five the next morning he sidled up to Martin, as the latter sat drinking his cocoa. 'Look 'ere!' he exclaimed aggressively, 'was it you wot done that to my 'ammick last night?'

'Done wot?' asked Pincher, grinning innocently.

'Cut my ruddy foot lanyard an' put sugar on my blanket,' the Irishman shouted, advancing threateningly with his fists clenched. 'I see'd yer larfin' last night, an' yer larfin' now. If it was you 'oo done it I'll' —

'Stop yer bloomin' noise, Paddy!' chipped in Strumbles, who was always inclined to be irascible in the early morning. 'If yer wants ter fight Pincher you'd best take 'im on in the dog watches arter tea, not at this un'oly hour o' the mornin'.'

'But if it was 'im wot cut' —

'Don't chaw yer fat!' growled the leading seaman, giving the Irishman a push in the chest. 'If it was Pincher wot done it, I reckons you arsked for it. If you comes makin' a row 'ere I'll land you one on the conk, so you'd best clear out!'

Popular opinion was evidently not on his side; and, seeing how affairs stood, Flannagan slouched off, vowing vengeance on some person or persons unknown.

But he never had his revenge; for, though he had a shrewd suspicion that Martin was somehow responsible for his discomfiture, he could never fix the blame on him for certain. The tables were turned at last, and Pincher suffered no further inconvenience at the hands of Peter Flannagan. The end had justified the means. Joshua Billings, A.B., was an adept at dealing with a young and bumptious ordinary seaman who made himself objectionable.

CHAPTER III

WORK AND PLAY

I

'Nice sort o' craft, isn't she?' growled the first lieutenant, eyeing the grimy collier lying alongside. 'Enough to break the heart of a plaster saint!'

Tickle, the junior watch-keeping lieutenant, nodded in agreement. 'She's broken mine already,' he observed dolefully. 'How on earth we're going to take in six hundred tons from her the Lord alone knows.'

Chase, the first lieutenant, refilled his pipe. 'I'd like to get hold of the blighter who charters these colliers,' he mumbled savagely. 'This one doesn't appear to have a winch that'll lift more than half-a-ton; and as for her hatches – lord! they're only the size of – of that.' He could think of no suitable simile, so held his hands out a couple of feet apart.

'You should just see her whips, No. 1,' put in the watch-keeper. 'They were new in the year one; used by Admiral Noah in the Ark, by the look of 'em. I tried to lift one of the cross beams in No. 1 hold just now. Took me about twenty minutes to get the winch to gee to start with. Then, when I'd gingered it up, and had got the beam in mid-air, the whip parted, and the whole caboodle came down with a crash. It would have gone clean through her bottom if there'd been no coal in the hold.'

'M'yes. I heard the yelling,' observed Chase. 'Any one hurt?'

'No. A silly young ass of an ordinary seaman – chap called Martin, who's just joined – jolly nearly got it in the neck, but not quite, luckily for him. It weighed the best part of half-a-ton, and it missed him by about six inches. He'd have been done in all right if his head had been in the way.'

'Silly blighter!' said the first lieutenant unsympathetically. 'What the dooce did he want to get in the way for?'

'Ask me another,' laughed Tickle. 'Some of these O.D.'s keep their eyes in the back of their head. However, this chap seems a bit better than some of 'em, though that's not saying much. He had the fright of his life, though, and won't do it again, I'll bet.'

The first lieutenant snorted.

S.S. *Ben Macdhui* certainly deserved all the strictures passed upon her by both officers. She was no chicken, merely a nine-and-a-half knot, pot-bellied monstrosity of a tramp built in the early 'eighties, which, by inadvertence on somebody's part, or through a shortage of more suitable craft, had temporarily been chartered as an Admiralty collier. She belonged to a small company who appeared to earn their dividends by buying all the old crocks of ships they could lay their hands upon, and then running them on the cheap, for all her gear and fittings were as elderly and unsafe as herself. Her middle-aged winches wheezed cheerfully, and vomited forth jets of steam, scalding water, and gouts of oil when they could be persuaded to revolve. Her derricks groaned and sagged perilously when they lifted half their proper load; while the less said about her coaling-whips – supposed to be brand-new two-and-a-half-inch steel wire of the best quality – the better. The officers and men were thoroughly in keeping with their ship. The former, according to their own account, had all seen better days; while the latter, bleary-eyed and stiff in the joints, looked more like a party of workhouse inmates than the crew of a British merchant ship. A more decrepit and ancient set of mariners it would be impossible to find. They all had bald heads, several were grandfathers with flowing white whiskers – when they washed; but then, of course, Messrs Catchem & Flintskin preferred men of experience to mere scatter-brained youngsters. They were more reliable, they said; but they also got them cheaper, and their appetites were smaller.

The 'Belligerents' swore lustily when the venerable *Ben Macdhui* secured alongside. The commander shared their feelings; while the first lieutenant – who was in general charge of the collier during coaling – nearly wept, and retired to the wardroom to seek liquid consolation. The lieutenants in charge of the holds, who would have to bear the brunt of the whole business if the coal did not come in at its usual rate, cursed long and loud. They were all justified, poor souls, for a bad collier may mean a long coaling; and a long coaling in the winter is the 'perishin' limit,' as some one put it.

The collier came alongside before dark, and that evening new whips were rove, derricks were rigged and topped, bags and shovels were brought up from the dim recesses of the *Belligerent's* bowels and distributed among the holds, the battleship's deck was brushed over with a moist mixture of sand and lime to prevent the coal-dust from soaking in, and all paintwork on the upper deck was swathed in canvas for the same reason.

Martin, as Lieutenant Tickle has already explained, had nearly lost the number of his mess when assisting in the collier. He thought his narrow escape was deserving of a certain amount of sympathy, but precious little he got. He was bluntly called a ' – young fool,' and asked 'why the – he wanted to get his – head in the way.' Even his messmates laughed at him, for to all bluejackets a miss is as good as a mile. In the course of their careers, even in time of peace, they look death in the face so often as to be utterly unmindful of narrow squeaks. Their calling is essentially a risky one, and to become inured to danger is part and parcel of their training. If a man has a close shave he is chaffed unmercifully; if he is killed, his shipmates express their sympathy, shrug their shoulders, attend the funeral with tears in their eyes and a glass case of wax flowers in their hands, and subscribe their shillings and pennies toward providing for the widow and children. It is all in the day's work.

Punctually at five-thirty the next morning, while it was yet dark, the boatswain's mates were piping, 'Clear lower deck! 'Ands fall in for coaling ship!' and officers and men, clad in the oldest and grimeiest of garments, repaired to the quarterdeck. Coaling ship was always a 'clear lower deck' evolution, and nobody was excused except a few privileged officers and men.

On the quarterdeck was the commander; and presently, when the men had been reported present, he gave them a few words.

'Men,' he said, 'we've got a bad collier this time, just about the worst thing in colliers I've ever seen. We have six hundred tons to take in, so let's see if we can't make an evolution of it. We've been a pretty good ship for coaling up to date, remember, so don't let us spoil our good record now. Coal ship!'

The groups of men scattered and fled to their several stations. The forecastlemen, foretopmen, maintopmen, and quarterdeckmen repaired to their respective holds in the collier, where they were divided up into gangs of five for shovelling the coal into the two-hundredweight bags, which were hoisted on board ten at a time. The 'dumping-ground parties,' composed principally of artisan ratings like the carpenter's mates, shipwrights, plumbers, and blacksmiths, were sent to the places on the battleship's deck where the hoists would presently be coming in. Their duty was to unhook and unstrap the bags as they arrived, and to place them on the barrows, which were then trundled to the various bunker-openings in the deck by the Royal Marines. Here the bags were seized by the 'tippers,' and their contents emptied down the shoots into the bunkers below, where they were stowed by the stokers doing duty as 'trimmers.' The empty bags were collected by a number of ordinary seamen and boys, who returned them to the holds in the collier; and woe betide these youths if the men digging in the holds were delayed through a shortage of empties!

Practically all the officers coaled with their men. The commander was in general charge of the whole operation, while the first lieutenant exercised supervision in the collier. The lieutenants and midshipmen of divisions worked with their men in the holds; while Vernon Hatherley, the lieutenant-commander (T.), clad in an ancient Panamá hat and a suit of indescribable overalls, acted the part of traffic manager on the upper deck. He had the assistance of a couple of midshipmen, and among them they organised the movement of barrows between the dumping-grounds and the bunker-openings,

so that no two streams moving in opposite directions should come into sudden and violent contact, and so cause a congestion in the traffic. The captain of marines, Hannibal Chance, supervised his barrow-men, and, assisted by the sergeant-major, exhorted them when they became languid. Nearly every other officer in the ship, save only the fleet surgeon, the fleet paymaster, the surgeon, and the assistant-paymasters, was in charge of something or other. The lieutenant-commander (N.), Christopher Colomb, otherwise the navigator, kept the 'day on' as officer of the watch; while even the chaplain, the Reverend Stephen Holiman, set an example by shedding his clerical garments and trundling a barrow. The men loved seeing Holy Joe 'sweatin' hisself,' as they put it; but, for all that, they voted him a good fellow, and he was immensely popular on the lower deck.

Martin found himself detailed as a member of one of the gangs of diggers in the forecastle's hold. The work of shovelling the coal into bags was back-breaking, for no two consecutive shovelfuls were exactly the same weight; in addition, he found it extremely difficult to keep his footing. The confined space reeked of coal-dust, and before long he and his companions were jet-black from head to foot. He breathed the fine powder down into his lungs. He perspired profusely. His back, shoulders, arms, and thighs ached with the strain; but he was game, and managed to struggle on somehow. Five other gangs were at work besides his own. Each one was responsible for a hoist of ten bags, and had to have them filled and strapped together by the time the whip was ready to hoist them. They occasionally had a few minutes' rest between the hoists, but otherwise the work went on continuously; and it was a point of honour that the whip, which visited all the gangs in rotation, should not be kept waiting. If there was any undue delay in hooking on, there were loud shouts from above, and angry, nautical exhortations from the lieutenant, midshipmen, and petty officers working in the hold.

It was sultry work, very sultry, though it was winter. The dust was so thick that the powerful arc lights could only be seen in a blurred glare across the hold. Jet-black figures whirled in and out of the murky cloud like demons on the brink of the nethermost pit. Shouts of 'Stand from under!' and empty bags came from the deck above; and every now and then there came a shrill screech on a whistle, a frenzied shout of 'Mind your backs! Stand clear!' a frantic clattering from the long-suffering winch, and a hoist would go hurtling, swinging, and banging across the hold as the wire whip strained and tautened out. The labouring men would spring aside to get clear, for a ton of coal in the small of the back will send a twelve-stone man flying, and may cause him serious injury. But still the work went on without a stop, and hoist after hoist left the hold, disappeared in the darkness above, swung through space, and finally landed with a thud and more shouts on the battleship's deck.

The *Ben Macdhui* was certainly a bad collier. Twice during the first hour did two of her winches break down, and each time they caused a delay of fully twenty minutes. Another time a block on the head of a derrick carried away, and the suspended hoist fell back into the hold with a crash, knocking over two men. They were not seriously hurt, and picked themselves up with many full-blooded sea oaths, to resume their work as if nothing had happened.

