



"The figure of an ancient man scrambling out of the hawse-pipe."

KING NEPTUNE HOLDS A COURT.

CROSSING THE LINE ON H.M.S. "INSOUPABLE."

A TRUE STORY, AS SEEN BY THE AUTHOR, WHO WAS AN EYE-WITNESS.

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I.

HERE was not a ripple on the water, and the tropical sun was beating down with all its mid-day fierceness on the ship and the groups of men clustered about her decks. Awnings were spread, and from the snow-like appearance of the decks, the guns, and the brasswork glistening in the sunlight, it was evident that a good deal of work had been got through. The ship, which was slowly steaming towards the Southern Cross, was a

British cruiser, not one of the newest types, but, nevertheless, able to give a good account of herself were she ever called upon to meet an enemy's ship.

Her name, H.M.S. *Insouvable*, was clearly indicated on the polished brass letters of her stern walk, and she was returning to her far-distant station after recommissioning in England.

On the bridge the officer of the watch was just reporting noon to the captain. "Twelve o'clock, sir; latitude 1° 40' N.," said the officer.

"Carry on, please," said the captain; and having thus graciously allowed the sun to cross the meridian, he turned to the navigating officer. "What time shall we be crossing the Line, Mr. Cumpus," asked the captain, "as I am hoping that Father Neptune will come on board, and I don't want to arrive there too late?"

"About ten o'clock, sir, if we keep to this speed, and the weather looks very fine," replied the navigator, cocking his eye up at the cloudless sky.

"Ah, that will do very well!" And with this remark the captain disappeared down the ladder.

Probably the quartermaster at the wheel was responsible for it when he was relieved and went below to dinner, but very soon the rumour spread through the ship that Father Neptune might be coming on board that very night.

Some of the young seamen who had only just come to sea, boys who still felt the keen pangs of parting for a long time from their homes, and to whom the sea was still a life in which all sorts of adventures were encountered every day, having read of such things before, guessed that something was going to happen, but did not quite know what; whilst others laughed at the idea, and thought that they were having their legs pulled.

"Well, let's go and ask old Blownose," said one of a group who were discussing the coming event. The man referred to was Mr. Blownose, C.P.O., and boatswain's mate of the upper deck, and though at times his hand was strong and heavy on any youngster who was not going in the way he should, yet he was dearly loved, and passed away many a dreary hour spinning yarns, while to him all questions appertaining to the sea, etc., were brought for decision.

"Do I think that Father Neptune could come on board? Well, all I know is that he generally comes on board most ships that pass the Equator, and if Captain Hardnut said he was coming, you can bet your bottom dollar that he will come. Our old man ain't generally far wrong. Why, I

remember in the old *Mary Inn*, sloop-rigged she was, where we lifted the screw if we wanted to make more than three knots, that—" But at this moment a shrill pipe was heard calling the hands to fall in for work, and the old man's story had to wait for a more favourable opportunity.

II.

At about ten o'clock that night the officer of the watch was leaning against the bridge rail thinking of the pretty girl whom only a few weeks ago he had seen waving to him from Southsea Pier, and wondering if the girls were as fair in the far-distant land he was bound to. The quartermaster was peering into the lighted binnacle, now and again looking up to relieve his eyes from the strain of constantly watching the lubber line, and the two look-out men had drawn together, and were discussing their last night ashore at Pompey (Portsmouth).

"All I know is," said one, "that one goes through it over and over again; but as long as I sleep all right, and eat my victuals comfortable like on the second day after leaving her, then says I to myself, says I, 'Bill, this ain't the proper thing yet.' I suppose one fine day she'll come along all right, and we'll square yards and settle down in a little white-washed cottage, but it ain't been yet."

"You just try my tip, Bill, and you'll find it will save you a lot of trouble."

"Look-out man," said the officer of the watch; "what the devil are you two men talking together there for?"

"I was only asking him whether he'd seen a light away over there on the starboard bow," said Bill, ever ready with an excuse.

