

The Dog Watches on a British Man-of-War

By BARTIMEUS

The corporal of the watch steps to the bell and jerks the lanyard that hangs from the chapper; eight bells of the afternoon watch, and as the last reverberating stroke dies away the row of buglers take deep breaths and "evening quarters" sounds along the busy decks. Aboard of the weather line a red flag creeps to the flag-ship's foremast-head, and from ship to ship the sirens wail the fleet numbers.

Before each division mustered in the battery stands a mid-shipman, notebook in hand, mustering the men by name. It is evidently a familiar duty, for he is doing it by memory, rarely glancing at the list of names he holds. The sixtieth name is called in a clear, boyish tenor, the mid-shipman shuts his book with a triumphant snarl, salutes the Lieutenant of the division, and reports "All present, sir!" The Lieutenant walks quickly round the ranks, running his eye over each man as he passes, and hurries forward to the fore shelter-deck, where the Commander stands.

"Third division correct, sir!" Simultaneously the officers of the forecastle, foretop, and marine divisions arrive, make their reports, and swing down the ladder again to their divisions. The Commander turns to a midshipman behind him.

"Who am I waiting for?" "Fourth division, sir."

"Tell him I'm waiting." The boy darts aft, better-ketter down the steel ladder, and along the battery; he is the Commander's "Doggie"—a stormy petrel. At the battery door he meets the Lieutenant of the fourth division.

"Please, sir, Commander's waiting," he pants.

Presently the Commander ascends to

the forebridge, where the Captain stands with dividers and ruler leaning over the chart.

"Quarters correct, sir." From the flag-ship's bridge a hoist of flags flutters towards the masthead.

"Hands scrub and wash clothes, sir," calls a yeoman of signals, his glass steadied against the bridge rail. The bugles sound "Disperse," and the divisions turn forward, step outward, and the orderly ranks melt into a confused throng of men.

The officer of the afternoon watch "turns over" to his relief, descends the ladder and walks aft. The quarterdeck is deserted, and through the wardroom skylight comes the clink of tea-cups and the hum of cheerful voices. Presently a funnel-clad figure appears up the hatchway; he stands whistling a little tune for a minute, and then gravely balances himself upon his hands. He is joined by two more youngsters clad in flannel trousers and sweaters, and in an instant the three are tearing pell-mell round the deck in an indiscriminate game of "Touch last"; this is the one period of the day when skylarking on the quarterdeck is permitted, and in a few minutes a dozen laughing figures are panting and scuffling round the barbettes.

"What about Prisoner's Base?" says some one, and pandemonium reigns supreme. You might not recognise in the athletic, ruddy-faced man tearing past in shouting pursuit the stern officer who, with a row of laurel-leaves adorning his cap-peaks, had an hour before reported "Quarters correct!" His grey-haired quarry will never see his fortieth summer again, and as you watch him clear the capstan in one clean bound, and subside laughing and panting on to the bollards you forget the three rings of lace that

will encircle his mess jacket cuff at dinner.

"Oh, Lord," he gasps, "I'm too old for these pranks!" and anon he is off again, hot on the trail of a nimble footed mid-shipman—aye, and catches him, too, by vaulting a five-foot armoured covering to the skylight.

To a stranger there may be something irresponsible and even puerile in the amusements of this breathless, laughing crowd of boy-men. He has learned, perhaps, to regard "Prisoner's Base" and "Touch-last," as the pastimes of school-boys—as indeed they are. But these pupils in life's sternest school (lest the iron, amidst which they have their being, enter also into their soul) return in leisure moments to the games of boyhood, ere the silver cord of youth be loosed, and the years draw nigh wherein they shall have no pleasure.

One by one the players drop out exhausted and throw themselves on the glæce of the barrette to rest; then two youngsters slip on the gloves, and stand facing each other in the glare of the sunset sky. "Time," says somebody, and there is silence, broken only by the patter of agile feet, the thud of the gloves, and the sound of the quick breathing. With infinite good humour they circle round, each lean, set face, relaxing into a boyish smile as a clever feint succeeds, hitting with all the strength of their clean young bodies and the science learned in "Britannia" days. And, watching the determined lines of mouth and jaw and the unflinching eyes as the gloved fist goes home, you may learn in some measure what manner of men are these that go down to the sea in ships.

Beyond the screen doors the smell of soapsuds mingles in the batteries with the wreaths of tobacco smoke. With trousers rolled up and discarded jumpers, the bluejackets are seated round the tubs and kettles scrubbing their clothes. The "raggies" work together, yarning over the tubs as they souse and rinse each article to a regulation whiteness—which, my brethren is the whiteness of white samite! Later they are "stopped" to long clothes-lines and tried up above the forecastle to dry.

In the wardroom a few figures are lounging in the padded armchairs with pipes and novels. One of them is the Lieutenant of the afternoon watch, who, having paced the bridge for four consecu-

tive hours is refreshing himself with a short nap before dinner, mindful that he will be on watch again at midnight. Next to him sits an officer with his arm in a sling and one bandaged leg supported on a chair. Life in a modern man-of-war, even in peace time, is not without its peculiar jeopardies; he leans back, smiling faintly, as the sounds of "skylarking" come through the skylight. If that six-inch wire hadn't taken charge the other day. . . . He aims a book at the sleeping Lieutenant. "Wake up, you lazy beggar, and out for a gin and bitters."

On the quarterdeck the boxing is over, and two combatants in mask and jerkins cross sabres for a bout before the light fails. A sinewy physical training instructor is giving wrestling lessons on a large mat near the hatchway, and further aft a lithe figure is swinging Indian clubs. Suddenly the "Dress" bugle sounds from below, and there is a stampede to cabin and chest: the pungent smell of "Elliman's" pervades the steerage-flat, and from the bathrooms come the sound of splashing and chatter of voices.

Once more the notes of the bugle ring out above the wail of the violins, as the band commences tuning up.

"Officers' wives eat puddings and pies," chants the Stormy Petrel, to the notes of the bugle-call, adjusting his tie in the small mirror that hangs in the lid of his chest. A passing messmate pauses on his way to the gun-room.


"Snack it about, my son; it's duff night!"

The Stormy Petrel slams down his chest lid, and presently, seated with a score of his brethren, wields knife and fork in a manner worthy of the startled consideration of gods and men.

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