The 'Belligerents' prided themselves on their coaling. With a good collier they had been known to average one hundred and seventy-seven tons per hour; but this time they had only embarked one hundred and ninety-eight by eight o'clock, at which time there came half-an-hour's respite for breakfast. They had been at it since about five-forty (two hours twenty minutes), and the commander was not at all pleased. But even he realised that it was not the fault of the men. 'Bad!' he growled. 'Damned bad! We're only averaging eighty-four point eight an hour. What can one do with a collier like this?'

During breakfast-time, wardroom, gunroom, and mess-decks were invaded by hordes of black-faced demons, ravenous and clamouring for food. Some of the more fastidious among them had washed their hands and had cleared a circle of grime from about their mouths; but time was short, and most of them had not troubled to do even this. Officers' messes, cabins, and mess-decks were pervaded with the strange, penetrating smell of coal. The dust hung and lodged everywhere, and even

the porridge, eggs and bacon, and milk were covered with films of black powder. But what did it matter? They were hungry, and the food tasted just as good, dust or no dust.

At eight-thirty work was resumed, and the ship's company, rejuvenated by breakfast, set to with redoubled energy. The *Belligerent's* once white deck was covered with black dust, caked by the wheels of the barrows. Officers and men alike were black from head to foot; but still the hoists crashed in, still the barrows flew round the deck, and still the coal went tumbling down the shoots into the bunkers. On the after shelter-deck the bandsmen were doing their share of the work by braying out the latest music-hall songs; but even their strident and not very tuneful efforts could only be heard at intervals in the clatter of the winches and the hollow rumble of the barrows.

The best hour's work was done between ten and eleven, when one hundred and twenty-four tons were taken in, and shortly before noon the full six hundred had been embarked. The bugle sounded the 'Cease firing,' the last hoists of empty bags and shovels came clattering inboard from the collier with throaty cheers from the tired men, and swarms of bluejackets set about lowering the derricks and unrigging the gear.

Soon afterwards, when the *Ben Macdhui's* chief engineer had raised sufficient steam in his tin-pot boiler to revolve the engines, and when the ancient crew could be induced to bestir themselves, the collier let go her wires and waddled off. The 'Belligerents' cheered and waved ironical farewells as she departed. They were heartily glad to see the last of her.

'Gosh!' muttered Martin, with a heartfelt sigh, as he watched her go from the forecastle, 'I ain't sorry that job's done!' His back ached, and he felt very weary. He also wanted his dinner.

Able Seaman Billings heard his remark and smiled. 'Garn!' he jeered good-naturedly; 'this 'ere coalin' ain't bin nothin', only six 'undred ton. You wait till we joins up wi' the fleet, me lad, w'en we coals once a fortnight reg'lar.'

It was quite true, as Martin afterwards discovered.

That afternoon, armed with the hose, scrubbers, and soap, they set about cleaning the ship, themselves, and their clothes. Coal-dust seemed to be everywhere; it had lodged in every nook and cranny, but by dark most of it was removed and the battleship was looking more or less like her old self. So ended Martin's first experience of 'coaling ship,' an evolution which subsequently was carried out with such frequency that it became a mere incident.

The next day they took in ammunition and explosives enough to send a whole squadron of Dreadnoughts to the bottom. Innocent-looking lighters and barges, crammed to the hatches with shell for the twelve-inch, six-inch, and smaller guns; cases of cordite-cartridges; boxes containing the copper war-heads for the torpedoes, filled with gun-cotton; small-arm ammunition; gun-cotton charges in cylindrical red-painted cases, and detonators, came alongside in the early morning while it was yet dark.

Soon after eight o'clock the work began. It was preferable to coaling, as it was cleaner; but the labour was very strenuous. There were three lighters on each side, and each had its own party of men employed in hooking on the projectiles and metal cordite-cases, which were then hoisted on board by the battleship's winches. Other men on deck with barrows transported the shell and cases as they arrived to square hatches in different parts of the deck, through which they were lowered to the magazines and shell-rooms in the bowels of the ship, to be stowed in their proper racks, bays, and compartments.

The great eight hundred and fifty pound projectiles for the twelve-inch guns dwarfed all the others, and they were slung inboard singly on account of their weight. The hundred-pound shell for the six-inch guns came in in canvas bags a couple at a time, while the lighter projectiles for the smaller weapons were hoisted in consignments.

Such a variety of shell there was! Some had bright-yellow bodies with red bands round their middles, and sundry stencil-marks on their sides denoting the date and place of manufacture, date of filling with explosive, and other purely personal details. These were the lyddite high-explosive shell

Martin had often heard about; and he was informed, by an A.B. who was lowering them below as if they had been mere sacks of potatoes, that they burst into thousands of minute fragments on impact, and that they were designed primarily for use as man-killing projectiles against the unarmoured portions of an enemy's ship. Then there were the common shell with black-painted bodies and red-and-white bands round their noses. They, too, were deadly in their way, but not quite so deadly as the lyddite, since they were filled only with black powder, and did not burst so violently on striking. The armour-piercers were also black, and had white-red-white bands round their heads. They, Martin was told, had very thick walls and specially toughened points, and were designed to bore their way through an enemy's armoured sides and to burst inside. Then came the shrapnel shell for the lighter guns, with their red tips and red bands; they were provided with a small bursting charge, were filled with bullets, and had time-fuses, so that they could be burst in the air at any moment, to send their leaden bullets flying on over a cone-shaped region of destruction. The practice projectiles were black, with yellow bands round their middles and white tips. They were quite harmless, being made of cast-iron, with small quantities of salt inside to bring them up to the exact weight.

It was quite six o'clock in the evening by the time the ammunition had all been taken in, and even then there were many hours' work in stowing the shell, cordite, and explosives in their several shellrooms and magazines.

The next morning, at cock-crow, they started another very similar job, taking in slops and stores of provisions from the victualling yard. This time the deck was littered with bundles of clothing done up in sacking, bags of flour, boxes and cases containing boots, shoes, straw hats, caps, biscuits, condensed milk, tea, coffee, chocolate, jam, preserved meat, tinned salmon and rabbit, mustard, pepper, salt, raisins, rice, dried beans and peas, pickles, suet, compressed vegetables, oatmeal, split peas, celery-seed for flavouring pea-soup, soap, and tobacco. There were also casks or drums of rum, vinegar, and sugar. The total consignment ran into well over a hundred tons dead weight, and all the hundred and one different articles had to be hoisted on board, sorted out, transported, and stowed in their proper storerooms.

The ship's steward and his assistant 'dusty boys' had a very busy day. Quite early in the proceedings a flour-bag burst like a shell and deluged the steward with its contents. He was powdered from head to foot, and remained so for the rest of the day; and the little runnels of perspiration running down his whitened face made a strange criss-cross pattern which transformed his ordinarily rubicund countenance into a very fair representation of a map of the planet Mars, with all the canals clearly marked. His appearance caused titters of amusement and howls of derisive merriment when his back was turned, as, armed with an enormous note-book and a sheaf of coloured pencils, he flitted in and out of the piles of boxes and packing-cases like a lost soul. He was endeavouring to trace odd cases of raisins, or errant boxes of jam or pickles, and looked very worried, poor man! At any rate, it was hardly safe to talk to him, for finding the mislaid things among the heaps of barrels, drums, cases, and boxes, which covered the deck in places to a height of fully five feet, was for the time being rather like searching for a pebble on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

II

The *Belligerent* was a 'Pompey'⁷ ship. Many of her officers and men had their homes in or near the port, so the 'funny party' – otherwise the ship's concert troupe – prevailed upon the first lieutenant, their honorary president, to petition the commander for permission to give a farewell entertainment on board the evening before they sailed to rejoin the squadron.

The commander, with visions of endless trouble in rigging a stage for the performance, and the sacred quarterdeck being littered with cigarette-ends, banana-skins, and orange-peel, was not altogether pleased at the prospect. 'They want to give a show!' he said, in surprise, when the first lieutenant mooted the subject. 'Great Scott! they must be mad. It's mid-winter. Suppose it's raining or blowing a gale o' wind?'

'Yes, sir. I pointed that out to them,' answered No. 1. 'I quite realise there are serious objections. They're so jolly keen on it, though, that I couldn't choke 'em off.'

'And they propose that we shall bring all the guests off in our boats, eh?'

Chase nodded. 'They do, sir,' he said. 'But I'll take the management of all that off your hands if you'll let me. They want the show to start at eight o'clock.'

'The devil they do!' laughed the commander, beginning to relent. 'You'll have to cut the encores, though. It'll have to be over by ten-fifteen at the latest. We're sailing the next morning.'

'I'll see to that, sir.'

'Are the officers and their wives to be asked?' the commander wanted to know.

'Oh yes, sir. They specially mentioned that.'

'Well, for goodness' sake censor the programme. Last time we gave a show and had ladies on board, one of the songs was altogether too – er – spicy. I can't remember who sang it, but one of the captain's guests was very much shocked. For heaven's sake make certain it doesn't occur again!'

'Yes, I'll do that, sir,' smiled No. 1, with vivid recollections of the incident.

'All right. I'll ask the captain, then. I don't expect he'll object. You'd better tell me beforehand how many boats you want to bring the people off, and I'll leave all the rest in your hands.'

'Thank you, sir.'

The captain raised no objections; and on the afternoon of the entertainment the carpenter and his men, assisted by the members of the 'funny party' and many willing volunteers, set about preparing the quarterdeck. The day, luckily, was fine, but bitterly cold. A temporary stage, built up of planks placed upon biscuit-boxes, was rigged right aft athwartships. It was provided with the necessary scenery painted on board, was decorated with flags and coloured bunting, and was flanked by a brightly polished twelve-pounder gun and a Maxim on their field-carriages. The awning overhead was shrouded in enormous foreign ensigns, while canvas side-curtains were laced all round the quarterdeck to keep off the wind. Seating accommodation for several hundred people was provided by bringing all the available stools from the mess-decks, and placing them in rows on the deck and the top of the after-barbette with its two 12-inch guns. The first two rows of stalls, so to speak, were reserved for the officers, and consisted of arm-chairs and other chairs borrowed at the last moment from the officers' cabins and messes.

By seven-forty-five the preparations were complete, and the guests were beginning to arrive. As they stepped over the gangway they were claimed by their respective hosts, presented with printed programmes, and conducted to seats. By seven-fifty-five the last boats had come off, and the quarterdeck was tightly packed with men and their female belongings. They were all very much on their best behaviour, talked in hushed, expectant whispers, and spent the time criticising their neighbours and admiring the drop-scene.

⁷ 'Pompey' is the naval slang term for Portsmouth.

