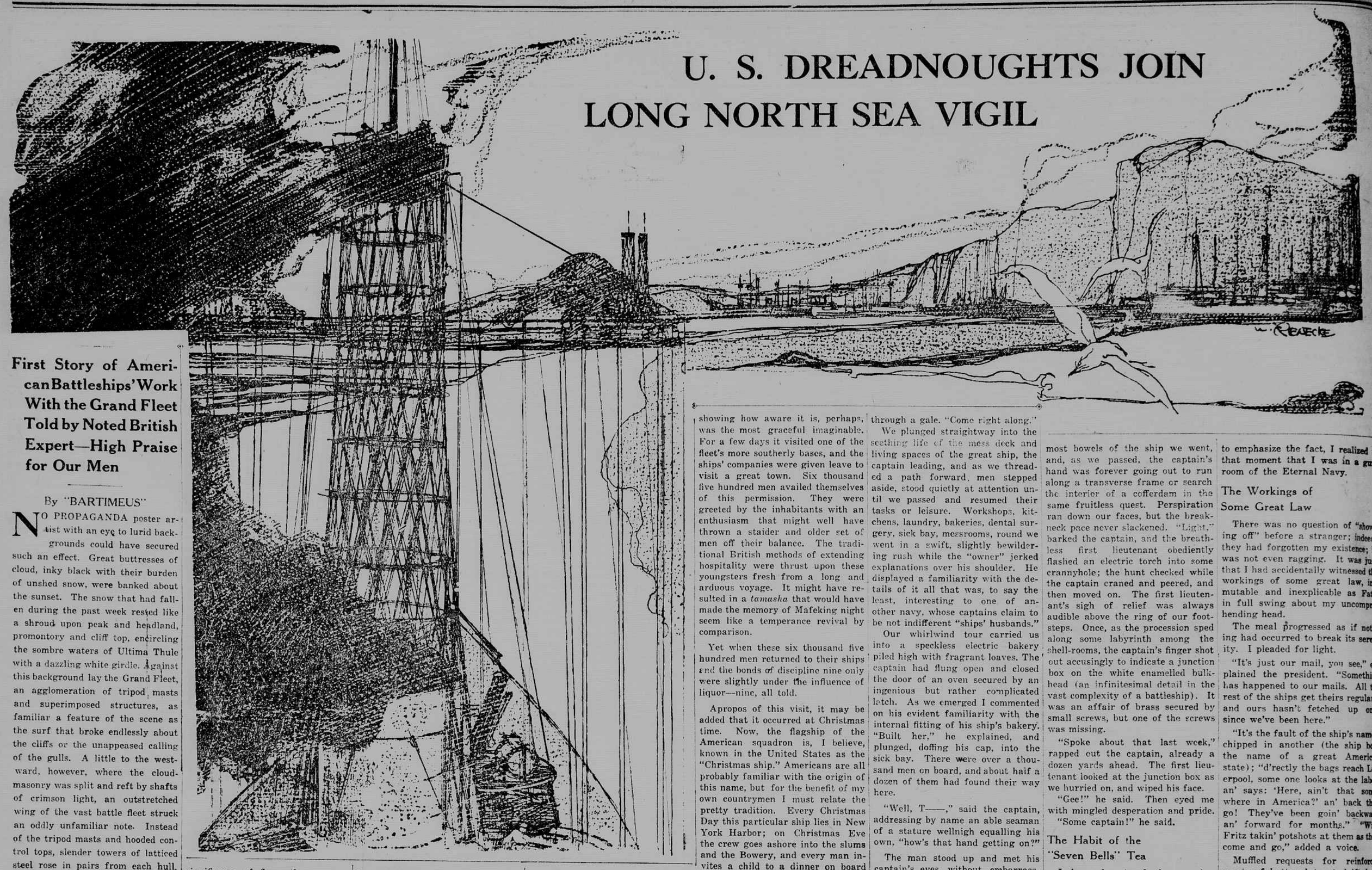
U. S. DREADNOUGHTS JOIN LONG NORTH SEA VIGIL



First Story of American Battleships' Work With the Grand Fleet Told by Noted British Expert—High Praise for Our Men

