

**DORLING
HENRY
TAPRELL**

STAND BY! NAVAL
SKETCHES AND STORIES

Henry Dorling
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Sketches and Stories

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Stand By! Naval Sketches and Stories:

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H. Taprell Dorling

Stand By! Naval

Sketches and Stories

PREFACE

It seems almost unnecessary to remark that the characters and ships figuring in the sketches throughout this book are entirely fictitious.

"Bunting," "The Acting Sub," "Our Happy Home," "The Lost Sheep," "The

'Muckle Flugga' Hussars," and "The Mother Ship" appeared in the *DailyMail*, and "The 'Pirates'" in the *Weekly Despatch*. They are here reprinted, with minor alterations, by kind permission of the Editors.

TAFFRAIL.

1916.

STAND BY!

THE "ACTING SUB"

He was a very junior young officer indeed when the powers that be first gladdened his heart and ruined his clothes by sending him to a destroyer. A mere sub-lieutenant with "(acting)" after his name, which, as any proper "sub" will tell you, is a sign of extreme juniority. Moreover, the single gold stripe on his monkey jacket was still suspiciously new and terribly untarnished.

Not so very long before he had been a "snotty" (midshipman) in a battleship, a mere "dog's body," who had to obey the orders of almost every officer in the ship except those few who happened to be junior to him. It is true that he exercised his authority and a severe discipline on those midshipmen who had the misfortune to be a year or so younger than himself, and that he expressed a lordly contempt for the assistant clerk. But he lived in the gun-room, slept in a hammock, kept all his worldly possessions in a sea-chest, and bathed and dressed in the company of fifteen other boisterous young gentlemen.

Then he had his watches to keep at sea and his picket boat to run in harbour, while his spare time was fully employed in mastering the subtleties of gunnery, torpedo work, and

electricity, and in rubbing up his rapidly dwindling knowledge of engineering and x and y . It was well that he did so, for at some distant period when the war ceased he would have to pass certain stringent examinations before he could be confirmed in the rank of lieutenant.

So on the whole he had been kept fairly busy, more particularly as watch-keeping at the guns with the ship at sea in all weathers in war time was not all jam.

But when he was sent to a destroyer he found the life was more strenuous, for the little ship spent far more time at sea. The weather was sometimes very bad indeed, and at first he was seasick, but it was always a consolation to have a cabin of his own, to live in the wardroom, and to be treated as a responsible officer instead of a mere "makee learn."

He had to work at least six times harder than he had in a battleship. For one thing he had all the charts to correct and to keep up to date, no small labour with pencil, dividers, parallel rulers, and much red ink in these days of war, prolific minefields, dangerous areas, extinguished lights, and removed buoys. He also assisted with the ship's gunnery, and at sea kept a regular three watches, eight hours out of every twenty-four, with the first lieutenant and gunner. But it was the sense of responsibility and the feeling that he was doing really useful work which gladdened his heart and kept him keen and energetic.

"Have you ever been in a destroyer before?" his commanding officer had asked him as soon as he joined.

"No, sir."

"Ever kept officer of the watch at sea?"

Again the answer was in the negative.

"Well, you'll have to do it here, my son. If you want to know anything come to me. There's nothing much in it so long as you keep your eyes skinned. You'll soon learn."

* * * * *

The skipper had said there was nothing in it, but the first night at sea he found himself alone on the bridge in charge of the ship he thought differently.

A light cruiser squadron and two flotillas of destroyers were steaming at 20 knots in close formation without lights. The night was as black as the wolf's mouth, and the rapidly rising wind cut the tops off the short seas and sent them flying over the bridge in constant showers of spray. Moreover, the perpetual pitching and rolling soon gave our friend a squeamish and altogether nasty sensation in the region of his waistcoat, and in ten minutes, by which time the water had found its way through his oilskins and was trickling merrily down the back of his neck, he felt miserable.