"Well, keep your ears open," said the officer of the watch. "I thought I heard a hail."

And, sure enough, presently quite distinctly was heard:

"Ship ahoy!"

"Aye, aye."

"What ship is that?"

"H.M.S. *Insoupable*," replied the officer of the watch, startled out of his reverie by this sudden hail coming apparently from nowhere.

"Signalman, jump down and tell the captain that we are being hailed, though nothing is in sight. Quick, now!"

"Stop both engines," said the officer of the watch, not waiting to ask the captain, as he was afraid that someone might be adrift in a boat.

After the cessation of the throb of the engines, which is always noticeable throughout a ship, especially if she has been steaming for some days, men



"The weird procession marched right round the deck."

"Aye, aye, sir." And the man, with a blanched face, rushed down the ladder, glad to be away from such an uncanny place.

"Please stop your ship, as I wish to come on board," came again in the gruff voice that had hailed the ship.

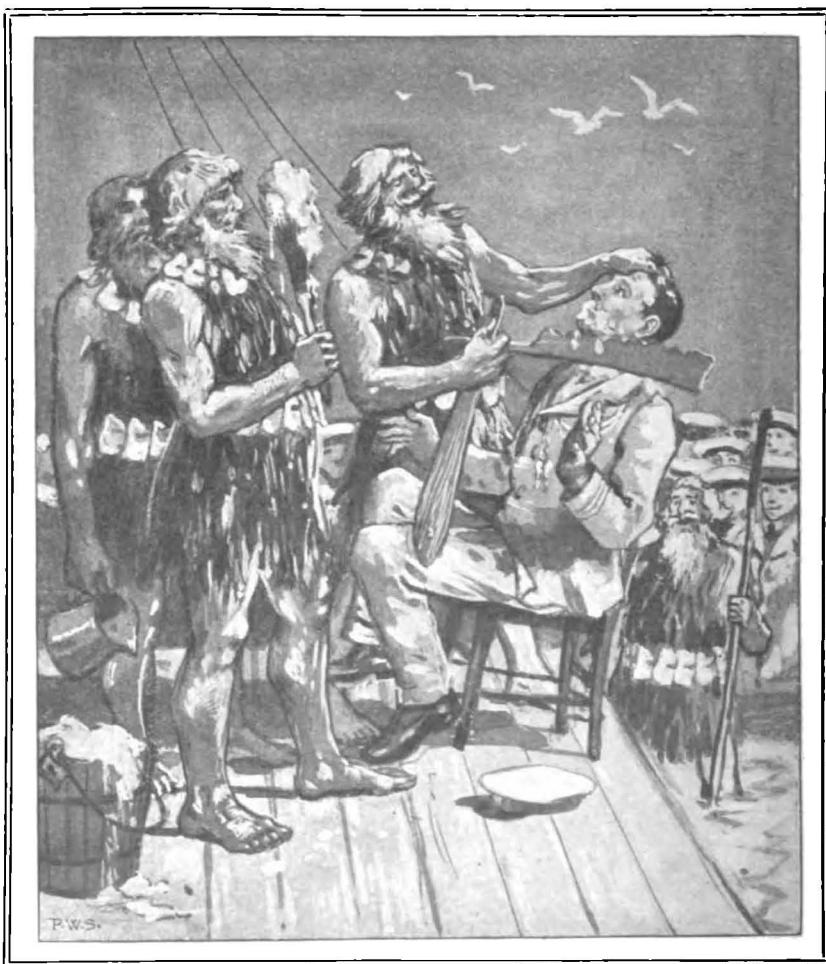
could be seen gathering together, anxiously peering forward through the gloom, wondering whatever was the matter. And to the startled ship's company again came the voice: "I am Father Neptune, and I wish to come on board your ship."

The figure of the captain coming forward somewhat reassured the startled ship's company, and they all moved a little nearer to the bridge ladder, wonderment instead of uneasiness sweeping over them.