By "BARTIMEUS"

NO PROPAGANDA poster artist with an eye to lurid backgrounds could have secured such an effect. Great buttresses of cloud, inky black with their burden of unshed snow, were banked about the sunset. The snow that had fallen during the past week rested like a shroud upon peak and headland, promontory and cliff top, encircling the sombre waters of Ultima Thule with a dazzling white girdle. Against this background lay the Grand Fleet, an agglomeration of tripod masts and superimposed structures, as familiar a feature of the scene as the surf that broke endlessly about the cliffs or the unappeased calling of the gulls. A little to the westward, however, where the cloud-masonry was split and reft by shafts of crimson light, an outstretched wing of the vast battle fleet struck an oddly unfamiliar note. Instead of the tripod masts and hooded control tops, slender towers of latticed steel rose in pairs from each hull. Against the black clouds every ensign of the fleet was clearly discernible, but it was not the white ensign that showed up so vividly above the strangers. It was the Stars and Stripes painted with the glory of a northern sunset.

Only a few weeks had elapsed since they arrived, rust streaked and travel-stained, as ships might well be that had battled through one winter gale after another from Chesapeake Bay to Ultima Thule, and at the sight of them the gray, war-weary battle fleet of Britain burst into a roar of welcome such as had never before greeted a stranger within its gates in either peace or war. For—and herein lies the magic of the thing—these were not merely allies swinging up onto the flank of a common battle line, but kinsmen joining kinsmen as an integral part of one fleet. The rattle of their cables through the hawser pipes was drowned by the tumult of cheering, and forthwith the American admiral dispatched a cablegram to Washington, whose laconic, businesslike brevity alone did justice to what may prove the most significant message of history: "Arrived as per schedule," it said.

The Reason for Merging the Fleets

This linking of the two navies may need an explanation. It may be asked (it will be asked, if I know anything of the talkers in this war): Could not the American fleet coöperate in the war without merging its identity in that of the British? The answer is this: Victory in modern naval warfare demands more than mere coöperation between allied squadrons. Navies fight otherwise than armies, whose generals can meet and confer even during the crisis of a battle. Squadrons working in unity afloat require one controlling intellect, one source of orders and information, one pair of shoulders and one only to take the burden of final responsibility.

Hence, to the sure shield of civilization and the Allied cause has been added a formidable buckler. The Grand Fleet has had grafted onto its side a new rib and a stout one.

It must be realized, however, that a common speech between the nations does not necessarily mean that their respective navies talk in the same tongue. The system of signalling in the American fleet, the significance of flags, the arrangement of codes and ciphers are peculiarly and completely theirs. The meanings of the flags had nothing in common with the British. Their system has been evolved through generations; is, so to speak, their navy's mother tongue. The signalmen of the —th Battle Squadron, blowing on their numbed fingers amid the snows of Ultima Thule, had to forget in twenty-four hours what had been laboriously taught them for years. They had to master a different colored alphabet as it is glimpsed two miles away, tangled up in halliards or half obscured by funnel and mayhap battle smoke. Manœuvres on a scale they had hitherto regarded as exceptional, fleet exercises and squadron competition, intership signalling (whereby the movement of a semaphore arm through fifteen degrees of the arc meant things undreamed of in their philosophy), tricks which northern visibility plays with daylight signalling—these things were their daily and nightly portion.

They Tackled It Like Tigers

In the words of one of them, "it was a tough proposition," and they tackled it like tigers. In a fortnight they were through with it. In a month the British signal boatswains rubbed their telescope lenses and said they were damned.

