

# A Matter of Coal.

By W. A. CHAPMAN.

**T**HE Second Division of the Home Fleet had been coaling all day, and were still at it when night fell. I took a boat and rowed out into Weymouth Bay, round the inexorable battleship-cruiser, close-hugged to a gaunt, long-funnelled collier, flying a blue ensign. Under the white glare of the arc-lights I could see black gangs busy between barbettes, and black processions rushing hither and yon with full sacks on little iron trolleys. Over the rattle of the winches there rose from the collier's forehold a verse of the "Cruisers' Coaling Song":—

Every 'oist is 'alf a ton, dumpin' on the deck,  
Every 'old is racin' all the others, neck an' neck,  
The Jollies with the trolleys—Hit they're earnin' all their pay,  
Rollin' roun' the bunker-oles, coalin' ship to-day.

O—I say:  
Coalin' ship to-day!

Next morning, strolling on White Horse Hill, I nearly fell over a large petty officer, reclining on the turf, and surveying the world at large with his hat over his eyes. We exchanged affable greetings. "Had a busy time yesterday," I observed, indicating the fleet in the bay below.

"Yes, an' they'll be havin' it ten cents busier to-day, holdin' a water carnival over the muck. I was watchin' em."

"Weren't you there then?" I asked; the name on his cap-ribbon was somewhere over his further ear.

"Me? I imagine not. I don't belong to that invincible armada just now. I'm a returned exile enjoyin' the blessin's of the land an' the fruits of my labours after a two-year sojourn under the Southern Cross. Still, bein' on a visit to a relative of mine nearabouts who follows pastoral pursuits, I can't resist an occasional desire to watch the toil of my gallant brothers in arms—from a distance.

"Yes," he continued, "it wasn't bad coalin'." Some of 'em were whackin' in their two hundred an hour. That's not bad, from colliers. An' I've sampled all ways; colliers, wharves, lighters, lorchas—an' wheelbarrows."

"Wheelbarrows?" I queried, for I too knew something of how warships coal, and this was a novel method.

"Aye, ten wheelbarrows, an' very nearly a prambulator!"

"Wherever was this?"

"At Drumlechie, a peaceful village in Caledonia; time—several years back."

"Tell me about it."

He charged a dark and ancient briar with similar hued tobacco from an enormous pouch, borrowed my matches, and puffed blue suffocation into the sweet morning air.

"'Twas in the summer manoeuvres, when I was coxswain of the O4.5, a torpedo boat—scrapped now—where you could look down the funnels from the deck, an' where you lived in a crouchin' attitude, circumnavigatin' on all fours.

"Our skipper was a red-haired sub-lieutenant called Randall—Doggo Randall. He was the only son of his ma, an' had lakhs of rupees.

"We were attached to the Green Fleet, located at Stranraer, an' waitin' for our foes, the Pink Fleet, to come along an' invite us out. This they were in no hurry about, bein' busy with our trusty allies the Browns, who were ravagin' their native coast, which was Ireland.

"So we torpedo craft passed the time in sailin' furth by sections an' makin' circumspicious sorties.

"One afternoon, bein' detached, an' the furthest boat out, we became involved in a proper blanketin' Scotch fog—the sort you can take handfuls of, an' play snowballs with. In the event it broke back an' rolled up the coast, an' revealed to our affrighted gaze half a dozen Pink destroyers, with a brace of gunboats, between us an' our friends.

"They'd been intendin' to pay a casual afternoon call, an' see how we were gettin' on—from a discreet distance—an' assure us we weren't forgotten.

"While we were still repeatin' in uni-

son the time-honoured formula about bein' damned, one of the gunboats had the exceedin' bad taste to discharge ordnance, an' pursue us with haste an' vigour.

"We fled precipitous down the coast under forced draught, the gunboat belin' after us a couple o' miles astern. An', as the 'Birkenhead' feller says, "Right on our flank the crimson sun went down." That stinkin' gunboat must have assumed us to be a dispatch runner, for she hung on after us through the fallin' shades o' twilight, though losin' ground. The O4.5 could do her twenty then, easy.

"Now we'd been due to coal that night at Stranraer, so when Hicksshaw, our chief tifie, appeared on the platform we called a bridge, moppin' his brow an' smellin' vile of oil, I guessed what was comin'.

"'Fraid we're done in, sir,' he says. "How so?" says Doggo.

"We've only another two hours' coal left, sir, at this speed. We'll have to be towed back into Stranraer if we go any further."

"Sufferin' serpents!" says Doggo. An' he scratches his red poll, scowlin' at the gunboat, still loomin' large on the twilight horizon.

"If I mistake not," he says, "our pursuer is the Pouncer, commanded by a person called Boone-Drexel, whom I don't love. Furthermore, he heard me refer to his command as a crab-whasin' Pondgee bumboat some time back. I've reason to believe he was offended. No," he says, "I will never consent to be led captive by Boone-Drexel, or something like that. He pores over the chart. You can give us two hours?" he says to Hicksshaw.

"That at the outside, sir."

"Well, another hour will drop that pestilent bug-trap out o' sight. Then we can ease down. Carry on till all's blue, Hicksshaw."