The drop-scene was a truly terrific representation of the *Belligerent* in action. It had been painted on board, and the artist had allowed his colours to run riot. The sea, well covered with shell-splashes, was very, very blue, and so was the sky. The ship herself, with flaunting White Ensigns hoisted everywhere, was fiercely blazing away with every gun at some invisible enemy over the horizon. Here and there the blue expanse of sky was punctuated with large yellow and white blotches. Whether or not they represented clouds, the bursting of hostile shell, or cordite smoke, nobody but the artist could say. They did equally well for any one of them. At the bottom was an elaborate scroll, royal blue in colour, inscribed with the battle honours of previous *Belligerents* in gold letters; while in the centre came the ship's crest and motto, '*Ut Veniant Omnes*' the Latin equivalent of 'Let 'em all come!'

Before long the guests thawed a little, and the place began to hum like a beehive. The ladies produced chocolate and other edibles from handbags, and thrust them on their neighbours in token of friendship. The men lit pipes and cigarettes until the air was blue with tobacco-smoke. Martin, with several other youngsters, had installed himself in an excellent position on the top of the after-turret, and waited anxiously for the performance to start.

The chattering ceased as the orchestra filed out from the wings and took their places behind a zareba of bunting-covered biscuit-boxes and hired palms erected in front of the stage. They all wore their best tunics, had their hair well parted and greased, and seemed very full of their own importance. They concealed themselves behind their barricade until only the tops of their heads were visible, leaving the bandmaster perched precariously on a chair set on a couple of rather insecure boxes. He wore a brand-new pair of white gloves in honour of the occasion, twirled his moustache, and tried hard not to look self-conscious.

'Swanker!' came a loud and very raucous remark from the top of the after-turret. Martin, greatly daring, but carried away by the excitement of the moment, had been responsible for the utterance. He looked round apprehensively, half-expecting to get into trouble for his temerity; but every one seemed quite pleased. The audience was actually tittering. The titter became a laugh, and the laugh a roar of delighted amusement. The bandmaster, with his back to the gathering, seemed rather agitated. He half-turned on his chair, thought better of it when it gave a dangerous wobble, and then pretended he had not heard.

The culprit, undiscovered save by his immediate neighbours, hugged himself at the success of his sally.

A minute later, when the band began to tune up for the overture, the first lieutenant appeared from one of the after-hatches. He had the reputation of being a 'taut hand;' but the men loved him dearly, and his arrival was the signal for a volley of cheers and hand-claps. He faced the audience nervously, bowed and smiled, and then, watch in hand, walked across to the bandmaster and held a whispered conversation.

Other officers came up the after-hatches and filed into their places. They were greeted with round after round of applause, as, very red in the face and very uncomfortable, they settled down in their seats. The *Belligerent* was notoriously a happy ship, and on occasions of this kind her ship's company were not slow in showing their appreciation for their officers.

The captain had been having a dinner-party in his cabin for some of the married officers and their wives; and he, the commander, the engineer-commander, the fleet surgeon, Hatherley, and Tickle, with their respective wives, arrived last. They, too, received their share of cheers while taking their seats. The captain, however, remained standing, and held up his hand for silence.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said when the uproar had subsided, 'I am very glad to see you all here to-night, and I hope you will enjoy the entertainment. The first lieutenant asked me to sing you a song myself, but I'm afraid I'm getting too old for that sort' —

Loud cries of 'No, no!' and more cheering.

'I am,' he continued, laughing, 'though you may not believe it. What I want to tell you is that I have arranged for light refreshments to be served in the battery during the interval, so I hope you will all – er – do full justice to them.'

Loud cheers, during which Captain Spencer sat down and nodded to the first lieutenant for the entertainment to begin.

The latter rose from his chair and glanced at his programme. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'the first item on the list is a selection by the band. It is called – er – "Down Channel," and has been specially composed for the occasion by Mr Johnson, the bandmaster.' He sat down again.

The bandmaster rapped twice with his baton, and with a rattle of drums the music began. The selection was a strange pot-pourri of every nautical song that Mr Johnson had ever heard. It started off with a variation of 'Hearts of Oak,' wandered into 'The Bay of Biscay,' 'Tom Bowling,' 'They all love Jack,' and several other tunes, ancient and modern, and finished off with 'The Red, White, and Blue' and 'Rule Britannia.' It was hardly original, but it was received with vociferous applause. The bandmaster, highly satisfied, turned and bowed his acknowledgments with great dignity.

'The next item on the programme,' said the first lieutenant, rising to his feet again, 'is a comic song entitled "Archibald," by Stoker Williams.'

The footlights were turned on, and the curtain went up to disclose Stoker Williams dressed in the height of fashion. He wore a morning coat, gray trousers, patent-leather boots and spats, eyeglass, immaculate shirt, collar, and tie. He represented, it would seem, a young man about town looking for a friend named Archibald. Presumably he had some difficulty in finding him, for he walked mincingly across the stage, grasping a cane and a pair of gloves in one horny hand, and in the other a very glossy top-hat, which he twirled violently when the spirit moved him. The first lieutenant fidgeted uneasily. The hat, a brand-new Lincoln & Bennett, belonged to him. So did the clothes. The chorus of the song went something like this:

Har-ar-chibald! Har-ar-chibald!
Son of a belted hearl.
Har-ar-chibald! Har-ar-chibald!
I'll bet 'e's mashin' 'is girl.
'E promised to meet me at 'arf-past three;
But 'e's such a nut that 'e's gone on the spree,
With 'is girls, girls, girls.
(Spoken) 'Har-ar-chibald! where are you?'

The words were not conspicuous for their wit or cleverness, but the tune went with a swing, and the audience, highly appreciative, rocked with laughter; and after the performer's 'Now all together, please,' at the end of the first verse, joined in the inane chorus until the roar of 'Har-ar-chibald! where are you?' could have been heard as far as the dockyard gates.

The song eventually came to a close with Archibald still missing, and Stoker Williams, very pleased with himself, left the stage amidst clapping, cat-calls, and loud cries of 'Encore!' But encores were barred, and the curtain came down with a crash.

The next turn was by the P.T.I. (Physical Training Instructor). He was a magnificently built man, and appeared, despite the weather, clad in flesh-coloured tights, sandals, and an imitation tiger-skin. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, advancing to the front of the stage and addressing the audience in the approved music-hall manner, 'with your kind indulgence I will now introduce a few lifting feats without apparatus of any kind. After that I shall have pleasure in giving a display with the Indian clubs. For the first part of my performance I must ask a member of the audience weighing at least ten stone to join me on the stage.'

After some hesitation and tittering, the challenge was presently accepted by Able Seaman M'Sweeny. Tubby, as he was called by his shipmates, was a short, rotund, and very bulbous person, who was a source of unfailing amusement to his friends. He had a fat red face rather like an apple, and a pair of humorous blue eyes; and, being something of a buffoon, was delighted at the idea of making himself conspicuous. He pretended to be very nervous, left his seat amid shouts of laughter and cries of 'Good old Tubby boy!' from the lookers-on, and presently appeared on the stage with the P.T.I.

'This gentleman informs me that he weighs thirteen stone,' said the P.T.I., producing a broad strap; 'one hundred and eighty-two pounds. I first place the strap round him, so' – buckling it round Tubby's middle – 'and will now ask him to lie flat on the deck in the centre of the stage.'

This was rather more than M'Sweeny had bargained for, for he guessed what was coming next. But he acquiesced nevertheless, and, turning his funny face toward the audience with a solemn wink, began to agitate his arms and legs as if he were swimming.

Martin, on the verge of hysterics, was slowly becoming purple in the face. He had never seen anything quite so funny in all his life.

'Look at our Tubby boy!' came another loud remark from a youth seated near him. 'Ain't 'e the limit?'

The P.T.I., seeing that Tubby was getting all the applause, became very wroth. 'Look here!' he growled in a very audible whisper, 'is this your turn or is it mine? Knock off playing the fool, can't you!'

The victim, breathing heavily and balanced on his most prominent part, with the tips of his toes just touching the floor, looked up with a grin. 'Ere,' he asked loudly, 'w'ere do I come in?'

The audience rocked in their seats, with tears streaming down their faces.

'Shut your fat head!' whispered the gentleman in the tiger-skin. – 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he went on, producing another short strap fitted with a stout hook, 'I hook this into the strap passing round the gentleman's body, so, and shall now carry him round the stage in my mouth.'

The 'gentleman' seemed distinctly nervous, but it was too late to back out now.

The band broke into slow music. The P.T.I., bent down, seized the strap in his mouth, and, bracing himself with his hands on his knees, lifted M'Sweeny a few inches off the floor. Then, with another heave which very nearly precipitated his victim and himself into the middle of the orchestra, he swung his burden waist-high, and staggered slowly round the stage with his back bowed and his muscles bulging.

Tubby, suspended by his centre of gravity, hung limply, with drops of perspiration trickling off his face. He was desperately alarmed lest he should be dropped with a crash, poor man!

The P.T.I., who, judging from his stertorous breathing, had undertaken more than he had bargained for, tottered once round the stage, and then went to the side and lowered his prey gently to the floor out of sight of the audience. At the same time the big drum gave a prearranged and very resounding crash. The audience laughed themselves hoarse, and cheered uproariously. After sundry other feats of strength with a long wooden bar from which depended the limp figures of two Royal Marines, one ordinary seaman, and one stoker, the performer gave his club-swinging display with lively music from the band. It was quite effective, and came to a close with great *éclat*.

The next item was a very doleful sentimental ditty about a lonely robin. It was sung by an intensely serious A.B., and the bird, it appeared, was on terms of great intimacy with a lady suffering from an incurable disease, who was slowly dying in the top back-room of a cottage. Every morning at breakfast-time the robin appeared on the window-sill; but on one memorable occasion he came rather late, to find the undertakers in the house. The shock unnerved him to such an extent that he died too, poor bird! It was so intensely pathetic that some of the ladies in the back-rows actually wept. The two rows of officers and their wives blew their noses and hid their faces in their programmes. Their shoulders shook visibly, but not with grief.

'The next thing,' said the master of ceremonies – rather perturbed because the last man had exceeded his appointed time by three minutes – 'is a song called "Slattery's Mounted Foot," by the members of the troupe.'

The curtain went up to show a man clad more or less as a soldier. He wore a marine's red tunic, baggy blue trousers with broad yellow stripes, a cocked hat with an enormous plume, a naval cutlass, and a pair of leather sea-boots with huge tin spurs. He sang the first verse of a song amidst much amusement, and then started the rollicking chorus:

Down from the mountains came the squadrons and platoons,
Four-and-twenty fighting men and a couple of stout gossoons.

At the cue 'squadrons and platoons' the Mounted Foot, riding home-made hobby-horses with flowing manes and tails, galloped on to the stage. Their appearance was the signal for a volley of shouts and laughter, in which the music was quite inaudible, and truly they were comical. There were six others besides the first man, who, it would appear, was General Slattery himself. They all wore burlesque military uniforms. One was a hussar, another a lancer, a third a soldier in a British line regiment, a fourth an Indian cavalryman with lance and turban all complete, a fifth a cross between a Chasseur d'Afrique and a Chinese brave, and the last an artilleryman. The *pièce de résistance* was the artillery itself, for the last man to arrive led the very unwilling Nellie, the ship's pet pig, to which was attached a large cardboard cannon. Headed by their General, they pranced about the stage enjoying themselves hugely. Their efforts brought the house down, for they quite succeeded in making fools of themselves, and 'Slattery's Mounted Foot' was a long way the best event of the evening.