At this moment the eager watchers

From his shoulders hung a loose tunic, apparently composed of strange and wonderful seaweeds, held at the waist by a girdle of oyster-shells.

On his head an iron crown, and in his right hand a rusty iron trident,



"Razor suit, sir?"

perceived the weird figure of an ancient man scrambling out of the hawse-pipe.

As he stood up and slowly made his way along the fo'c'sle, it could be seen that he was very old indeed. The lines of centuries seemed to mark what could be seen of his face through his wild, matted locks and snow-white beard.

while from his drenched appearance he had apparently just emerged from the depths of the sea.

Slowly he made his way to the bridge ladder, and, as he mounted it, Captain Hardnut came eagerly forward to greet him, and, after having cordially welcomed him on board, escorted him to the chart-house.

It was quite ten minutes before they reappeared again.

"Then I will expect you to come on board and bring your satellites with you to-morrow forenoon, and the bath will be ready," the captain was saying as they went down the ladder, through the crowd of peering faces, and disappeared on to the fo'c'sle.

III.

The upper deck of the cruiser presented a most unusual appearance the next morning. In the middle was a large canvas bath, about twelve feet square, filled with salt water. At one end a large platform had been erected about six feet above the water.

No sooner had prayers been read



"When Crusher disappeared into the bath."

Presently the throb of the engines was felt again, and the ship's company went away to their hammocks to think over the events of the evening, and only too glad of the anticipation of more on the morrow to enliven the monotony of the days spent at sea.

than the men were "piped down," pipes were lit again, and apparently the men were to have a holiday instead of being told off for work

"What's come over the old man?" asked a black figure which had appeared at one of the engine-room hatches in order to trim a cowl round

to the wind, and also to get a breath of fresh air.

"Why, haven't you heard that Father Neptune is coming on board this 'ere 'ooker to have a look round, and perhaps wash some of you blighters. You is behind the times," replied an old able seaman to whom the question had been put.

"Well, I don't know about being behind the times, but I guess I shall be behind one of these 'ere boilers all the time you lazy blighters on the upper deck is enjoyin' yourselves."

Groups of men could be seen standing about discussing the events of the previous night, the older ones relating how they had first met Father Neptune, and chaffing the others as to what was probably going to happen.

Presently the strains of a squeegce band were heard, and a procession came out from under the fo'c'sle. At the head was seen Father Neptune, dressed exactly as he had been the previous night, his regal appearance and great age showing even more plainly in the full daylight.

Close behind him were about a dozen men, evidently his court, from the similiarity of their dress to that of their chief.

They were all of them tall, powerful-looking men, their muscles showing out from beneath their scanty, dripping clothing. Instead of tridents, all except three were carrying big staves, and these appeared to be in closer attendance on their chief than the others.

One was carrying a large wooden bucket containing a mixture of soap and water, another of them had a large brush tucked under his arm, while the fattest of them was brandishing a large wooden razor, with which he evidently intended to keep back the crowd from getting too close to Father Neptune.

This weird procession marched right round the deck, and finally came to a halt round the bath. Father Neptune, stepping forward, then held up his hand, and, when there was complete silence, said :

"Captain Hardnut, officers, and men of H.M.S. *Insoupable*, I have come on

board your magnificent ship to wish you all a successful voyage, but more especially to baptise any young officer or seaman whom I have not already had the pleasure of meeting, and I hope that those of you whom I have already met will assist one another in bringing these candidates forward for my satellites to deal with."

Then the man with the razor and those who were carrying the brush and bucket mounted the platform, while the others got into the bath and formed themselves round it.

The first candidate was brought forward.

This was the young lieutenant whom we have previously seen as officer of the watch. He was asked to mount the platform and to sit down in a chair with his back to the water.

"Hair cut or shave, sir?" asked the man with the brush.

"I don't mind wh---" But before he could answer any more, suddenly his mouth and eyes were full of soap and water. "Here, what the devil are you doing?" asked the gasping officer, amidst a roar of laughter from the onlookers.