The ship was in the middle of a line of eight destroyers. Two hundred yards ahead of him he could just discern the dim black blur of the next ahead and the occasional splutter of whity-grey foam in her wake as her stern lifted to the seas. At times, when

a driving rain squall came down from windward, he seemed to lose sight of her altogether, and, through inexperience and in his anxiety to catch up, increased the revolutions of the engines not wisely but rather too much. The next thing that happened was that the squall cleared, and he found himself almost on top of her, and had to put the helm over and sheer out of line to avoid a collision. At the same time he reduced speed to drop back into station. Sometimes he reduced more than he should, with the consequence that the next astern nearly bumped him, while the leader shot ahead and vanished into the darkness like a ghost.

It was then that he had horrible thoughts of being scrubbed for the deadly sin of losing touch with the flotilla and meandering about the ocean like a lost sheep looking for his next ahead. If he did not succeed in finding her somebody's blood would be required.

It was rather trying for a novice, and many times he remembered the commanding officer's standing orders. "Do not hesitate to call me if you are in doubt or difficulty," they said, with the "Do not" underlined twice. Should he rouse the skipper or should he not? He was asleep in his clothes on the cushioned settee in the charthouse underneath the bridge and would be up in ten seconds if required. But the acting "sub" did hesitate to call him unnecessarily. After all, it was quite possible that the "C.O." might be rather peevish if he was hauled out for no reason. He was not really "in difficulty," he persuaded himself, and he certainly did not wish to patent the fact that he could not

keep the ship in station, whatever the circumstances.

No; he would not call him. He solved the problem by increasing the speed of the engines ever so slightly above the normal, and five minutes later heaved a sigh of profound relief as the black shape of the next ahead hove up out of the darkness.

In an hour his helpless feeling had gone and he was jogging merrily along without any difficulty.

* * * * *

But the skipper, who was accustomed to the ways and tricks of newly-joined officers generally, and sub-lieutenants in particular, had been awake the whole time. He always slept with one eye open at sea, and as the charthouse was immediately beneath the bridge and the shafting of the wheel and engine-room telegraphs passed within a few feet of his head, he knew at once from their agitated movement when anything really desperate was happening. So when the helm went overhand the revolution telegraph revolved frantically five or six times in quick succession he yawned wearily, flung off his rug, and sat up.

"I won't go up and interfere unless he sends for me," he thought to himself. "He must learn." He had been a "sub" in a destroyer himself. The summons never came.

At three o'clock, by which time the dawn was breaking, the "C.O." did appear on the bridge.

"Well, Sub?" he asked. "What d'you think of station keeping

at night?"

"Quite easy, sir," said that young officer blandly, quite unaware of the acoustic properties of the charthouse. "As easy as falling off a log."

"Did you have any difficulty in seeing the next ahead?"

"Not much, sir. It was a bit dark at times, though."

The "C.O." smiled to himself. He knew.

* * * * *

The "sub," he has passed out of the "acting" stage, is now an expert at the game, and, to use the phraseology of his latest confidential report, is "energetic and trustworthy" and a "most promising and capable officer."

THE MOTHER SHIP

Sixteen years ago, when the ships of the Royal Navy still disported themselves in black hulls, with red water-lines, white upper works, and yellow masts and funnels, she was a smart cruiser attached to one of the large fleets. She was as spick and span as elbow grease and ingenuity could make her, and the show ship of her squadron and the pampered darling of the admiral, went by the name of "the yacht."

She was easily one of the cleanest ships afloat. Her blue-black side, anointed daily with some mysterious compound rubbed on with serge, a compound the exact ingredients of which were known only to her commander and the painter who mixed it, was as smooth and as shiny as a mahogany table. Her decks were as clean as scrubbers, holystones, sand, and perspiring blue-jackets could make them, and woe betide the careless sailor who defiled their sacred whiteness with a spot of paint, or the stoker who left the imprint of a large and greasy foot on emerging into the fresh air from his labours in the engine-room or stokehold.

Her guns, steel, and brass-work winked and shimmered in the sun. Her funnels were brushed over at frequent intervals with a wash the colour and consistency of cream, and before she went to sea her yellow masts and yards used to be swathed in canvas lest they should be defiled by funnel smoke. Her boats, with their white enamel inside and out, their black gunwales

with the narrow golden ribbon running round inside, the well-scrubbed masts, oars, thwarts, bottom-boards, and gratings, the brass lettered backboards, and cushioned sternsheets, were the pride of her midshipmen and the envy of nearly all the other young gentlemen in the squadron.