But the communication problem didn't end there. Wireless plays an even more important part than visual signalling in naval warfare. It is important enough in peace, and the American fleet had by no means neglected the subject. But aerial conditions in the region of Manila differ considerably from those in the North Sea. Speaking radiographically, the North Sea is the most crowded thoroughfare in the world. All through the twenty-four hours ships and submarines and shore wireless stations are talking, talking, talking. British warnings to shipping on its lawful occasions, streams of lies from Berlin (branded at the outset 'German press message'), cipher cryptograms from three admiralties, destroyers bleating in a fog, appeals from a hunted merchantman, all these interspersed with the crackling Telefunken of the German submarine.

Now, the American wireless experts have been concerned principally with covering long distances. The development of "spark" and power in a comparatively undisturbed ether was the main preoccupation of the operators. From this serene condition ships and silent cabinets passed into the windy parrot house of the North Sea. Here power, as they understood the term, was negligible. The greatest distance required of their Hertzian waves was a preposterous 400 miles or so. But not only had they to thread a way unbroken through this aerial Babel, but, what was even more difficult, the operator was required to detect and read messages on one tune in a vast discord of diverse and unfamiliar notes. It is even said that an Englishman's touch on a sending key differs from that of an American as radically as the spoken accent differs. Yet after a month of assiduous practice, the former are in a fair way to present as few difficulties to communication as the latter.

And Still Identity Is Preserved

So much for the technical aspect of the affair. But there is another to consider. Each nation having evolved, perfected and adopted a system, considers it, *ipso facto*, the best system in the world. To ask a segment of that nation to dump the cherished thing overboard and adopt the theory and practice of another nation "likely not so good" is demanding much. That the order was obeyed instantly goes without saying. But let it be noted that it was obeyed in a spirit of uncritical loyalty and whole-souled enthusiasm by every man concerned, from admiral to signal boy. To this the British commander in chief has testified.

But, after all, these matters are merely externals. In adopting British methods of communication and staff work for the smooth working of the whole, the American ships have not lost a jot of their identity. Their customs remain, with their traditions, American; indeed, they are but thrown into stronger relief, and the British fleet around them is noting, drawing comparisons with intense interest, as two scions of the same family might meet and study gesture or physiognomy, searching eagerly for kindred traits. And daily the bonds are tightening.

The admiral commanding the force of American battleships which constitutes the —th Battle Squadron of the Grand Fleet stood and thawed before the burnished radiator in his cabin.

"Now," he said, "you've spent a day on board this ship. What struck you most? What remains your most vivid impression?"

I had been waiting for the question, and wondering what the deuce I was going to say. A man who spends ten crowded hours in unfamiliar surroundings, trying to draw comparisons between them and his accustomed environment, finds his impressions at the end of it like a jigsaw puzzle that has been upset.

I looked at him as he stood taking me in, and in the quizzical, humorous smile hovering about his eyes, in the set of his very imperturbable mouth, in his wholly comfortable attitude before the radiator, I read my answer. It was something that had been struggling for expression at the back of my brain all day.

"Well, sir," I said (and then wished I could have embarked on my explanation as our sailors do with, "it's like this 'ere, sir"), "to all intents and purposes you've dropped out of the skies plop into the middle of the Grand Fleet. It's a fleet that has been three and one-half years at war. It belongs to the oldest and most conservative—if not the proudest—navy in the world. It's got the Armada and the Nile and Copenhagen and Trafalgar and Jutland to its credit, and, I fancy, it takes a largish size in hats on the strength of it. It certainly had a standard by which to judge strangers."

"Sure," said the admiral, softly, with his eyes on the far-off snowy hills. I'm not used to making stump speeches to admirals.

I took a long breath. "Well, from the moment your ships rounded that headland the British fleet has been sizing you up. Every boat that is manned and leaves your ship, every officer or man who moves about your decks, is being watched and criticised and studied by several thousand pairs of eyes. You live in the limelight."

"Sure," said the admiral so softly that it was hardly more than a gentle expiration between his teeth. He may have been wondering when I was coming to the point.