The remaining turns were too numerous to be mentioned in detail. They included further ditties by the singers of 'Archibald' and 'The Lonely Robin,' a banjo solo, some really clever conjuring and lightning sketching by an engine-room artificer, and an absurd sketch, written on board, called 'The Broker's Man.' The plot of this production, if it could be called by such a name, can be deduced from the list of characters:

Mr Stony-Broke– an impoverished aristocrat.

Mrs Stony-Broke– his wife.

Miss Gertrude Stony-Broke.

General Sir Thomas Dammit, K.C.B.– a rich uncle.

Mr Hardcash– a hard-hearted landlord.

Mr Theodore Buggins– the broker's man.

Hon. Bertie de Montmorency– Gertrude's fiancé.

Giles– a footman.

Scene – The Stony-Brokes' drawing-room in London.

Time – The present.

The parts of Mrs and Miss Stony-Broke were played by seamen. Mrs Stony-Broke appeared in black satin and a shawl, and the fair Gertrude in an evening-dress of pale yellow. Both mother and daughter were very shapeless, while their home-made wigs, white cotton gloves, bare red arms, and enormous feet brought tears of joy to the eyes of the audience. So did the gallant General Sir Thomas Dammit, who, it would seem, made a habit of wearing his full-dress uniform, cocked hat, and sword on all occasions.

Mr Hardcash, the villain of the piece, was loudly hissed; while his emissary, Mr Theodore Buggins, a truly dissolute fellow, became hilariously intoxicated at Mr Stony-Broke's expense. But everything ended happily. Gertrude and the Hon. Bertie plighted their troth, and were duly set up for life with a handsome cheque from Sir Thomas.

The curtain came down amidst scenes of the wildest enthusiasm from the audience, and the orchestra playing Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March.'

When finally the band played 'God Save the King,' Pincher Martin was convinced that it was quite the best entertainment he had ever seen. His shipmates agreed with him.

CHAPTER IV

THE STRENUOUS LIFE

I

Twenty-four hours later the *Belligerent* was at bleak, wind-swept Portland; and during the next fortnight Martin began to realise what life in the navy really meant. He fondly imagined that he had been hard-worked at Portsmouth, but it was mere child's-play compared with what went on when they were with the squadron.

The anchorage was full of men-of-war. First came seven other battleships precisely similar to the *Belligerent* herself, squat, ponderous-looking vessels, with piled-up superstructures and heavy gun-turrets which gave them an aspect of strength rather than of speed. They were commanded by a vice-admiral, who flew his flag in the *Tremendous*. Next came an independent cruiser squadron of four sister-ships under the orders of a rear-admiral. They were long, lean craft, with four funnels like factory chimneys, and raking masts. They had an ungainly appearance, but looked fast. Then came a couple of light cruisers, slender, graceful vessels, with beautiful lines. They, too, had four funnels, and gave the impression that they were fliers, as indeed they were. Innumerable black destroyers, with another light cruiser as their flagship, lay in glorified sheep-pens jutting out from the shore. They were evil-looking craft, and could do their thirty knots with ease.

But the ships were not always in harbour. Most days of the week they spent outside the breakwater, indulging in what was officially known as 'aiming rifle practice.' It meant that 1-inch or .303-inch aiming rifles were placed in all the guns, and that the ship steamed past a minute target, firing as she went. It kept the gunlayers and guns' crews proficient, for the weapons were worked, aimed, and fired exactly as if they had been using their proper ammunition. Unofficially, this practice was known as *piff*, from the feeble sound of the reports.

Sometimes the whole battle-squadron went to sea for steam tactics under the orders of the vice-admiral; while at least one night a week was spent somewhere out in the Channel without lights, to give the destroyers practice in making torpedo attacks under war conditions.

It was all very wonderful to Martin; but what impressed him most was the way in which the entire squadron of eight battleships steamed about as a whole. Each vessel remained at precisely the same distance from her next ahead, until it seemed as if they were all joined together by some invisible string, rather than free units capable of independent motion and movement. How they managed to achieve this result he could not imagine. It savoured of necromancy. He did not know until later that on the bridge of each vessel was a young lieutenant with a sextant, whose duty it was to measure the angle between the masthead and the water-line of the next ship ahead. Briefly, if the angle grew larger it meant that the ship was drawing up on her next ahead; if smaller, that she was dropping behind; and the revolutions of the engines were accordingly decreased or increased to get her back into her correct position. 'Station keeping!' – the officers of watches would have laughed if they had been asked how they did it. 'My dear chap, it's as easy as falling off a log. Any fool could do it.' Perhaps he could; but then there are fools and fools. Some of them are wise fools.

Steam tactics, too, were very impressive. The eight battleships would be steaming along in two ordered columns of four ships each. A string of gaily coloured bunting would suddenly appear at the flagship's masthead, to be repeated by the rear-admiral leading the other line. Hardly had the flags blown out clear than every other vessel would be flying a white-and-red 'answering pendant,' meaning 'I have seen and understood.' The flagship's signal would come down with a rush, and after a brief interval of suspense every ship would be swinging round under the influence of her helm. They

formed single line ahead, line abreast, and quarter line, each gray ram cutting the water at precisely the same distance from the next ahead. Now and then they broke off into pairs. Sometimes they circled round in succession, each vessel following dead in the wake of her leader. Occasionally they wheeled, the pivot ship reducing her speed, the wing ship increasing, and the intermediate vessels adjusting the revolutions of their engines until every foremast was exactly in line. They twisted themselves into knots, and unravelled themselves again. The effect was really rather wonderful. The squadron seemed to manoeuvre this way and that with the same ease and flexibility as a company of well-drilled soldiers.

It must be very difficult, Martin concluded; but he wondered vaguely why the admiral should take it upon himself to act the part of a glorified drill-sergeant. He did not know that flexibility of movement and ability to change formation with rapidity and precision are even more important in a squadron at sea than with a regiment ashore.

The admiral, experienced officer though he was, was merely accustoming himself to handling his squadron as a compact and organised whole against the time when he might be called upon to do it with an enemy's fleet looming up over the horizon. Moreover, no two ships are ever handled in quite the same way, and he was giving his captains – who, provided they lived, would be admirals themselves one day – an opportunity of learning the ways and tricks of their several ships, so that, when the time came, they should not fail him. Practice makes perfect, even with such gilded potentates as admirals and captains.

The destroyer attacks after dark, too, were very spectacular. The long winter nights were usually overcast and very dark, and the squadron would be steaming without lights; but even then the lynx-eyed young gentlemen on the bridge would not admit that they had any real difficulty in keeping station. They were used to it. On such occasions the men kept their watches, and the lighter guns and the searchlights were manned exactly as they would be in war. Martin, being an ignorant newcomer, found himself detailed as a bridge messenger; and there, in the very nerve-centre of the ship, he had an excellent opportunity of seeing everything that went on. He never forgot the first destroyer attack he ever saw.

Looking ahead, he could just see the next ship as an intense black blur against the lighter darkness of the sky and sea. Astern came another ponderous mass. The intervals seemed dangerously close, but the officer of the watch showed no anxiety. On the contrary, he stood at the standard compass on the upper bridge, using his binoculars every now and then, and giving occasional muffled orders in a calm voice through the voice-pipe communicating with the man stationed at the engine-room revolution telegraph below. Even the captain and the navigator, who were up there as well, did not seem to be taking things very seriously, though in reality they both had their weather-eyes very much lifting, and were using their glasses constantly. They were always on very friendly terms, and were carrying on an animated conversation about nothing more important than – golf!

'Well, sir,' Colomb was chuckling, 'if your putting hadn't been so bad you'd have knocked me endways. You were shocking on the greens.'

'Yes; but you wait till I get used to that new putter of mine,' the skipper returned, not in the least offended. 'I botched every single putt, and if I hadn't done that – Hallo!' he suddenly broke off, sniffing; 'd'you smell that?'

'That' was a pungent whiff of crude petroleum floating down from windward, and Captain Spencer knew well enough that it meant the attacking craft were somewhere fairly close. The greater number of modern destroyers consume nothing but oil-fuel in their furnaces, and in a strong wind the reek of its burning can often be smelt for several miles.

'M'yes. They're pretty close, sir,' Colomb agreed.

'Keep your eyes skinned, officer of the watch,' the captain cautioned, busy with his own glasses. 'Warn the group officers and guns' crews!'

'Ay, ay, sir,' said the lieutenant, pressing a push by his side, which caused an alarm-bell to sound at all the anti-torpedo-craft guns throughout the ship.

For some minutes there was silence, broken only by the humming of the wind through the rigging and the liquid plop of breaking seas. But all the time the smell of oil-fuel became gradually stronger; and then, quite suddenly, the flagship – two ships ahead – switched on a searchlight. She had seen something!

The powerful blue-white beam flickered out, swung round slightly, and then fell on a black phantom shape rushing through the water. She was a destroyer, and came along with the wind and sea dead astern; but even then sheets of spray were flying over her low decks and bridge.

Martin held his breath.

The moment the attacker was lit up by the ray there came the loud crash of a gun, and an instant later more searchlights joined the first.

Boomp! Bang! Boom! Boomp! went the guns in an irregular volley, as the first and second ships in the line got to work. Sharp stabs of red flame danced in and out of the beams of the lights. The thick smoke of the blank discharges wreathed and eddied through the rays as it drifted down the line on the wind; but the destroyers – two of them – still came on at full speed, pitching and rolling horribly.

They seemed to be about six hundred yards on the starboard bow of the flagship, travelling down the line of battleships in an opposite direction to that in which the latter were steaming, and so brilliantly were they illuminated in the glare that even the figures of the men crouching on deck round the torpedo-tubes were clearly visible through glasses. The water was washing knee-deep over their decks as they rolled, but it was not until they were nearly abeam of the flagship that a ball of red fire shot up into the air from each of them. This indicated the moment at which, if it had been the real thing, their torpedoes would actually have been discharged.

'That pair were sunk all right,' muttered Captain Spencer, watching them through his glasses as they swept past barely three hundred yards off. 'They were under fire for quite half-a-minute before they let go their torpedoes. Poor devils! they're having a pretty rotten time. Great Scott! just look at that sea!'

The leading destroyer had put her helm over to alter course outwards. It brought her nearly head on to the sea, and she had shoved her nose straight into the heart of an advancing wave. It was not really rough, as seas go, but the speed with which she was travelling caused the mass to break on board until she seemed literally to be buried in a smother of gray-white water, while sheets of spray swept high over her masts and funnels. For quite an appreciable time she was hidden, but then slid back into sight on the crest of a sea, with her twin propellers revolving wildly in the air, to disappear in the darkness as suddenly as she had come, with her consort still in close station behind her.

'Thank the Lord I'm not in a T.B.D.!' muttered the officer of the watch to the navigator.

Martin shared his feelings.