"Well, as the 'Revenge' feller says, 'The moon riz up an' the stars came out far over the summer seas,' an' the Pouncer became lost to our hungerin' vision, an' towards ten o'clock we eased to half-speed. We were all speculatin' how long we'd have to drift before they sent to look for us an' tow us back, but Doggo seemed quite happy. He went below an' came up whistlin' hymns, an' cramm'in' a pocket-book in his pocket.

"Then we rounded a point, an' saw a light or two under the land.

"That," says Doggo, "is Drumlechie. After course therunto, coxswain!"

"We closed the land, slid past a little breakerboat, nosed through a mob o' fishin' boats, an' ties up alongside a stone jetty. It was nearly eleven by then, an' Nature was wrapped in darkness an' slumber.

"We'll create a furore in this tranquil township," says Doggo. "Tell Hicksshaw to keep steam handy with what coal he's got, an' the hands to clean in coalin' rig."

"This we did, wonderin' how long fishin' villages had been recognised bases for supplyin' navies with fuel.

"By the law o' maritime warfare," says Doggo, "we are now interned till the cessation of hostilities. We should be dismantled, disbanded, disarmed, dissolved, dispersed. But what care I for laws an' lawgivers—or somethin' like that—an' umpires o' gold an' brass?" He looks in his pocket-book. "May I not purchase me fuel with mine own patrimony? But first must I sound a native."

"Up from the cuddy of the nearest fishin' boat looms the watch aboard, in advanced deshabille, amazement writ large on his countenance. Come to think of it, it is somewhat unusual for the British navy to bustle unheralded into fishin' villages under cover o' darkness, an' monopolise the wharfage.

"'Wha's you steamer?' says the watch aboard.

"We're His Majesty's Torpedo Boat O4.5. Does this idyllic hamlet possess anything so sordid as a coalmanger?" says Doggo, or something like that.

"'Eh?"

"'Eh be sigured! Does this thirvin' burg own a citizen that traffics in coal?"

"The watch aboard surveyed us with

a lantern, promiscuous an' bovine, while Doggo danced on the deck plates. Finally, in the rude dialect of his nation, he gave us to understand that one Murdo McBean vended that commodity, that his yard an' habitation were up the main street, that he'd be in bed the noo, an' wad we be waitin' coal the night?"

"We wull," says Doggo, an' clambers up on the jetty, to disappear in the parlous o' Drumlechie.

"Half an hour later we sighted him approaching under forced draught. He opened fire at extreme hearin' range.

"Tell Hicksshaw to have bunkers open an' trimmers standin' by. Mr. Bolitho—that was the gunner—to remain aboard in charge. Every other man-jack on the beach!" We assembled on terra-firma. "Coxswain," he says, "I fear I've very seriously perturbed the worthy McBean. But I'm a great man. I'm a coal king. I've cornered the Drumlechie coal supply—at a most famous price. The contents of the McBean yard, twenty tons odd, are ours, together with all the conscience an' objections of its owner. But the blighter hasn't a cart in commission. It's in dock, undergoin' extensive reht." He turns to the troops, an' lugs out a bag o' silver. "Men," he says, "I have here many shekels. Rosee the denizens o' Drumlechie systematically an' with despatch, an' hire wheelbarrows—big ones. Spare not the cost. Be firm an' courteous. Remember Lalysmith, an' no lootin'. Sweezy-moy—or somethin' like that. He was right. We created a furore. Oh, most indubitably! Inhabitants o' the United Kingdom haven't yet got accustomed to be routed up at midnight by unwashed pirates in coalin' rig, demandin' wheelbarrows in the name of the King.

"There were some peculiar scenes. Most peculiar. Our foragin' party ranged promiscuous through the dark by-ways, tumult followin' in its train. Every abode that backed on a patch o' garden, or looked likely to own a wheelbarrow, became a centre of perturbation. Doggo was ubiquitous, as you might say, with apologies, exhortations, an' half-crowns. He fostered a vague impression that the Gaul was thunderin' at the gates of Glasgow. There was openin' o' windows, an' bobbin' forth o' sheeted apparitions. There was alarum an' excursion, with dynamic upheavin' o' slow-movin' intellects. Drumlechie began to emerge 'ong masse,' amazement writ large on its countenance.

"When we foregathered at last in the main street, opposite McBean's yard, with ten barrows an' their highly suspicious owners, we had a gathering of the clans behind us in semi-deshabille. McBean, in shirt an' pants, was expandin' matters to the local constabulary who was scribblin' in a notebook. He demanded further elucidation from Doggo, an' got it terse an' misleadin'. There was a tumult on the flank of the populace, an' Tom Sings, our leadin' torpedo-man, appeared trundlin' a prambulator, in ballast. But a shriekin' female grabbed him by the collar within sight o' safety, so to speak, an' Tom wriggled clear with half a serge jumper in the hands of the foe, also the prambulator. Doggo, tryin' hard not to laugh, told him to consider himself under open arrest for lootin', an' then we got to work by moonlight on the Drumlechie coal supply.