"Well, sir," I continued, "all that is apt to make a very good man indeed self-conscious. I came over on the lookout for self-consciousness, like a lady visitor looks out for wet paint on board. I've been ten hours in your flagship, and I've talked to samples of every rank and rating. I've only seen one person self-conscious under friendly scrutiny."

"Ah!" said the admiral. His eyebrows lifted a shade.

"I caught sight of myself in a looking-glass," I explained. . . .

Six Thousand Men Welcomed Ashore

Not that this absence of self-consciousness is the outcome of indifference. The American squadron is keenly alive to the intense observation it is undergoing. Its method of showing how aware it is, perhaps, was the most graceful imaginable. For a few days it visited one of the fleet's more southerly bases, and the ships' companies were given leave to visit a great town. Six thousand five hundred men availed themselves of this permission. They were greeted by the inhabitants with an enthusiasm that might well have thrown a staider and older set of men off their balance. The traditional British methods of extending hospitality were thrust upon these youngsters fresh from a long and arduous voyage. It might have resulted in a *tamasha* that would have made the memory of Mafeking night seem like a temperance revival by comparison.

Yet when these six thousand five hundred men returned to their ships and the bonds of discipline nine only were slightly under the influence of liquor—nine, all told.

Apropos of this visit, it may be added that it occurred at Christmas time. Now, the flagship of the American squadron is, I believe, known in the United States as the "Christmas ship." Americans are all probably familiar with the origin of this name, but for the benefit of my own countrymen I must relate the pretty tradition. Every Christmas Day this particular ship lies in New York Harbor; on Christmas Eve the crew goes ashore into the slums and the Bowery, and every man invites a child to a dinner on board the following day. The little guests are carefully chosen. They are the type of child that would not otherwise eat a Christmas dinner, would not probably eat a dinner at all—the poorest of the poor from gutter and dive and archway. And not only do these pathetic little guests get dinner, but also a suit of clothes, a toy and a present of money.

The Gracious Custom Was Not Forgotten

For the first time the Christmas just passed found the "Christmas ship's" moorings in New York Harbor empty. She was lying at the base I have referred to, within reach of a great British city. But the tradition remained the same. They had forty-eight hours in which to arrange the whole thing, but they did it. They added one stipulation that had not been laid down in New York. Preference was to be given in the matter of selection to those waifs whose fathers had laid down their lives in battle.

Britannia, noting this story, may remember and echo the words of the greatest of all child lovers:

"Inasmuch as ye do it unto the least of my little ones. . . ."

To the naval officer a ship's personnel is necessarily an absorbing study. The human element is one in which he works and lives, and, whatever the development of the machine, man and his ways afloat must ever remain the primary factor in a navy's efficiency. It goes without saying that when the personnel belongs to the ship of another nation the interest is largely charged with curiosity.

I attempted to convey something of this interest to the captain of an American battleship who was my host for the day. We were sitting in his cabin, and the talk had ranged from the Yukon to Brooklyn yard, and was what a certain weekly paper would call "Mainly About People."

The Rare Chance of Seeing the Crew

I hinted at my interest in the men not without diffidence, because to ask the captain of a man-of-war if you can go and look at his ship's company as a matter of curiosity is tantamount to demanding leave of a stranger to go and smoke a pipe in his nursery while his children are being bathed. A mess deck is an intimate place.

"Want to see the men?" he echoed, and thrust on his cap. "I'll show 'em to you." He was a mighty man, possessing volcanic energy and a voice designed to carry orders through a gale. "Come right along."

We plunged straightway into the seething life of the mess deck and living spaces of the great ship, the captain leading, and as we threaded a path forward, men stepped aside, stood quietly at attention until we passed and resumed their tasks or leisure. Workshops, kitchens, laundry, bakeries, dental surgery, sick bay, messrooms, round we went in a swift, slightly bewildering rush while the "owner" jerked explanations over his shoulder. He displayed a familiarity with the details of it all that was, to say the least, interesting to one of another navy, whose captains claim to be not indifferent "ships' husbands."