For the next forty minutes the guns' crews in the battleships were very busy; for, having sighted the searchlights during the first attack, the remainder of the flotilla, attracted to the spot like wasps to a honey-pot, came dashing in from all directions to deliver their assaults. They came on gallantly, some singly, others in pairs or fours at a time; and though, naturally enough, the battleships claimed to have sunk every mother's son of them long before they had had a chance of getting home with their torpedoes, the destroyers themselves thought otherwise.

The attacks were over by two A.M., and at this time the weary men at the guns and searchlights were free to go to their hammocks, the scattered destroyers were collected by their senior officer, and attackers and attacked, with navigation lights burning, turned their bows homeward.

By eight o'clock the battleships had moored in Portland Harbour, and the destroyers, in a long single line, headed by their light cruiser, came silently in through the northern entrance on their way to the pens. Their funnels were caked white with dried salt, but they steamed past jauntily, showing few traces of their buffeting.

Martin watched them with a new interest, for to him it seemed nothing short of miraculous how such slender-looking vessels could stand the weather he had seen them in a few hours before.

'Wot yer lookin' at, Pincher?' asked Billings, stopping on his way to his mess for breakfast.

'Them,' said Martin, jerking his head in the direction of the destroyers.

'Them!' said Joshua, rather surprised. 'Wot's up wi' 'em?'

'I was thinkin' it must be a dawg's life to be aboard one o' 'em. They looked somethink horful larst night.'

Billings, who had served in a destroyer himself in his young and palmy days, grinned broadly. 'They ain't so bad,' he murmured. 'You gits a tanner a day,⁸ 'ard lyers in 'em, an' that's a hextry three an' a tanner a week. It's werry welcome in these 'ere 'ard times.' The old reprobate smacked his lips longingly, for three-and-six a week meant many pints of beer.

'I reckons they deserves it,' Martin remarked.

'I reckons all matloes deserves double wot they gits,' laughed his companion. 'But larst night weren't nothin'. You wait till yer sees 'em in a gale o' wind; then they carries on somethin' horful. Larst night it weren't blowin' nothin' to speak o'. They 'ad a bit o' a dustin' p'r'aps, an' got their shirts wet, but that ain't nothin'!'

Martin gasped. He had seen the destroyers plunging about like maddened racehorses, with water breaking over their decks; but yet Billings referred to it casually as a 'bit o' a dustin'.' If their behaviour of last night was nothing out of the ordinary, he prayed his gods he might never serve in one of them. 'A bit o' a dustin',' indeed! What must they be like in a gale of wind? It nearly made him seasick to think of it.

⁸ Men serving in destroyers receive sixpence a day extra pay. It is known as 'hard-lying money.'

II

As a start to his seagoing training, Martin found himself put in the gunnery-training class with eleven other youngsters like himself; and here, under the expert guidance of Petty Officer Samuel Breech, he was soon being initiated into the mysteries of squad drill, the rifle and field exercise, the various parts of a rifle and their uses, gun drill, the anatomy and interior economy of lighter weapons and machine-guns, and their ammunition. Much of it he had already learnt before, during his period of preliminary training at the barracks, and the instruction, essentially practical, did not overtax his intelligence.

Petty Officer Breech, a fully qualified gunner's mate, was a strict disciplinarian and something of a martinet. He was a short, burly little man, with a bull-neck and a rasping voice; and the former, combined with a closely clipped red beard and a pair of piercing gray eyes, gave him an air of ferocity which he really did not possess. He was naturally kind-hearted, and the buxom Mrs Breech could twiddle him round her little finger. But on board ship he upheld his dignity with firmness. After long experience with ordinary seamen and their ways, he had come to the conclusion that the only way of getting them thoroughly in hand was to frighten them at the start, and to keep them frightened; so he invariably commenced operations by giving each new class a short lecture.

'You 'ave joined the navy,' he used to say, glaring fiercely, 'to learn discipline, an' you've come to me to learn somethin' about gunnery, or as much of it as I can drive into your thick 'eads. The sooner we understand each other the better; an' before we start work I warns you that I'll stand no sauce from the likes o' you, so just bear it in mind. W'en I gives you an order I expects it to be obeyed at once, an' at the rush. I don't want no shufflin' about in the ranks, nor skylarkin' neither,' he added, gazing ferociously at Martin, who was endeavouring to remove a spot of moisture from the end of his nose without using a handkerchief.

'I wants to blow me nose,' murmured the culprit, reddening.

'An' I wants no back answers unless I asks you a question,' Breech went on, wagging an admonitory finger. 'Wen you're standin' at attention you must keep still, no matter whether a moskeeter's bitin' you 'longside the ear'ole, or a wild monkey's chewin' your stummick. I wants you to look like a squad o' Henglish sailors, not a party o' mourners at a Hirishman's funeral, nor yet a gals' school out for a airin.' It's no laughin' matter, neither,' he continued, eyeing one of his pupils who had a suspicion of a smile hovering round the corners of his mouth. 'Wen I makes a joke you can laugh – bu'st if you like; but if I sees you laughin' w'en I'm not, that's hinsolence, an' you knows wot to expect.'

The smile vanished.

'I'm 'ere to enforce discipline,' the petty officer resumed, 'an' discipline I'll 'ave. I wants you to be smart, an' if I sees you're tryin' to learn I'll do my best for you. If I sees any one skylarkin' or talkin' in the ranks I runs 'im in at once, so don't forget it. To start with, I'm goin' to teach you the parts o' the rifle; an' w'en you knows that, we passes on to squad drill with an' without arms. Squad! – stand easy! This 'ere,' he explained, balancing a Lee-Enfield in his hand, 'is a magazine rifle, Lee-Enfield, Mark 1 star. Its weight is a trifle over nine pounds, as you'll find w'en you 'ave to carry it; an' its length, without the bay'nit, is four foot one an' a narf inches. This 'ere's the bay'nit, with a blade 'xactly twelve inches long, an' 'e fixes on to the muzzle o' the rifle, so. The bay'nit is only sharpened on the outbreak o' 'ostilities, an' is provided for stickin' your enemy; not, as most sailors thinks it's for, for openin' corned-beef tins, an' such like. 'Owever, we'll 'ave plenty o' bay'nit exercise later on.'

It took them a full day and a half to learn the ins and outs of the rifle; and, having mastered it thoroughly, the class passed on to squad drill and the rifle and field exercise. The greater number of them already had some smattering of these, but that fact did not prevent Petty Officer Breech marching and counter-marching them up and down the deck as if their very lives depended upon it. He kept up a running commentary the whole time.

'Squad! – 'shun! Stand at – ease! A little more life in it; an' keep still w'en you're standin' at attention, can't you? Knees straight, 'ead an' body erect, eyes straight to the front. – 'Awkins, you're waggin' your 'ead. – Flannagan, keep your knees straight, an' stand up. – Now then, try again. Squad! – 'shun! Ah, that's more like it now. Number! Form fours! As you were! A little life in it, please! Form fours! Right turn! Quick march! Come along, come along, step out smartly with the left foot, an' take a full pace. Left – left – left – right – left! Mark time! Pick your feet up! Pick 'em up! Bend the knees! That's more like it! Forward! About turn! Not a bit like it. Squad! – halt! Left turn! Stand easy! Look 'ere, now. Wen I says, "About turn!" I don't want you to shuffle round any'ow. I gives the order "turn" as the left foot comes to the ground, an' each man turns on 'is own ground in three paces. At the fourth pace step off with the left foot in this manner.' He marked time himself, and proceeded to demonstrate how easy it really was.

For a whole week they were hard at it, learning to march, side step, change step, double, form fours, turn, and change direction. Sometimes, when one or other of the pupils was called out to drill the class, they got tied up into inextricable knots, with the rear rank facing the front, and the men in their wrong places; but after seven hard days even Breech admitted that he was fairly satisfied with their progress.

Then they spent hours fixing and unfixing bayonets, ordering, shouldering, sloping, trailing, changing, grounding, and securing arms, until they were sick of the very sight of a rifle. It was dreary work – very dreary; and if they showed the least signs of slackness or inattention they were doubled round the deck until they were ready to drop from sheer fatigue, or did 'muscle drill' until their biceps ached.

They saluted mythical officers, varying in rank from the sovereign himself to second lieutenants and midshipmen, and attended imaginary funerals as the escort or firing-party. On these occasions Breech walked solemnly up and down to represent the officer or party to be saluted, or, in the case of the funerals, the corpse on its gun-carriage. 'The next time I passes I represents 'is Majesty the King inspectin' a guard o' honour, mounted at Bucking'am Palace,' or 'Now I'm a Field-Marshal,' and 'Now I'm a lootenant in the navy,' he would say, approaching with what he considered the slow and stately gait befitting his exalted rank. 'Now I represents a regiment o' soldiers with their colours flyin'.' 'Now I'm the corpse comin' out o' the mortu-ary.'

The first time he made this last remark it caused the second man from the left in the rear rank to burst out into a raucous chuckle of amusement, and in another instant the whole class was tittering.

Breech fixed the culprit with a horny eye. 'There's not nothin' to laugh at, 'Awkins,' he observed without the ghost of a smile. 'This is a very sad occasion. You'll be the corpse yourself one day.'

They made pretty good progress on the whole – all except Peter Flannagan, that is. He was by way of being a 'bird' – a man who is constantly in trouble – and had already been through the gunnery-training class once, but had failed in the examination at the end of it. As a result he had been put back for a further period. He was naturally as obstinate as a mule, and unusually thick-headed; but, instead of doing his best with what wits he possessed, he endeavoured to show his superiority by taking as little trouble as he dared. He was Breech's *bête noire*; and, if ever anybody was wrong, it was pretty certain to be Flannagan. But he deserved everything he got, and was very unpopular with the others.

On one never-to-be-forgotten occasion the petty officer cautioned him for talking and joking in the ranks whilst at drill. The Irishman, in some fit of devilment, promptly repeated the offence, and, not content with that, put out his tongue to show his contempt.

Breech saw it. 'Flannagan,' he thundered in a voice of iron, 'come out to the front!'

The Irishman came out and stood before him with a sullen scowl.

'You disobeys my order wilfully, an' puts out your tongue,' the petty officer said. 'Disobedience an' hinsolence. 'Ave you anythin' to say?'

'Nothin', except that I'm fair fed up wi' 'bein' chased about this 'ere deck like a dawg.'

'Fed up, are you?' Breech answered, keeping his temper, but with a dangerous ring in his voice. 'You 'ave the himpertinence to spin me a yarn like that! If I chooses to take you on the quarterdeck, you gets a couple o' months in the detention quarters for hinsolence. But you're long past the stage where punishment'll do you any good. No; I shall 'ave to deal wi' you another way, my lad. I'll see that you're taken out o' the trainin' class, to start with, an' you comes an' reports yourself to me at five o'clock this evenin'. Now you takes off your accoutrements, returns your rifle, an' reports yourself to the capt'n o' your top. Perhaps 'e'll find some use for you; you're no good to me.'

Flannagan, rather ashamed of himself, slouched off.