But then, of course, this all happened in the "good old days," the palmy days when men-of-war spent no great portion of their time at sea and when, in some ships, Messrs. Spit and Polish were still the presiding deities. No doubt, as we were sometimes asked to believe before the war, the Service has gone to the dogs since 1900, for noisy and blatant Mr. Gunnery has usurped the place of the above-mentioned pair and life generally has become more strenuous. The ability to hit a hostile ship at a distance of twenty miles or so cannot be inculcated in the fastnesses of a harbour. The job simply must be taken seriously.

* * * * *

If you turn up her name in the "Navy List" of to-day – wild horses will not make me disclose it and the Censor would not pass it if I did – you will see that she still figures as a cruiser, though the fact remains that she never goes to sea for any war-like purpose. They have even added insult to injury by removing some of her guns.

This may be a matter for deep regret on the part of her officers and men, who, since they belong to the Royal Navy or the Royal

Naval Reserve, naturally long to assist in an active manner at the discomfiture of some floating Hun. Their thoughts may not exactly be pleasant when they read and hear of the warlike doings of their seagoing sisters, but they may console themselves by recollecting that the ship of 1916 is probably infinitely more valuable to the country than that of 1900, and that at the present time the Navy could not do without her.

She is still clean but is no longer a "yacht," for her purpose is strictly utilitarian. She performs the multifarious duties of a depôt ship, and as such attends to the ailments, aches and pains of, caters for the needs of, and generally acts as a well-conducted mother to a large number of destroyers. You have only to ask these latter what they think of their parent, and there is not one of them who would not tell you that they could not get on without her. Of course they cannot! For destroyers, like delicate children prone to catch mumps, whooping-cough, and measles, cannot thrive without careful nursing, particularly in war time.

And so, if the depôt ship receives a plaintive wail by signal to say that one of her children has been punctured through the bows by a projectile from a belligerent Hun, or that another, in a slight altercation at sea with one of her sisters, has developed a "slight dent" in herself to the accompaniment of leaky rivets and seams, she merely says, "Come alongside!"

The destroyer does so, and, lo! an army of workmen step on board with their tools, and with much hammering and drilling, the outward application of a steel plate, some oakum, and some

white lead, her hurts are plastered and she is rendered seaworthy once more.

Sometimes the defects may be even more serious, as, for instance, when one of her charges, having been badly cut into in a thick fog or having unwisely sat down upon a mine, limps back into harbour with several compartments full of water and serious internal injuries as well. But the depôt ship is quite equal to the emergency. She sends her shipwrights, carpenters, and other experts on board the afflicted one and, with a large wooden patch, more oakum, and buckets of red and white lead, the destroyer is made sufficiently seaworthy to proceed to the nearest dockyard.

Again, there may be engine-room defects, such things as overheated thrust-blocks, stripped turbines, and leaky valves. There are boiler troubles and the periodical cleaning of the boiler tubes. There can be defects in the guns, torpedo-tubes, searchlights, or electrical fittings; defects anywhere and everywhere, even in the galley-stove funnel or the wardroom pantry. Mother has a large family and their ailments are very varied and diverse. But she competes with them all and, save in cases of very severe damage, rarely confesses the job to be beyond her powers and has to send her troublesome child to a dockyard.

* * * * *

But this is not all she does. If Spud Murphy, able seaman of a

destroyer, carves the top off his finger or complains of "horrible pains in th' stummick," he is sent to mother to be nursed back to health by her doctors. If Peter Jones imagines he has not received the pay to which he is entitled, if he wishes to remit a monthly sum to his wife, or if he desires to become the possessor of a pair of boots, a tooth-brush, and a pair of new trousers, mother will oblige him. Moreover, the fond parent distributes the mails and supplies the beef, vegetables, bread, rum, haricot beans, tinned salmon, raisins, sugar, tea, flour, coffee, and a hundred and one other comestibles necessary for the nourishment of those on board her protégées. She will also supply many other unconsidered trifles in the way of ammunition, torpedoes, rope, canvas, paint, emery paper, bath-brick, oil, bolts, nuts, pens, red ink, black ink, hectograph ink, foolscap, pencils, paper fasteners, postage stamps ... I will leave it at that.