Our whirlwind tour carried us into a speckless electric bakery piled high with fragrant loaves. The captain had flung open and closed the door of an oven secured by an ingenious but rather complicated latch. As we emerged I commented on his evident familiarity with the internal fitting of his ship's bakery. "Built her," he explained, and plunged, doffing his cap, into the sick bay. There were over a thousand men on board, and about half a dozen of them had found their way here.

"Well, T——," said the captain, addressing by name an able seaman of a stature wellnigh equalling his own, "how's that hand getting on?"

The man stood up and met his captain's eyes without embarrassment; just, in fact, as one citizen regards another.

"Nicely, thank you, sir," he replied.

"Hit your man in a softer place next time," said the captain, and the seaman laughed, nursing his bandaged hand.

"I will, surely," he said. A chuckle ran around the sick bay. I had the sensation of a stranger left trying to fathom a family joke.

"Want to talk to 'em?" asked the captain a minute later, as we stopped to watch a veteran superintending the splicing of a five-inch wire by two ordinary seamen. "Here, B——," he called one of the youngsters, again by name. The boy dropped his marling spike and responded smartly. "Where were you raised?" asked the captain.

"Kentucky, sir," came the reply in the soft Southern drawl. The lad stood before us without a trace of sheepishness or apparently aware of any distinction in being thus singled out by his captain by name from among a thousand other men. The captain nodded. "Trade?" "A farmhand, sir."

The Question No Sailor Can Answer

It was my turn, and I asked him the question no sailor has ever been able to answer. "Why did you come to sea?" He grinned, showing two rows of perfect teeth. "Him," he said, and jerked his head over his shoulder at the other ordinary seaman wincing beneath the whispered exhortations of his instructor. "Him an' me," adding, "He's my chum." Strong men have tried to write books on all that was contained in these two sentences; most have died with the task unfinished.

We had concluded lunch—a meal that commenced with iced grapefruit (grapefruit at the North Base, harkee!)—when the captain beckoned me to accompany him on another tour. It was of a more official nature this time, including a routine inspection of the storerooms and magazines, and I joined the little group of officers who hurried in the wake of that tall, striding figure with gold lace around the peak of his cap, who knew his ship as I know the inside of my pocket.

We were a band of strenuous adventurers in search of the unfindable. Never did red-shirted miners ply pick and shovel in the first days of the Klondyke rush as that captain labored through the long afternoon in search of dust. Up and down the shafts leading to speckless storerooms, hand over hand by burnished steel rungs into the uttermost bowels of the ship we went, and, as we passed, the captain's hand was forever going out to run along a transverse frame or search the interior of a cofferdam in the same fruitless quest. Perspiration ran down our faces, but the breakneck pace never slackened. "Light," barked the captain, and the breathless first lieutenant obediently flashed an electric torch into some crannyhole; the hunt checked while the captain craned and peered, and then moved on. The first lieutenant's sigh of relief was always audible above the ring of our footsteps. Once, as the procession sped along some labyrinth among the shell-rooms, the captain's finger shot out accusingly to indicate a junction box on the white enamelled bulkhead (an infinitesimal detail in the vast complexity of a battleship). It was an affair of brass secured by small screws, but one of the screws was missing.

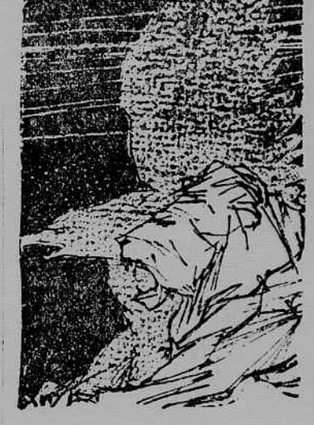
"Spoke about that last week," rapped out the captain, already a dozen yards ahead. The first lieutenant looked at the junction box as we hurried on, and wiped his face.

"Gee!" he said. Then eyed me with mingled desperation and pride.

"Some captain!" he said.