What happened at five o'clock that afternoon the class never discovered; but the fact remains that Mr Peter Flannagan trod rather delicately, and had some slight difficulty in sitting down for the next ten days or so. Rumour had it that Breech, who was a powerful little man, had armed himself with a singlestick, and had taken the law into his own hands. Very reprehensible conduct on his part, no doubt, for it was strictly against the regulations, and might have got him into trouble if the Irishman had lodged an official complaint. But Breech knew his victim to a nicety, and was perfectly well aware that he lacked the necessary courage to make the matter public. He knew, moreover, that to a man of Flannagan's type a little concentrated physical pain was far and away a better deterrent than any other form of punishment. Whatever his method was, it had the desired effect, for thereafter Ordinary Seaman Peter Flannagan treated Petty Officer Samuel Breech with a respect which almost amounted to reverence. A strong arm and a thick stick do sometimes achieve wonders.

Martin and the remainder of the class waxed hilarious over Peter's downfall. He was not popular. He was a K.H.B.,⁹ and they were not sorry to be rid of his presence.

⁹ K.H.B. = King's hard bargain, a term used in connection with a man who is an undesirable character.

III

The life, however, was not all work, and Martin found he had a certain amount of leisure for amusement. He was allowed ashore every alternate day from four o'clock in the afternoon till ten o'clock at night, and on Saturdays and Sundays from one-thirty.

The *Belligerent* ran her own football team – she ran everything, from a concert-party, a pipe-band, and a tame pig, to a monthly magazine (written, edited, and produced on board); and Pincher, who had been rather a shining light as a wing forward in his village team at home, invariably went ashore to watch the matches.

The squadron always played a football league competition during the winter, each ship playing every other vessel in turn, and the winner of the most points at the end of the season holding a challenge cup – presented by the flag officers and captains – for the ensuing year. In addition to this, the members of the winning team received personal prizes in the shape of inscribed silver medallions. The *Belligerent* had come out top in the league the year before, and the victorious team had promptly had their photographs taken, with, of course, the medallions and the cup; and the latter, enshrined in its glass case, now lived on the fore mess-deck as a tribute to their prowess. They were very proud of it. They were keen to win again, but rumour had it that the *Tremendous*, which had been newly commissioned, had a remarkably good team. Two of them were reported to be county players, so the 'Belligerents' were rather fearful of their laurels.

Now Martin, small and puny though he was, was fleet of foot and very tricky with his feet, but he was far too modest to let anybody know it. He always watched the matches, however, and took an intelligent interest in the games, and eventually, by dint of being present on many occasions, found himself installed as a sort of honorary member of the team in the shape of their recognised touch-judge. He was even permitted to appear in the photograph which was taken soon after the ship arrived at Portland. He was in the back row, it is true, and wore his seaman's clothes instead of a highly coloured shirt, blue shorts, stockings, and football boots. But he carried a small hand-flag as his insignia of office, and considered himself no small beer in consequence. It was an honour to be associated with the team in any way; and as most of the officers, and practically the whole of the ship's company who happened to be ashore, made a point of attending the matches, Martin, running about with his flag, felt he was a – if not the – centre of attraction. At any rate, he was quite a personage, and talked about the game to the other ordinary seamen and boys with an air of great authority.

The scenes of excitement during some of the matches baffled description. 'Play up, Yaller-bellies!' two hundred of the *Belligerent's* men would shout in unison. The yellow referred to the canary-coloured shirts worn by their team, while the other rather inelegant word was the abbreviated name of the ship.

'Come on, the Cockneys!' or 'the Duffos!' would come the answering roar from the partisans of the other team, according to whether their ship hailed from Chatham or Devonport. 'Down wi' the Pompeyites!'

For minutes at a time the repartee bandied to and fro was so vociferous that the whistle was well-nigh inaudible; but the referee was used to it. He had an unenviable time in other ways, poor man! for whatever decision he gave was quite certain to be wrong from the point of view of fully half the spectators, in spite of the fact that he was a strictly neutral man from some other ship. 'Foul!' somebody would bellow, as the whistle blew for a free kick. 'Garn! That ain't no foul!' was hurled back from the men of the ship against which the penalty had been given. 'Play the game! Play the game, carn't you?' 'Goal! Well shot! Good old Yaller-bellies!' would come a roar, accompanied by a shower of caps in the air, as the ball flew past the white posts into the net. 'That's the style! Knock 'em end-ways!' 'Offside! Offside!' came louder yells from the other side. 'Where's the referee? What's 'e thinkin' of?' And so it went on.

But the referee, used to the ways of seamen, merely smiled, and paid no attention whatever to the ribald remarks hurled at his head, personal as some of them were. He was proof against such attacks, and his decisions were always fair.

Occasionally there were stormy scenes at the end of the matches; for when a favourite team had lost, their adherents were sometimes anxious to take on the partisans of the other side with their fists to discover which really was the better ship. More than once men returned on board with black eyes and swollen noses; but actual bloodshed was rare, though feeling always ran high. More often than not, victors and vanquished alike repaired to the canteen, and absorbed malt liquor at each other's expense, the former to celebrate the victory and the latter to drown their sorrow. They were very keen on the result of the league matches. The canteen did a roaring trade.

At one of the most important matches a member of the *Belligerent's* eleven happened to be absent at the time the game was due to start, and Lieutenant Boyle, who captained the team, was at his wits' end to find a suitable substitute. 'Have any of you men played this game?' he asked, going up to a group of seamen belonging to the *Belligerent* who had come to watch. 'Parkins hasn't turned up. We want a forward badly.'

Pincher, seizing the opportunity, stepped forward before any one else had a chance of answering. 'I've played at 'ome, sir,' he said, reddening at his own temerity. 'I used to be on the right wing.'

Boyle seemed rather surprised. 'You!' he said. 'Can you run? D' you know how to dribble and shoot?'

'Yessir.'

The officer looked at him for a moment without replying. He seemed rather doubtful.

'E's orl right, sir,' chipped in Billings, who happened to be present. 'E's pretty nippy on 'is feet. I've seen 'im kickin' the ball abart.'

The lieutenant looked up with a laugh. 'All right, Billings; we'll take him on your recommendation. – Martin, rush across to the pavilion and borrow some gear. Hurry up about it; we're late already.'

Pincher, overjoyed and very proud of himself, flew off like the wind, and presently reappeared clad in full regalia, yellow shirt and all. It was his first really important match; but he felt he was on his mettle, and played well, almost brilliantly. At any rate, he shot two goals; whereat the 'Belligerents' howled themselves hoarse, raised cheers for 'young Pincher,' and wished to treat him with much beer at the end of the game. It was the first time in his life he had ever received adulation, and he was a proud man. His play had undoubtedly helped to win the match.

He was prouder still when Boyle sought him out afterwards. 'You played excellently, Martin,' he said. 'Why on earth didn't you let us know you played?'

'Didn't like to, sir.'

The officer laughed. 'I wish you men wouldn't be quite so modest,' he remarked. 'How d' you expect us to raise a decent team if you all hide your lights under bushels? You're the very man we've been looking for.'

'I'm sorry, sir,' said Martin sheepishly. 'I didn't know as 'ow I wus wanted.'

'We didn't know you were a player. However, now we've got you, you will remain in the team; so look out you keep yourself in decent training. A pint of beer after each game, and no more, mind. If you come to my cabin this evening I'll give you your jersey and other gear.' The lieutenant strolled off to change.

Martin could have jumped for joy. He was a full-fledged 'Yellow-belly' at last, and would appear before the whole ship's company in all the glory of a canary-yellow shirt with a large blue 'B' on the left breast. It was one of the things in this world he had been longing for. He was no longer a mere excrescence on the face of the earth – a poor, puny Pincher who was everybody's whipping-boy. On

the contrary, he was a very proud Pincher, for at last he had come into his own. The *Belligerent* had some use for him, after all.

CHAPTER V

THE OFFICERS

The *Belligerent's* captain, John Horatio Spencer, D.S.O., was a fine type of the modern British naval officer, and a thorough seaman, who had risen in his profession through sheer merit and force of character. He had been lucky, it is true, for as a young lieutenant he had seen much active service in West Africa, had been severely wounded, was mentioned in despatches for 'great gallantry and resource,' and had received the Distinguished Service Order. In 1900, again, as the senior lieutenant of a second-class cruiser on the Cape of Good Hope station, he was landed with the naval guns for the relief of Ladysmith. He again did excellent service, was promoted to commander in 1901, to captain seven years later, and 1914 found him commanding a first-class battleship at the comparatively early age of forty-three.

In appearance he was a big, thick-set man, nearly six feet tall, and broad in proportion. He had a red, clean-shaven face, a pair of penetrating blue eyes which seemed to read one's innermost thoughts, and dark hair slightly shot with gray over the temples.

Every ship he had ever commanded, from a destroyer upwards, had been a happy one. His officers loved him as a friend and admired him as a superior, and 'Our John,' as they affectionately called him, spent far more time in their company than he did in the fastnesses of his own cabin. He hated the solitude of life in his own apartments in the after-end of the ship, and, when he had no guests of his own, frequently had meals in the wardroom as an honorary member, and played bridge and spun yarns in the smoking-room. He had the happy knack of being friendly with every one with whom he came in contact, and invariably treated his officers as equals when he was off duty.

On deck, of course, it was a different matter, for there he was very much their commanding officer, and they his subordinates; and, as Tickle, the junior watch-keeper, once put it, 'the owner'¹⁰ was the whitest and the straightest man on God's earth; but Heaven help you if you make a fool of yourself on deck!

Captain Spencer did bite sometimes, and bite hard; but the culprit generally deserved all he got, and bore no grudge whatsoever. More often than not he would be discovered the same evening in the smoking-room having a sherry-and-bitters with 'the old man,' just to show there was no ill-feeling on either side.

On the mess-deck the captain was revered in rather a different way, for the men, while admiring him, regarded him with a certain amount of awe. Some of the younger and more timid ordinary seamen and boys, indeed, looked upon him as a sort of awful deity, an ogre almost, who sat in his cabin all day long inventing new schemes for their eternal damnation. They were frightened of him, and, on the rare occasions when they did catch sight of his four gold stripes on deck, felt rather inclined to run away and hide their faces. It was foolish of them, for a kinder-hearted man than the skipper it would be impossible to imagine.

But the men saw comparatively little of him, and had few opportunities of discovering his true character. He appeared on deck for 'divisions' every morning; walked round on Sundays criticising their clothes, the length of their hair, and the cleanliness of the ship; was always on the bridge at sea; and punished them when they misbehaved themselves. They realised he was just, and justice is what the bluejacket most admires; but they were not aware that he took a deep interest in them and their affairs, and that he knew everything that went on on board. Neither did they perceive that he frequently went to a great deal of trouble to stretch points in their favour in the way of leave and other privileges.

¹⁰ The commanding officer of a man-of-war is frequently referred to as 'the owner,' or 'the old man.'

'Our John' hated advertisement in any form; and this, perhaps, was why the men never really understood his true kindness of heart. For instance, when he subscribed five pounds towards a fund for the benefit of the widow of one of his men who had died, or two pounds towards the ship's concert party, he gave the money anonymously. When he granted the men an extra forty-eight hours' leave on his own responsibility, and because he considered they had earned it by their good behaviour, he never told them so.