Heaven alone knows what else she can disgorge. She seems to resemble a glorified Army and Navy Stores, with engineering, ship fitting, ship chandlery, outfitting, haberdashery, carpentry, chemists, dry provisions, butchers, bakers, stationery, postal, and fancy goods departments. We have forgotten the certificate office or research department, where they will tell you the colour of the eyes of any man in the flotilla, the number of moles on the back of his neck, and the interesting fact that Stoker "Ginger" Smith has a gory heart transfixed by an arrow, together with the words "True Love," indelibly tattooed on his left forearm.

The Criminal Investigation Department, which seems to be

aware of the past history of everybody, will deal with offenders, while, to go to the opposite extreme, the depôt ship's padre will be only too happy to publish the banns of marriage for any member of his flock.

In addition to all this the officers of the flotilla are honorary members of mother's wardroom, where, despite the fact that she sometimes has great difficulty in collecting the sums due at the end of the month, she allows them to obtain meals, drinks, and tobacco. Lastly, she gets up periodical kinematograph or variety shows to which all are invited, free, gratis, and for nothing... What more could her children want? She is a very good mother to them. Her greatness has not departed.

OUR HAPPY HOME

Compared with that of a "27-knotter" of twenty years ago the wardroom of a modern destroyer is a palatial apartment.

Imagine a room about 15 ft. long, 25 ft. wide – the whole beam of the ship – with about 7 ft. headroom.

It has white enamelled sides and ceiling. A table, long enough to seat ten people at a pinch, runs athwartships, and ranged round it are various straight-backed chairs.

On the after bulkhead is a square mahogany cupboard with a railed top, on which reposes a gramophone, while to the right, in the corner, is another cupboard reaching to the deck above and divided into numerous square lockers. It is really intended for stationery, but provides an equally useful receptacle for bottled beer and stout.

To right and left along the ship's side, with its row of small scuttles, are cushioned settees, and on the foremost bulkhead, to the left of the door, is a bookcase with cupboard underneath. Except on Sundays, when the latter is specially tidied up for the "rounds," it will not bear close investigation. It may be found to contain half a Stilton cheese (rather fruity), pats of butter, two bottles of Worcester sauce, fruit, one tin of Bluebell polish, and a large lump of oily waste. No wonder our butter sometimes tastes peculiar!

To the right of the door is a sideboard, a solid mahogany

affair, with racks for glasses and tumblers, and cupboards for wine. In the centre of it is a mirror which, on sliding down into a recess, reveals a small square hatch communicating with the pantry outside.

Overhead, secured to the beams, are various pipes, electric light fittings, brass curtain rods, and a couple of swinging oil lamps. Several more oil lamps are in the bulkheads or walls. They are used when steam is down and the dynamo is not running. The furniture and fittings are completed by a comfortable-looking, well-padded armchair, a couple of steam radiators of polished, perforated brass for warming purposes when the ship is at sea, a red and blue carpet, curtains, a letter rack and notice board, and the stove.

The latter is fitted to burn anthracite. It looks well, with its highly polished brass casing and funnel reaching up through the deck above, but it has a very decided will of its own. Sometimes, in a fit of contrariness, it persists in blazing like a blast furnace on muggy days until its sides are nearly red-hot and the heat of the wardroom is well-nigh intolerable. But on chilly mornings it occasionally rings a change by refusing to burn at all, and merely vomits forth clouds of acrid, grey smoke. This generally occurs during breakfast, when folk are sometimes apt to be snappish and irritable. We have never really quite fathomed the idiosyncrasies of the stove. Maybe it is sadly misunderstood, but at any rate we can always empty the vials of our wrath for its misdeeds upon the head of its unfortunate custodian, a newly caught officer's

steward of the second class, with long hair and a mournful aspect.