The Habit of the "Seven Bells" Tea

I dropped out of the running about 4 o'clock because we were in the neighborhood of the gunroom (steerage, they called it), where I had been invited to tea. I took with me an uneasy recollection of the first lieutenant's reproachful eyes as I sheered out of the procession, but it was speedily obliterated by the interest and charm of the



ensuing hour. The American midshipman is the senior of his British "opposite number" by perhaps a couple of years—but there the difference begins and ends. The half shy warmth of my welcome; the rather oppressive decorum of the assembly as we took our places round the tea-table, was not otherwise than it would have been in a British gunroom under similar conditions; the quick thaw that synchronized with the rapid disappearance of buttered toast and jam was Youth asserting itself over international courtesies.

The meal (they explained that they had picked up the habit of "seven bells" tea from us, and the lesson had not been ill learned) was nearing its close when a sudden shout of laughter obliterated the hum of chaff and conversation. Every eye turned on a midshipman at the end of the table whose face was slowly turning carmine to the roots of his curly hair. The president extended his closed fist, thumb pointing downward. One after another the remainder followed suit until every member sat thus, with the exception of the blushing victim. He looked the length of the long table twice, gathered his cup and plate together, and, without further ado, vanished beneath the table to the accompaniment of unbridled mirth.

If nothing else had been needed to emphasize the fact, I realized in that moment that I was in a gunroom of the Eternal Navy.

The Workings of Some Great Law

There was no question of "showing off" before a stranger; indeed, they had forgotten my existence; it was not even ragging. It was just that I had accidentally witnessed the workings of some great law, immutable and inexplicable as Fate, in full swing about my uncomprehending head.

The meal progressed as if nothing had occurred to break its serenity. I pleaded for light.

"It's just our mail, you see," explained the president. "Something has happened to our mails. All the rest of the ships get theirs regularly and ours hasn't fetched up once since we've been here."

"It's the fault of the ship's name," chipped in another (the ship bore the name of a great American state); "d'rectly the bags reach Liverpool, some one looks at the labels an' says: 'Here, ain't that somewhere in America?' an' back they go! They've been goin' backward an' forward for months." "With Fritz takin' potshots at them as they come and go," added a voice.

Muffled requests for reinforcements of buttered toast drifted up from underneath the table. "Well?" I queried, still hopelessly in the dark. "Oh, well, you see, any one who mentions the word 'mail' at meals just has to quit an' go underneath the table; we've made it a rule."

A British midshipman who draws a dirk in the gunroom stands a round of port after dinner. To each navy its own etiquette—and penalties.

We Refought the Battle of Jutland

It was when we had lit our pipes (the exile had been suffered to return to our midst) and sprawled in comfort, elbows on the table, that the real inner meaning of this great alliance dawned fully upon me. Together we refought Jutland as it has been refought in scores and scores of gunrooms amid tobacco smoke and the shifting of spoons and matches across a tablecloth; after that, it was baseball, instead of rugby; Annapolis instead of Dartmouth training college; but it all amounted to a common ideal, voiced, not by politicians or diplomats, but by a nation's youth in common speech with ours.

I visited the compact double cabins—once they called them staterooms—each with its intimate links with home suggested by the backs of familiar books on a shelf and photographs pinned to the heads of bunks. In fancy I made a dozen obeisances to the smiling American girlhood that has good cause to be proud of its knights; and so back to the gunroom, where one of the gay company had just sat down to the piano.

We perched round on the table and the backs of chairs and sang. They were the latest patriotic songs from the United States, tuneful, emotional jingles whereby every nation going to the wars shamelessly strives to voice its inner feelings. And when the player's repertoire was ended we started afresh, while the more energetic fox-trotted gracefully to and fro across the narrow deck space.

Tune and words have since escaped me, but the refrain of the last song lingers still by reason of its significance in these sombre days. "We are coming, we are coming," roared the young voices, and I stole a glance at the lean faces, at the laughing, confident eyes all about me—"And we shan't keep coming very long!"

I came nearer to feeling sorry for the Hun than I had since the war started.