So, from the lower-deck point of view, Captain Spencer was justly admired and greatly feared; but there was not a man on board who had not the fullest confidence in him and his judgment, or who would not cheerfully have followed him to the very gates of hell if he had asked them. Neither was there a more efficient or a happier ship than the *Belligerent*. Her officers and men knew it, and gloried in the fact.

But no small credit for this excellent state of affairs was due to the commander and other officers. The former, the Honourable Algernon D'Arcy Travers, was the direct antithesis of the captain in appearance. He was tall and very thin, but was a pleasant messmate with a very pronounced sense of humour, and on occasions behaved with all the boisterous bonhomie of a junior sub-lieutenant. His excessive leanness did not worry him in the least, though he did once say that he wished his 'hinge' were a little better padded and the wardroom chairs rather softer. It was a matter of some import to his wife, though, for that lady sent him bottles of malt extract to thicken the flesh on his bones. This nutritive compound, however, was generally handed over to his bluejacket messenger, who liked the sweet taste of it; and that youth, already chubby and well-favoured, was gradually assuming the proportions of a young elephant. The commander found that being thin was an advantage in some ways; and on riotous guest nights, when he made as much noise as anybody present, it certainly permitted him to scramble through the square opening in the back of one of the wardroom chairs without much difficulty.

It was a feat few of his messmates could perform. The engineer-commander, George Piston, a well-covered officer, had tried it on one occasion, and had stuck half-way through. His messmates, headed by the commander himself, cheered him on with howls of merriment; but the victim was laughing so much that he seemed to have swelled. He could not budge one way or the other, and there was every prospect of his having to go through life with a chair securely fastened round his portly middle. They took off his garments one by one; but it was no use. They used vaseline and oil as lubricants, and endeavoured to tuck the folds of flesh through the narrow opening, but without avail.

'For heaven's sake send for a saw!' spluttered the gasping officer, relapsing uncomfortably on the sofa and beginning to feel rather alarmed. 'I can hardly breathe. Give me a whisky-and-soda, some one, or I shall burst!'

The saw arrived in due course, and the chair was removed with some damage to itself. The gallant officer never attempted the feat again.

The commander, an ex-torpedo specialist, was a good officer at his work, and the *Belligerent* always looked as clean and as smart as a new pin. Her organisation, too, was as perfect as it could be. The ship's company were very fond of 'the Bloke,' as they called him; and when men did misbehave themselves he generally made the punishment fit the crime. When two ordinary seamen, Barter and Hitchcock, began to give trouble, for instance, he hit upon rather an original method of dealing with them. He provided both of them with an ordinary singlestick and a face-mask, but no body-pads, and then promised them one penny each for every visible wale inflicted on the anatomy of the other. The instigator imagined that he would have to shell out a shilling at the most; but after a bout lasting for a fierce fifteen minutes, examination in the bathroom at the hands of a ship's corporal showed that Barter had earned one shilling and eightpence, and Hitchcock two and a penny. They were never obstreperous again, and the ship's company, instead of offering them sympathy, laughed immoderately.

The commander, like other naval officers, had his bad moments, and sometimes the watch-keepers found it advisable to steer clear of him before breakfast. But even if an explosion did occur no bones were ever broken, for they all knew he said a great deal more than he meant. After breakfast and a pipe he was amiability itself, provided nothing went wrong.

Chase, the senior lieutenant-commander and gunnery officer, has already been described; and the next in seniority was Vernon Hatherley, the lieutenant-commander (T.). He was something of an exquisite. He took a great pride in his personal appearance, was reported to wear silk slumber-wear, and kept a store of cosmetics and unguents in his cabin for the anointing of his face and hair. His messmates knew this, and, headed by No. 1, sometimes shampooed him with whisky-and-soda after dinner. But Torps, as they called him, was an excellent fellow, and took the ragging all in good part. Moreover, he generally succeeded in getting his own back by discovering something wrong with the electric lights in his tormentors' cabins at times when they most wanted to use them. He was an x-chaser, in that he had done remarkably well in all his different examinations; but besides being an expert theorist, he was an officer who knew the practical side of his business from A to Z.

The navigator, Christopher Colomb, had just married a young and pretty wife, and did not spend more time on board than he could possibly help. As a consequence, his messmates saw comparatively little of him, unless the *Belligerent* was cruising, and Mrs Colomb could not follow her husband. The captain occasionally succeeded in getting him to play golf in the afternoons; but Colomb preferred his wife's society to that of any one else. When he was on board in the evenings he shut himself in his cabin, and spent the time writing a learned treatise on *Magnetic Influences at Sea*. The book is still being written.

Peter Wooten, the next senior non-specialist officer of the military branch, was doing a two-year spell in a battleship, after having been in command of destroyers and gunboats for the past six years. He hated the drudgery of big-ship life, where he acted as the commander's understudy on the upper deck, had charge of the midshipmen and their instruction, arranged the ordinary seamen's training classes, worked the derrick for hoisting in and out boats, and generally acted as a sort of 'odd job' man. The life was fairly comfortable, it is true; but he much preferred the joys of commanding his own small ship to being a comparative nobody in a vessel the size of the *Belligerent*. He was a burly, deep-chested man, with fair, curly hair, tanned face, and a pair of clear, humorous blue eyes. He was fresh from China, where he had commanded a tiny river gunboat up the Yang-tse-kiang; and there, miles up the great river, far away from any admiral, and completely 'on his own,' he had made history in a small way. He was a great character, and his stories of the Chinese revolution, when he could be induced to tell them, were sometimes amusing and always interesting. (He was the commanding officer of Martin's destroyer when that ordinary seaman joined the 'black navy' soon after the outbreak of the present war, so perhaps we may be pardoned for allowing him to spin one of his yarns. It has the advantage of being true.)

'It was quite a pretty little show,' he said one evening in the smoking-room after dinner, when somebody had egged him on to talk after a second glass of port. 'Have any of you fellows ever heard of a place called Kiang-fu, up the Yang-tse? You might know it, No. 1; you're an old China bird.'

Chase shook his head. 'Sorry I don't, Peter. But let's have the yarn, all the same.'

Wooten lit his pipe. 'Kiang-fu,' he started, 'is one of their walled towns on the banks of the river. It's a beastly place, full of stinks and bugs and abominations generally; and the only white people there are the consul and his wife, a couple of missionaries, and two merchants. Well, one morning my old *Kingfisher* was lying about twenty miles downstream, and a Chinaman from the consulate at Kiang-fu arrived in a sampan with a note from the consul to say that five thousand rebels had arrived before the place, and that there was going to be some scrapping. There were about a thousand Imperial troops inside the town, Johnson the consul said, and he was in a bit of a funk as to what would happen when the rebels took the place. They'd have butchered every one, of course, Europeans included. My

orders were to protect British interests, but not to fight, so I upped killick¹¹ and steamed for Kiang-fu for all I was worth. We got about six and an onion¹² out of the old bus, I remember, and reached there about noon.' He paused and sucked thoughtfully at his pipe.

'And what happened then?' queried some one.

'I found the bally battle in full swing,' Wooten went on. 'Guy Fawkes Day wasn't in it, and both sides were blazing away for all they were worth, and making a hell of a row. However, they weren't doing much damage to each other. I anchored my hooker about a couple of hundred yards from the shore, where we could get a decent view of what went on, manned my two six-pounders and the Maxim, and hoisted an ensign and a large white flag – wardroom tablecloth it was – in a boat, and then went ashore to see Johnson. Things were pretty lively, and shells were bursting and bullets were whistling all over the place. The rebel attack was to come off that night, and as there could be only one end to it, I took Johnson and his missus, the two missionaries, the two shopkeepers, and Heaven alone knows how many Christian Chinese off to my ship. The upper deck was fairly packed with 'em. Then we sat down to watch the sport. One of the shopkeepers, I may say, was a Scotsman, and the other a Yank, and they wanted me to order the rebs. to shove off out of it and leave Kiang-fu alone. They had a lot of valuable stuff in their godowns¹³ waiting to be shipped down the river, and said the whole lot of it 'u'd be looted if the city fell.

'I cursed them for a couple of tizzy-snatchers,' he resumed, grinning at the recollection; 'I told 'em they ought to be jolly thankful to have got off with their lives; and asked 'em how the dooce I could dictate to five thousand ruddy cut-throats with Mauser rifles and Lord knows how many field guns – decent guns, too; none of your clap-trap rubbish. I had exactly thirty men all told, a broken-winded eighty-ton gun-boat, two six-pounders, and one Maxim. Pretty tall order, wasn't it? However, I was still yapping to 'em on deck when I heard a sort of *phut*, and a bally bullet buried itself in the deck about a foot off my leg. It came from the direction of the rebel trenches, about five hundred yards off, and some silly blighter had evidently eased off a rifle at us for the fun of the thing. I heard one or two more bullets come whistling overhead – damned bad shooting they made – so sent all the refugees over to the lee side of the deck out of harm's way. Then I trained my guns on the rebs., and hoisted all the ensigns I had. They knocked off firing then, so I got into the boat with the consul, the wardroom tablecloth, and the largest ensign I could find, and pulled ashore.' He paused.

'Had you any weapons with you?' somebody asked.

'Lord, no!' said Wooten. 'Doesn't do to let a Chinaman see you're frightened of him. I took a walking-stick, and Johnson had a white umbrella. I was in a dooce of a funk, though, and when we landed we found a whole bally company of soldiers waiting to receive us.'

'What! a guard of honour?' asked Chase.

'Don't you believe it. They had fixed bayonets and loaded rifles, and I felt rather nervous as to what was going to happen. You see, there wasn't another British ship within a hundred miles of us. However, I landed with the consul, and a Chinese officer with a drawn sword came forward to receive us. He wasn't a bad fellow, and talked quite decent English, with an American accent. I asked him what the dooce they meant by having the troops there as if they wanted to scupper us, and told him who the consul was, and that I was the C.O. of the man-of-war, and that, on behalf of his Britannic Majesty, we wished to see his General. He said the old bloke was having his afternoon caulk, and that they daren't wake him. I said he'd better roust the old josser out, and be damned smart about it. He hummed and hawed a bit over that, and then said that if we'd come along with him he'd take us to the headquarters, and see if we could have an interview. I wasn't going to kow-tow to any bally Chinaman, though, so I told him that if he didn't take steps to have the General brought to us in less than half-an-

¹¹ Weighed anchor.

¹² A fraction of a knot.