We are at war, and there is little or no attempt at decoration in our habitation. The bright red and black tablecloth of the usual service pattern gives the place a touch of colour, but beyond this and a couple of vases of tightly packed flowers on the table, and on the ship's side a print of the gallant old admiral after whom the ship is named, everything serves a strictly utilitarian purpose.

But in spite of its bareness the wardroom is very snug and comfortable. It is particularly inviting on returning from a spell at sea, when one goes below from the wet and chilly upper deck, to find everybody talking at the top of their voices, and pipes, cigarettes, and the stove all going full blast together. If it is after sunset and the ship is "darkened" the scuttles will all have their deadlights down, and the place will be very, what we may call "frowsty." The atmosphere, indeed, what with tobacco smoke and various unnameable but pungent odours from the pantry outside, might well be cut with a knife; but nobody seems to mind. It is warm, at any rate, and is ten thousand times better than the piercing wind and bitter cold on deck.

At sea it is not always pleasant. In heavy weather the stern of the ship has an unwholesome knack of jumping into the air and shaking itself like the tail of a dog. It is disconcerting, to say the least of it, particularly when the water sweeps its way aft along the upper deck in solid masses which no so-called watertight ventilator can keep out.

When the helm goes over suddenly, too, and the ship slaps her

stern into the heart of an advancing wave, a miniature Niagara comes pouring down the after-hatch, unless it happens to be shut. It rarely is. As a consequence the mess is sometimes inches deep in water, while the violent motion unships every moveable fitting in the place and flings it to the deck.

At times the dog Cuthbert, in his basket, the gramophone, many broken records, chairs, tumblers, apples and bananas, books, magazines, papers, knives and forks, a tinned tongue, and the cheese play a riotous game of leapfrog on the deck, with the dirty water sluicing after them.

From outside in the pantry come the crashing sounds of our rapidly disintegrating stock of crockery, and, if we dared to poke our noses inside this chamber of horrors, we should see a pale-faced officer's steward seated on a bench with his head held in his hands. A joint of cold beef, a loaf of bread, an empty pickle jar, and cups, saucers, and plates are probably playing touch-last in the sink. The floor is a noisome kedgerie of broken china and glass, sea water, pickles, chutney, condensed milk, and other articles of food. But the steward, poor wight, is past caring. He does not mind whether it is Christmas or Easter.

A good many of the others are sea-sick as well, for a destroyer in really bad weather is worse than a nightmare, while it is practically impossible to keep dry or to get proper food even if one wanted it. But yet there is a rumour going round that, through reasons of economy, we are shortly to be docked of our "hard-lying" money! But a word as to the inhabitants.

First comes the commander or lieutenant-commander in command. His cabin – which in heavy weather sometimes suffers the same fate as the wardroom, except that the litter on the deck is limited to water, clothes, books, and papers – is a good-sized apartment in the flat just forward of the wardroom. At sea he spends all his hours on the bridge or in the charthouse, and is only seen below for odd ten minutes at a time. In harbour, however, he has his meals in the wardroom with the other officers, but spends no small portion of his day at his writing-table in his cabin answering official conundrums as to why, for instance, two tablespoons and a napkin have been "lost overboard by accident in heavy weather" in the middle of a notoriously fine summer. He also grinds out official letters and reports by the sweat of his brow, and is gradually becoming a pastmaster in the art of "having the honour to be" somebody else's "obedient servant."

Living in the wardroom and knowing all the members of the ship's company by name brings him into very intimate touch with the men and their affairs. He knows of everything that goes on on board, and as most of the official correspondence of the ship is done by him he is a very busy man even in harbour. At one time he also had to write and thank those good-hearted people who sent mufflers, mittens, cigarettes, balaclava helmets, and peppermints to the "dear sailors."

Next comes the engineer-lieutenant-commander, or the "chief," as we call him. He, too, has his hands full, for besides being in charge of the turbines, boilers, and all the machinery

on board, he is also responsible for practically all the stores except provisions. They range in variety from what his store books call prenolphthaline, solution of; cans, iron, tinned, 4 galls.; bits, brace, carpenter's, centre, 1 1/4 inches; to flags, hand, nainsook, white, with dark blue stripe, 2 ft. by 2 ft.; watches, stop; bolts, steel, screwed, bright, hexagonal-headed, 1 in. by 2 in.; sealing wax, foolscap, paper fasteners, and pencils; and paint, green, Brunswick, middling, whatever that may be. This is just a small selection of the articles he keeps and has to account for at stocktaking, and if you turned out his various storerooms you would find he had sufficient articles to set up a combined ironmongery, ship chandlery, and stationery emporium.