"The populace, havin' grasped somethin' o' the inwardness o' things, descended 'ong masse' to the jetty to view O4.5. The vanguard of our far-dung coalin' line took 'em in rear at the charge, wheel foremost.

"Such night in Scotland ne'er had been, an' he'er again shall be. The strenuous life prevailed in Drumlechie that night, an' the spirit o' hustle moved abroad, scatterin' nubs o' coal all down the street, an' squashin' in many toes. McBean's yard was in full possession o' four lusty an' dusty able-bodied muleteers armed with shovels, an' the deck o' O4.5—what there was of it—was dangerous to be alive on, because o' bunker holes an' flyin' coal.

"Between these two points o' concentration our cavalcade o' barrows moved at varyin' velocities. Hatchett, our signalman, led the line, blowin' tactical signals on an exceedin' shrill whistle, an' when they wasn't peltin' down loaded, with barbaric yells, they were canterin' up empty, an' chauntin', "I had a wheelbarrow, the great wheel went round!"

"Doggo was busy interviewin' deputations o' the populace. When he wasn't assurin' some elderly female that her bit cottage would not be plundered an' burnt that night, he was soothin' some pillar of the kirk who'd been har-

rowed by random profanity. Presently we saw him across the road in the portals of the local 'Marriage', parleyin' with the local constabulary. We suspected bribery an' corruption, an' the velocity o' things increased in direct ratio. Our suspicions were confirmed five minutes later, when he detailed two hands for special duty in connection with a nine-gallon cask. They rolled it across very tenderly, an' established it in a corner of the yard. Doggo assumed the office o' ship's steward, with a pint pot, an' superintended the subsequent lubrication o' transport, takin' careful stock o' recipients.

"There were divers attempts at dual personification, aided by lavish coal dust applied to the features, but Doggo was exceedin' fly. One pint per man per hour, perhaps, was his immutable scale o' lubrication. The attentions an' proximity o' the adult male populace commenced to be embarrassin' about now, an' the local constabulary emerged, wipin' his mouth, from his strategic ambush in the side parlour o' 'Marriage' to take measuras accordin'.

"When the bearin's o' transport had been sufficiently oiled pro tem, Doggo sent the refreshment booth on a barrow down to the quay, consignin' it to the gunner for the benefit of the trimmin' party. There was a determined attempt at highway robbery on route, which it was my painful duty to frustrate. Well, the fruits of our darlin' toil was largely apparent in McBean's coal yard, which was fast becomin' an achin' void, an' the populace o' Drumlechie was beginnin' to resume its virtuous couch when Hatchett appeared, sprintin' up street, minus his barrow, an' palpitatin' with lubricated excitement. He burst into the banquet-hall—coal yard, I should say—fell on one knee over a shovel an' swearin', an' shouted: "My Lord, the foe approaches, or something like that.

"In other words, there was searchlight signalin' in the oilin', furtive an' insistent. Doggo became the personification o' dynamic energy.

"Drop ever it—thing!" he howls. "Get down an' aboard!"

"An' without pausin' to bid farewell to the paralysed McBean he lit down to the waterside.

"We dropped everythin' an' followed, an' our line o' retreat was dotted with capized barrows, their owners beatin' delectful. We dove a path through the wonderin' populace, an' arrived tumultuous at the jetty. Hicksshaw was raisin' steam. The fans were hummin', an' the funnels were actin' volcanic. Right out at sea a searchlight beam was pokin' among the clouds.

"Can't make sense of it, sir," says the gunner. "But 'tain't our code. They've been at it five minutes now."

"All aboard an' cast off," yells Doggo. Hatchett displayed remarkable aplomb in the crisis. He dug me in the ribs, an' kicked the cask, which was standin' on the edge, an' still contained considerable powers of lubrication. "Are we goin' to leave this to the mercy o' Giths an' Vandals?" he says. "Somehow not," says I, an' while Doggo was gazin' seaward we lowered it down very tenderly, an' I stowed it surreptitiously among the harness casks. Its retreat was watched with lamentation by the adult male populace.

"Then we backed out stealthily an' circumspicious, scrapin' the nearest fishin' boat as we slowed. The watch aboard came up hurriedly, in the same advanced deshabille, an' threatened us with law, callin' us murderin' wreckers. The populace o' Drumlechie 'ong masse, an' with mingled feelings, watched us 'have out past the breakerboat. The owner o' one of the barrows that had somehow got slightly dismantled told us in a foghorn voice that we were callous an' destructive reprobates.

"An' so we went to sea.

"I could a tale unfold of our thairlin' dash north again, of how we niggled past their cruiser screen in the dark, torpedoed the Pouncer in the balmy dawn on the edge of another obliqu' fogbank, fleein' into Stranraer at sunrise with news of the approachin' armada, an' of how the admiral wept tears o' gratitude without askin' questions. But I haven't time now. I've an appointment with my pastoral relative this mornin', to skin a fowl or pluck a pig or somethin', I forget exactly. Good-mornin'."

Hostess (after presenting fan to prize-winner at whist drive)—Really, I'm afraid it's hardly worth accepting! Winner (appraising its worth)—Oh, thank you so much; it's just the kind of fan I wanted—ones that I shouldn't mind losing.