

**A FLEET IN BEING: NOTES
OF TWO TRIPS WITH THE
CHANNEL SQUADRON**

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A Fleet in Being: Notes of Two Trips with the Channel Squadron by Rudyard Kipling

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RUDYARD KIPLING

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CHANNEL SQUÁDRON

BY
RUDYARD KIPLING

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A FLEET IN BEING

CHAPTER I

*' . . . the sailor men
That sail upon the seas,
To fight the Wars and keep the Laws,
And live on yellow peas.'*

'A Gunroom Ditty-Box.' G. S. BOWLES.

SOME thirty of her Majesty's men-of-war were involved in this matter ; say a dozen battleships of the most recent, and seventeen or eighteen cruisers ; but my concern was limited to one of a new type commanded by an old friend. I had some dim knowledge of the interior of a warship, but none of the new world into which I stepped from a Portsmouth wherry one wonderful summer evening in '97.

With the exception of the Captain, the Chief Engineer, and maybe a few petty officers, nobody was more than twenty-eight years old. They ranged in the ward-room from this resourceful age to twenty-six or seven clear-cut, clean-shaved young faces with all

manner of varied experience behind them. When one comes to think, it is only just that a light 20-knot cruiser should be handled, under guidance of an older head, by affable young gentlemen prepared, even sinfully delighted, to take chances not set down in books. She was new, they were new, the Admiral was new, and we were all off to the *Manœuvres* together—thirty keels next day threading their way in and out between a hundred and twenty moored vessels not so fortunate. We opened the ball, for the benefit of some foreign warships, with a piece of rather pretty steering. A consort was coming up a waterlane, between two lines of shipping, just behind us; and we nipped in immediately ahead of her, precisely as a hansom turning out of Bond Street nips in in front of a City 'bus. Distance on water is deceptive, and when I vowed that at one crisis I could have spat on the wicked ram of our next astern, pointed straight at our naked turning side, the ward-room laughed.

'Oh, that's nothing,' said a gentleman of twenty-two. 'Wait till we have to keep station to-night. It's my middle watch.'

'Close water-tight doors, then,' said a Sub-Lieutenant. 'I say' (this to the passenger) 'if you find a second-class cruiser's ram in the small of your back at midnight don't be alarmed.'

FASCINATING GAME OF GENERAL POST

We were then strung out in a six-mile line, thirty ships, all heading Westwards. As soon as we found room the Flagship began to signal, and there followed

a most fascinating game of general post. When I came to know our signalmen on the human side I appreciated it even more. The Admiral wreathed himself with flags, strings of them; the signalman on our high little, narrow little bridge, telescope jammed to his eye, read out the letters of that order; the Quartermaster spun the infantine wheel; the Officer of the Bridge rumbled requests down the speaking-tube to the engine-room, and away we fled to take up station at such and such a distance from our neighbours, ahead and astern, at such and such an angle on the Admiral, his bow or beam. The end of it was a miracle to lay eyes. The long line became four parallel lines of strength and beauty, a mile and a quarter from flank to flank, and thus we abode till evening. Two hundred yards or so behind us the ram of our next astern planed through the still water; an equal distance in front of us lay the oily water from the screw of our next ahead. So it was ordered, and so we did, as though glued into position. But our Captain took up the parable and bade me observe how slack we were, by reason of recent festivities, compared to what we should be in a few days. 'Now we're all over the shop. The ships haven't worked together, and station-keeping isn't as easy as it looks.' Later on I found this was perfectly true.

A VARYING STRAIN

One thing more than all the rest impresses the passenger on a Queen's ship. She is seldom for three whole hours at the same speed. The liner clear

of her dock strikes her pace and holds it to her journey's end, but the man-of-war must always have two or three knots up her sleeve in case the Admiral demands a spurt; she must also be ready to drop three or four knots at the wave of a flag; and on occasion she must lie still and meditate. This means a varying strain on all the mechanism, and constant strain on the people who control it.

I counted seven speeds in one watch, ranging from eight knots to seventeen, which, with eleven, was our point of maximum vibration. At eight knots you heard the vicious little twin-screws jiggiting like restive horses; at seventeen they pegged away into the sea like a pair of short-gaited trotting ponies on a hard road. But one felt, even in dreams, that she was being held back. Those who talk of a liner's freedom from breakdown should take a 7,000 horsepower boat and hit her and hold her for a fortnight all across the salt seas.

IN CLUB AND COTERIES

After a while I went to the galley to get light on these and other matters. Once forward of the deck torpedo-tubes you enter another and a fascinating world of seamen-gunners, artificers, cooks, Marines (we had twenty and a sergeant), ship's boys, signalmen, and the general democracy. Here the men smoke at the permitted times, and in clubs and coteries gossip and say what they please of each other and their superiors. Their speech is soft (if every one spoke aloud you could not hear yourself think on a cruiser), their gestures are few (if a man swung

his arms about he would interfere with his neighbour), their steps are noiseless as they pop in and out of the forward flats ; they are at all times immensely interesting, and, as a rule, delightfully amusing. Their slang borrows from the engine-room, the working parts of guns, the drill-book, and the last music-hall song. It is delivered in a tight-lipped undertone ; the more excruciatingly funny parts without a shade of expression. The first thing that strikes a casual observer is their superb health ; next, their quiet adequateness ; and thirdly, a grave courtesy. But under the shell of the new Navy beats the heart of the old. All Marryat's immortals are there, better fed, better tended, better educated, but at heart unchanged. I heard Swinburne laying down the law to his juniors by the ash-shoot ; Chucks was there, too, inquiring in the politest manner in the world what a friend meant by spreading his limbs about the landscape ; and a lineal descendant of Dispart fussed over a 4in. gun that some one had been rude to. They were men of the world, at once curiously simple and curiously wily (this makes the charm of the Naval man of all ranks), coming and going about their businesses like shadows.

NOT FROM THE ADMIRALTY STANDPOINT

They were all keenly interested in the Manœuvres—not from the Admiralty standpoint, but the personal. Many of them had served under one or other of the Admirals, and they enlightened their fellows, as you shall later hear.