Occasionally he also is bothered with conundrums. For instance, the naval store officer at one of the dockyard ports has a cheerful habit of forwarding a communication to the effect that "brushes, paint, three in number, and broomsticks, bundle of, one, demanded" on such and such a date "are in No. 8 store awaiting removal. Kindly send for them as soon as possible, or if ship has sailed kindly say where these articles should be sent." The ship always has sailed, and by the time the letter is received is usually hundreds of miles away in Scotland, Ireland, or Timbuctoo. Moreover, as the censorship regulations strictly forbid the ship's location to be mentioned, the chief curses.

His dilemma rather reminds us of the young and giddy naval officer who, after a riotous night in London forgot whether he had been appointed to H.M.S. Chatham at Dublin or H.M.S.

Dublin at Chatham!

Then we have the first lieutenant, the executive officer of the ship and the skipper's right-hand man. He is the go-between betwixt officers and men, is responsible for the ship's interior economy, cleanliness, and organisation, and has to be pretty shrewd and levelheaded. Energetic as well, for though a destroyer is a small vessel and carries under a hundred men all told, there is always something going on. In addition to his other duties, too, he takes turns in keeping watch at sea with the sub-lieutenant and gunner.

Next the sub-lieutenant. He is the veteran of our little party so far as this war is concerned, for before he came to us he was in a battleship in the Dardanelles. He is now the custodian of the charts, and has to keep them up to date, no easy matter in these strenuous times of Hun minefields. He also runs the ship's football team, which goes ashore and disports itself in green jerseys whenever it gets the opportunity. This, in itself, entails some work and an infinite amount of tact, particularly as fully half the ship's company wish to play.

Next the gunner (T), responsible for the torpedo armament, electrical fittings, and the actual mechanism and mountings of the guns. He is a very busy man, for his torpedoes, like children, always seem to have something the matter with their insides.

Then comes the surgeon probationer. He is not a fully qualified medical man, but a student from one of the large London hospitals temporarily enrolled in the Royal Naval

Volunteer Reserve. He gives hygiene lectures to the ship's company, attends to their cuts, contusions, and minor ailments, and packs them off to hospital or to the mother ship if necessary. After an action he would be more useful still.

Lastly the "Snotty" of the Royal Naval Reserve, who does odd jobs of all kinds and generally assists the first lieutenant and the sub.

"Cuthbert," our dog, is a Sealyham terrier. He lives either in the wardroom or the skipper's cabin. He has bad dreams sometimes, and makes strange noises in his sleep, but is the only member of our community who is really cheerful in bad weather, and is always ready for his food.

"Bo," or "Hobo," to give him his full name – somebody was reading Jack London's "The Road" when he came aboard as a tiny kitten – is a black-and-white tom-cat of plebeian origin. He is an honorary member of our mess and occasionally pays us visits at meal-times, and after nourishment sometimes condescends to occupy the armchair in front of the stove. He is very friendly with Cuthbert.

The first steward we had was an ex-valet. He suffered from a swollen head and what he was pleased to call a "college education." He may have been an excellent valet, but was no earthly good as the steward of a destroyer, and soon departed. His sins would fill a book. He used our expensive damask table napkins as dish cloths, involving us in endless complications with the Victualling Yard authorities, who objected to their being used

for such a purpose. He produced cold ham, biscuits, and pickles for breakfast, lunch, tea, and dinner. Excellent in their way, no doubt, but rather monotonous in the depths of winter. On one occasion he skinned a pheasant to save himself the trouble of plucking it – we will draw a veil over what happened.