"Very sorry, sir," said the man, who was again flourishing his razor about, "but my mate has always been clumsy, and it is best not to answer any of his questions." Which certainly seemed good advice.

Then the barber began to shave him with the wooden razor.

"Razor suit, sir."

Forgetting the advice, the young fellow again opened his mouth to reply, with the same disastrous result as before.

Then, choking and spluttering, the unfortunate victim somehow turned a somersault backwards, and, falling into the bath, was passed along under water, until he emerged at the other end rather resembling a drowned rat. He was then allowed to get out, having been thus duly baptised, and could, if he wanted to, assist in ducking the others who came after him.

This went on all the forenoon, first the officers, and then the ship's company, all done in very good humour,

any particular wag coming in for a more prolonged baptism than his more fortunate comrades.

One of these was a private of Marines called Crusher (perhaps from the size of his feet), who was not altogether a very popular messmate, as, being a very big man, he was somewhat of a bully—which is, in the eyes of a sailor, perhaps one of the worst possible offences.

As he mounted the platform, which he did in a none too ready manner, the crowd of watchers was thicker than ever, and remarks, plainly meant to catch the ear of Crusher, were audible.

"Want's a good shave, he do."

"Pity they don't cut off his feet as well."

"We do want a steam-roller down our back lane."

Crusher, it was plainly to be seen, was getting very angry, especially when the usual effort failing to make him open his mouth, recourse had to be taken to throwing cold water down his back, and as he gasped—wallup! his mouth was full of soap, much to his tormentors' amusement. When Crusher disappeared into the bath it was evident that the number of duckers had been augmented, and from the time he was under, as well as the spluttering and gasping that went on when at last he appeared again, it was evident that the work had been well done, and that probably Crusher would not bully so much in the future.

When at last everyone who had crossed the Line for the first time had been thus initiated into the "rules of the sea," the captain, who had been watching the proceedings, surrounded by a number of his officers, stepped forward and said :

"I wish, in the names of all present, to thank our oldest and most revered friend, Father Neptune, for coming on board to-day. Sometimes he is hard on us, while at other times he is most gentle; but, above all, he is England's greatest friend, and I hope that he will always assist her in retaining the proud name of 'Mistress of the Sea.'"

"Three cheers for Father Neptune."

And with that they all lustily cheered the old man over and over again, and

waving his hand to the ship's company, he disappeared through the fo'c'sle doors.

IV.

That evening groups of seamen could be seen standing together discussing the unusual events of the day.

"I didn't see old Blownose all this forenoon," said one young seaman to another. "I wish he could have seen me taking my ducking like a man, 'cos somehow he always seems to think me a mollycoddle. Why, there he is. Let's go over and ask him what he was doing, and tell us that yarn of his about the *Mary Ann* when he crossed the Line for the first time."

"Well, boys, how did you enjoy your bath this morning? I noticed most of you took to it like ducks to water, especially you, Thin 'Un," referring to the youngster who had suggested asking for his yarn.

"Why, were you watching?" eagerly asked the boy addressed as Thin 'Un.

"You bet I was," said Blownose, "and proud of some of you chicks. I'll make a good brood out of some of you young devils yet."

Whether it was the twinkle in his eye or the fact of the old man saying that he had watched the ducking going on, when apparently he had not been there, Thin 'Un never knew, but slowly a suspicion grew and grew and formed itself in his mind, and he asked Blownose if he had any interesting tattoo marks on his arms.

"Sure I have," said the old man, "and the one of which I am proudest is that which I had done in 'Ong Kong; took all my month's pay it did, and many a month's pay as well." And with that he pulled up his sleeve and showed a marvellous tattoo of a spider in its web just about to eat a fly caught in its meshes.

"Blow me tight!" said Thin 'Un, drawing his companions away. "I know why we didn't see old Blownose this morning. Can't you guess, mates? Why, because he was Father Neptune. And I recernises him by that tattoo mark."