¹³ A 'godown' is a warehouse.

hour I'd raise hell's delight. It's no use being anything but dictatorial with Chinamen,' he went on to explain; 'and if you can bluff 'em into believing that you've got the whip-hand they generally knuckle under. We had some more talkee-talkee, and then he did go off with his men, and jolly glad I was to see the last of 'em. Twenty minutes later the General arrived. He was rather a fine-looking old boy, with no pigtail, and was dressed up in khaki and a sword. He had a couple of A.D.C.'s with him. He couldn't talk English, so I asked him through the consul what he meant by allowing his troops to fire on my ship, and said that I should have to report it, and so on. He said they hadn't done it. I said they had, and that if he came on board I'd jolly soon prove it. Well, after a lot of jawbation we got him into the boat, with the A.D.C.'s, took him off to the ship, and showed him the bullet-mark in the deck. He got in a bit of a funk then, so Johnson and I drew up a document in Chinese and English, in which he said he was sorry for what had occurred, and so on. It went on to say that he agreed to abandon the siege of Kiang-fu, as British interests were at stake, so we'd more or less cornered him. He signed like a lamb, wily old devil; but then we remembered that no document is valid in China unless it's stamped with the official seal of the man who signed it. We asked him where the seal was, but he hadn't got it on him. Johnson asked him where it was, and he said he'd got it in his old headquarters, about ten miles downstream. He volunteered to go and fetch it, but we weren't having any. The upshot of the whole affair was that we sent one of the A.D.C.'s ashore to order the siege to be stopped, and the rebels to retire, and took the General and the other A.D.C. down the river. Then we sent the A.D.C. ashore to get the seal, and had the document properly stamped. That's all, I think.'

'But did the rebels retire?' asked the commander.

Wooten nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'They left the place like lambs, and the Imperialist colonel inside nearly fell on my neck and wept. The two shopkeepers gave me a box of a hundred cigars between them! Damned nasty cigars, too!'

His listeners laughed.

'And what happened to you?' asked Chase.

'Oh,' smiled Wooten, 'I sent the document to the admiral, with a covering letter, and jolly nearly got badly scrubbed for exceeding my duty and abducting the General. However, it was all right in the end, and I believe the old man was secretly rather pleased with what I'd done.'

'So he jolly well ought to have been,' remarked one of the watch-keepers.

'M'yes, but he was a man who didn't say much. However, a month later a British colonel and a couple of other officers came down from Peking to confer with me about putting Kiang-fu in a state of defence in case the rebels came again, for by that time the powers that be had come to the conclusion that if they did capture it, it wouldn't do us any good. The colonel and I went ashore together, he with his two officers, and I with a sheet of paper and a pencil.

'You'd better loophole that wall,' he started off, pointing at a solid stone affair about three feet thick. 'This house had better be demolished, and you'll have to dig a trench along here, with decent sand-bag head-cover. I should think a hundred and fifty rifles will be enough to man it, provided you have a couple of Maxims at each corner. Over there we'll have an emplacement for a field-gun, and there another trench.'

'He went on like that the whole of one grilling forenoon, and by the time he'd finished I'd totted up my figures, and found he'd used the best part of a thousand men.

'That's all right, sir,' said I; 'and when may I expect the regiment?'

'Regiment!' he said, rather surprised. 'What regiment d'you mean?'

'The regiment for doing all this work and garrisoning the place, sir,' said I innocently. 'You've been talking about knocking down houses, erecting barricades, and digging trenches right and left. I've only got thirty men.'

'The deuce you have!' he said thoughtfully. 'We'd better' —

'Go and have lunch, sir,' I chipped in.

'Excellent idea,' said he, mopping his face.

'So off we went, had a top-hole *tiffin*, and that was the last we ever heard of it. Kiang-fu never was put in a state of defence so far as I know. However, the rebels never came there again, so every one was quite happy. I tell you,' Wooten concluded with a grin, 'one occasionally has some pretty rummy times up the Yang-tse.'

One had, apparently, and Peter Wooten was an officer of great initiative and resource, who had served his country well, and had upheld the dignity of her flag on more than one occasion. Chinese generals, mandarins, and other Celestial potentates were nothing to him. He bullied or bluffed them all into doing what he wanted, and they used to walk in terror of 'the red-faced devil with the loud voice,' as they called him. No wonder, then, that Peter felt himself tied by the leg in a battleship, where, to use his own expression, he was a 'mere dog's body.'

The watch-keeping lieutenants were George English, Aubrey Plantagenet Fitz-Johnson (usually known in the wardroom as 'the Dook'), Henry Archer Boyle, and Tobias Tickle.

English was a mild, inoffensive little man, whose chief ambition in life was to retire from the navy while he was still young, marry a wife, live in a small whitewashed cottage miles away from any sea, rear pigs and chickens, and collect butterflies. For all his lack of ambition, however, he was a good and zealous officer. He never made a bad mistake; but never, on the other hand, did anything very brilliant. He was a conscientious plodder.

'The Dook' was a tall, dashing, immaculate person, with sleek and shiny hair. He had a wonderful taste in dress, and how many different suits of plain clothes he possessed nobody but himself and his servant knew. How much he owed his tailor and his haberdasher nobody was aware of but those long-suffering tradesmen themselves, for Fitz-Johnson cast all his bills into the fire immediately on their receipt. His garments were always fashionable and well cut; his ties, collars, shirts, and socks of the newest and most exclusive pattern. His uniform frock-coat fitted his *svelte* figure like a glove; his trousers were always perfectly creased; and on Sundays he always appeared at 'divisions' with a brand-new pair of kid gloves – he never wore the same pair twice. The men called him Algy. He looked it. He was essentially a lady-killer. His cabin was full of autographed photographs of feminine admirers and mementoes in the shape of faded dance-programmes and little knots and bows of ribbon. His bedspread, a wonderful creation in blue silk, embroidered with his crest and monogram, had been worked by one set of fair fingers; his door and scuttle curtains, of chintz, by some one else; and a little bag for his hairbrushes by a third lady. When the mail arrived his letter-rack in the wardroom was crammed with bills, and letters in feminine handwriting. He kept up a voluminous correspondence, but was wise enough never to have more than one ardent admirer in any one place. He was a regular 'devyl with the girls,' there was no doubt about that; and if the ship arrived at some new place, and the wardroom took it into its head it would like to give a tea-fight, 'the Dook' was immediately sent ashore to prospect. How he did it nobody quite knew; but at the end of twenty-four hours he would be on friendly terms not only with all the young and pretty girls in the place, but also with their mothers, aunts, and female cousins. He was always on the verge of being engaged to be married, but never quite pulled it off. His host of unpaid bills, and the fact that he had little or no money besides his pay, probably frightened him. But, at any rate, he was a valuable acquisition as a messmate, for he sang well, and could play almost any musical instrument under the sun.

His chief failing was that he was never less than a quarter of an hour late for his watch. 'I'm deuced sorry, old chap,' was his usual excuse to the officer he had to relieve. 'The fella didn't call me properly.'

'Oh, to hell with you and your rotten excuses!' would growl the irritated watch-keeper who had been kept up. 'You're about the frozen limit! The corporal of the watch was hammering on your cabin door for at least a quarter of an hour!'

'It really wasn't my fault, though,' Fitz-Johnson would protest mildly. 'Please don't get shirty, old chap.'

It was impossible to be really angry with him; but he continued to relieve late until the other watch-keepers hit upon a scheme of keeping him up for an extra half-hour at the end of his own watch. That cured him eventually.

Boyle, the next in seniority, was a young, enthusiastic, and very energetic officer, who wished one day to become a gunnery officer. He had charge of the after-turret, with its pair of twelve-inch guns, and spent much of his time in a suit of oily overalls scrambling about in the depths of the hydraulic machinery. He was of an inventive turn of mind too, and even at the comparatively early age of twenty-four had already designed a self-stabilising seaplane, a non-capsizable boat, a patent razor-strop, and an adjustable chair. This last, which he used in his cabin, was really most ingenious. It had hidden springs all over it, and you pushed a button and it did the rest. You could use it for anything, from an operating-table to a trousers-press; and it was often brought into the wardroom after dinner on guest-nights for its various uses to be demonstrated. It worked beautifully, until one night the *padre*, who was reclining gracefully at full length, pressed the wrong button in a sudden fit of exuberance. The chair promptly bucked like a kicking mule. The front shot up and the back fell down, and the reverend occupant hurtled adroitly backwards straight into the arms of an astonished marine servant with a tray full of whiskies and sodas. He came to the ground with a crash, with the marine and the liquid on top of him, and everybody laughed.

The servant, drenched through, retired grumbling to change his garments; and the Rev. Stephen Holiman scrambled to his feet, surveyed the mess of broken glass and liquor on the deck, and then felt his pulped collar and examined his clothes.

'Boyle, you silly ass!' he expostulated, justifiably annoyed, and trying to mop himself dry with a handkerchief, 'why the d-dickens couldn't you tell me the thing was going to pitch me over backwards like that?'

'I'm awfully sorry, *padre*,' spluttered the inventor, weak with laughing. 'You must have pressed the wrong button; but even then I've never known it do that before. Perhaps it wants oiling.'

'Take the rotten thing away and drown it!' retorted the *padre*, as angry as he ever got. 'It oughtn't to be allowed on board. It's ruined my clothes!' But the *padre* was a sportsman with a sense of humour, and after a little more grumbling, during which he got no sympathy from his messmates, cheered up and went off to change. Ever afterwards, when the chair appeared, he endeavoured to make it play the same trick on some unsuspecting guest. But it never would.

Tobias Tickle, commonly known as 'Toby,' was the officer of Martin's division, whom we have already met. He had married very young, and had a rich and pretty wife, who was as popular as himself; but this did not prevent Toby from being a very riotous member of society on occasions. He was loved by his men; for, while very strict, he took a great interest in them and their affairs. He knew the surname and Christian name of every bluejacket in his division; knew whether they were married, engaged to be married, courting, or single; and always gave them good advice when they asked for it. They often did. On more than one occasion he or his wife had helped them in other ways.

Once, when Mrs Buttings, the wife of an able seaman, had been ailing, and had had to undergo a rather serious operation, Mrs Toby heard of it through her husband. She promptly visited the patient, found her living in a miserable little dwelling in a back street in Landport, with four children between the ages of six months and five years, and nobody to look after her except the neighbours. This would not do for Mrs Tickle. She promptly engaged a trained nurse, sent the children off to a farmhouse in the country, visited the invalid daily, saw that she had a proper diet, and provided her with many sovereigns' worth of coal and luxuries.

Buttings himself, when he went ashore and saw the transformation in his usually rather slovenly home, was furious. Like most bluejackets, he hated the idea of charity in any form, and went straight off to see Tickle.

'Look 'ere, sir,' he said; 'with orl my doo respects to you, it ain't playin' the game!'

'Not playing the game!' answered the lieutenant, quite at a loss to understand what the man was driving at. 'What d'you mean?'

'Well, sir, it's like this 'ere. I goes 'ome an' finds my 'ouse rigged up like a bloomin' 'orspittle, an' the missus lyin' in bed with flowers, an' beef-tea, an' port wine, an' sich like. I finds another 'ooman there a-lookin' 'arter 'er – dressed up like a 'orspittle nurse, she wus – an' w'en I arks 'er wot she done with the kids, she sez as 'ow they'd bin sent to the country. W'en I wants to know 'oo's done it, she sez Mrs Tickle. It ain't fair on a man, sir, doin' a thing like that, an' habductin' of 'is kids. S'welp me, it ain't!' Buttings paused for breath.

'I'm sorry you think that, Buttings,' said Tickle gently. 'Your wife has been very ill, and what she wants is good food and proper treatment. She's getting that now. The children, too, are out in the country having an excellent time. After all, my wife didn't do it without asking Mrs Buttings.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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