The next caterer we had was an able seaman who re-entered the Navy as a volunteer for the war. He, during his time out of the Service, had been a sort of general factotum to some dark-skinned South American potentate. He is a real treasure – the A. B. I mean, not necessarily the potentate. He feeds us liberally and well, though it is true that he speedily discovered the virtues of tinned salmon. In fact we don't know what he would do without it, and the ubiquitous pig. Sometimes we have tinned salmon fish cakes and bacon for breakfast, tinned salmon kedgeree, cold ham, and pig brawn for lunch, and roast pork as a joint for dinner. By rights we should have grown cloven hooves and salmon scales, but we always have a pleasant feeling of repletion after meals and have no cause for real complaint.

Our amusements are simple. We talk a great deal of "shop" and argue a lot, read a great deal – some of us get through two "seven-pennies" a day – listen to the gramophone, write letters, play with the doctor's Meccano set, and try to persuade Cuthbert to strafe the cat.

Our arguments are of the usual naval variety. Positive assertion, followed by flat contradiction and personal abuse, terminating in a babel in which everybody shouts and no one

listens.

Sometimes, before breakfast, we have our early morning "hates," and are fractious and peevish. We long to strafe someone or something, and if, like the soldiers in the trenches, we had the Huns always with us, we might vent our spleen on them. But we can't, worse luck!

But please do not imagine that we are unhappy, because we aren't. Our mouldiness in the mornings is merely temporary. If we could but catch a Hun before breakfast!

BLOODLESS SURGERY

The climb had been a stiff one. The day was very hot, and, rather purple about the face and breathing heavily, the sailor relapsed on the springy, scented turf close to the cliff's edge and gazed pensively at the vista of shimmering sea spread out before him.

He was a massive, rotund, bull-necked individual, with a face the colour of a ripe tomato, and wore on the sleeves of his jumper two red good conduct badges and the single gun and star of an able seaman, seaman gunner, of His Majesty's Navy. His name was Smith, I discovered, and he was home on seven days' leave. I had met him halfway up the hill ten minutes before, toiling laboriously to the summit like an asthmatic cart-horse, and with his crimson face shining and beady with perspiration. A mutual glance and a casual remark about the excessive heat had led to conversation.

He now sat on the turf mopping his heated countenance with a mottled blue and white handkerchief; but a few minutes later, having recovered himself sufficiently to smoke, produced a pipe, tobacco box, and matches from the interior of his cap.

"You 'aint got a fill o' 'bacca abart you, I suppose, sir?" he queried, exploring the inner recesses of his brass tobacco box with a horny forefinger.

"I'm afraid it's rather weaker stuff than you're used to," I

remarked deprecatingly, handing my pouch across.

"Yus," he agreed, examining its contents and proceeding to fill his pipe. "It do look a bit like 'ay, don't it? 'Owever, seein' as 'ow I carn't git no more I'm werry much obliged, sir, I'm sure."

"It's expensive hay," I said weakly, as he handed my property back and lit his pipe. "It costs well over ten shillings a pound."

The ungrateful old sinner puffed out a cloud of smoke. "'Arf a Bradbury¹!" he grunted unsympathetically. "You're jokin', sir."

I shook my head.

"But we pays a bob a pound fur 'bacca on board o' the ship," he expostulated. "It's something like 'bacca; grips you by the neck, like."

Evidently the delicate flavour of my best John Cotton did not sufficiently tickle his brazen palate.

For a moment or two there was silence between us as we watched the gulls screaming and wheeling over some object in the water far beneath us.

"Well," I asked, merely to start a conversation, "how d'you like the Navy?"

"Suits me all right, sir," he said, "seein' as 'ow I've bin in it a matter o' fifteen year. But between you an' me, sir," he hastened to add, "it ain't like wot it wus when I fust jined. It's full o' noo-fangled notions an' sichlike."

"What d'you mean?" I asked in some amazement.

"Carn't say no more, sir. Afore we wus sent on leaf we wus all

¹ A "Bradbury" is one of the new £1 notes. So called from the signature at the bottom.

cautioned special not to git talkin' abart the Service wi' civvies."

I suppose I did look rather unlike a member of His Majesty's land forces, for I was wearing plain clothes and had only come out of hospital four days before, after being wounded for the second time on the western front. (I am speaking of the fighting line in France, not anatomically.) I hastened to explain who I was.

"Sorry I spoke, sir," he apologised. "I thought you wus one o' these 'ere la-de-dah blokes out fur an arrin'. Wot did you say your corpse wus?"

"Corpse! What corpse?"

"Corpse, sir. Rig'mint."

"Oh, I see. I'm only a doctor, a Lieutenant in the R.A.M.C. I'm on sick leave, and crawled up here to-day to get some fresh air and to ... er, meet someone I know." I looked at my wrist watch and glanced over my shoulder.

"Young lady, sir?" he queried in a husky, confidential whisper. I nodded.

"I'm on the same lay meself," he told me, with a throaty sigh and a lovelorn look in his blue eyes. "Expectin' 'er any minit now, seein' as 'ow it's 'er arternoon art. 'Er name's Hamelia, an' I don't come up 'ere to look at the perishin' sea, not 'arf I don't. I gits fair sick o' lookin' at it on board o' the ship."

I was not in the mood for exchanging confidences as to my prospective matrimonial affairs, and my silence must have said as much.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir; but seein' as 'ow you're a doctor, I

wonder if you 'appens to know our bloke in the *Jackass*?"

"Who, your doctor?"

"Yessir. Tall orficer 'e is, close on six foot 'igh, wi' black 'air, wot jined the Navy special fur the war. Name o' Brown."

"I'm afraid I don't know him," I said, puzzling my brains to fit any medical man of my acquaintance to his very loose description.

"'E's a fair corker, sir," my companion grinned.

"In what way?"

"The way 'e gits 'is leg pulled, sir."

I scented a story, and as there was still no flutter of a white skirt down the slope to our right, I desired him to continue.

"Well, sir," he started, "it wus like this 'ere. The *Jackass* is one o' these 'ere light cruisers, and one mornin' at 'arf parst nine, arter the fust lootenant, – Number One, as we calls 'im, – arter 'e 'ad finished tellin' off the 'ands for their work arter divisions, the doctor 'appened to be standin' close alongside 'im, Number One beckons to the chief buffer..."

"I beg your pardon," I put in, rather mystified. "I'm afraid I don't know very much about the Navy. What's a chief buffer?"

"Chief Bos'un's Mate, wot looks arter the upper deck, sir. Name o' Scroggins. Well, sir, Number One sez to 'im, 'Scroggins,' 'e sez. 'You knows them buoys we was usin' yesterday?' – 'Yessir,' I 'ears the chief buffer say. 'You means them wot we 'ad fur that there boat racin' yesterday?' – 'Yes,'

sez Jimmy the One.² 'I wants 'em all bled before seven bells this mornin'.' – 'Aye, aye, sir,' sez Scroggins, and goes off to see abart it."

"Bleed the boys!" I murmured in surprise. "Do you mean to tell me they still have these archaic methods in the Navy?"

"Course they does, sir," answered the A. B. "They won't float else."

"What, in case the ship is torpedoed or sunk by a mine?" I asked innocently, very perplexed. "I'm a medical man myself; but I never knew that bleeding people made them more buoyant!"

"If you arks me these 'ere questions, sir, I carn't spin no yarn," the sailor interrupted with a twinkle in his eye. "Well, sir, the fust loutenant tells the chief buffer to 'ave the buoys bled, but it so 'appens that the doctor 'eard wot 'e said, so up 'e comes. – 'Did I 'ear you tellin' the Chief Bos'un's Mate to 'ave the boys bled?' he arks. – 'You did indeed, Sawbones,' Number One tells 'im. – 'But surely that's my bizness?' sez the doctor. – 'Your bizness!' sez Number One, frownin' like. "Ow in 'ell d'you make that art?' – "Cos I'm the medical orficer o' this 'ere ship.' – 'Ah,' sez Number One, slow like and grinnin' all over 'is face and tappin' 'is nose. 'You means, doc., that I've no right to order the boys to be bled, wot?' – 'That's just 'xactly wot I does mean,' sez the doctor, gittin' a bit rattled like."

² "Jimmy the One," a lower-deck nickname for the First Lieutenant.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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