

CONFIDENCE--1919

I.

The seamen hold up the Edifice. They have been holding it up in the past and they will hold it up in the future, whatever this future may contain of logical development, of unforeseen new shapes, of great promises and of dangers still unknown.

It is not an unpardonable stretching of the truth to say that the British Empire rests on transportation. I am speaking now naturally of the sea, as a man who has lived on it for many years, at a time, too, when on sighting a vessel on the horizon of any of the great oceans it was perfectly safe to bet any reasonable odds on her being a British ship--with the certitude of making a pretty good thing of it at the end of the voyage.

I have tried to convey here in popular terms the strong impression remembered from my young days. The Red Ensign prevailed on the high seas to such an extent that one always experienced a slight shock on seeing some other combination of colours blow out at the peak or flag-pole of any chance encounter in deep water. In the long run the persistence of the visual fact forced upon the mind a half-unconscious sense of its inner significance. We have all heard of the well-known view that trade follows the flag. And that is not always true. There is also this truth that the flag, in normal conditions, represents commerce to the eye and understanding of the average man. This is a truth, but it is not the whole truth. In its numbers and in its unfailing ubiquity, the British Red Ensign, under which naval actions too have been fought, adventures entered upon and sacrifices offered, represented in fact something more than the prestige of a great trade.

The flutter of that piece of red bunting showered sentiment on the nations of the earth. I will not venture to say that in every case that sentiment was of a friendly nature. Of hatred, half concealed or concealed not at all, this is not the place to speak; and indeed the little I have seen of it about the world was tainted with stupidity and seemed to confess in its very violence the extreme poorness of its case. But generally it was more in the nature of envious wonder qualified by a half-concealed admiration.

That flag, which but for the Union Jack in the corner might have been adopted by

the most radical of revolutions, affirmed in its numbers the stability of purpose, the continuity of effort and the greatness of Britain's opportunity pursued steadily in the order and peace of the world: that world which for twenty-five years or so after 1870 may be said to have been living in holy calm and hushed silence with only now and then a slight clink of metal, as if in some distant part of mankind's habitation some restless body had stumbled over a heap of old armour.

II.

We who have learned by now what a world-war is like may be excused for considering the disturbances of that period as insignificant brawls, mere hole-and-corner scuffles. In the world, which memory depicts as so wonderfully tranquil all over, it was the sea yet that was the safest place. And the Red Ensign, commercial, industrial, historic, pervaded the sea! Assertive only by its numbers, highly significant, and, under its character of a trade--emblem, nationally expressive, it was symbolic of old and new ideas, of conservatism and progress, of routine and enterprise, of drudgery and adventure--and of a certain easy-going optimism that would have appeared the Father of Sloth itself if it had not been so stubbornly, so everlastingly active.

The unimaginative, hard-working men, great and small, who served this flag afloat and ashore, nursed dumbly a mysterious sense of its greatness. It sheltered magnificently their vagabond labours under the sleepless eye of the sun. It held up the Edifice. But it crowned it too. This is not the extravagance of a mixed metaphor. It is the sober expression of a not very complex truth. Within that double function the national life that flag represented so well went on in safety, assured of its daily crust of bread for which we all pray and without which we would have to give up faith, hope and charity, the intellectual conquests of our minds and the sanctified strength of our labouring arms. I may permit myself to speak of it in these terms because as a matter of fact it was on that very symbol that I had founded my life and (as I have said elsewhere in a moment of outspoken gratitude) had known for many years no other roof above my head.

In those days that symbol was not particularly regarded. Superficially and definitely it represented but one of the forms of national activity rather remote from the close-knit organisations of other industries, a kind of toil not immediately under the public eye. It was of its Navy that the nation, looking out of the windows of its world-wide Edifice, was proudly aware. And that was but fair. The Navy is the armed man at the gate. An existence depending upon the sea must be guarded with a jealous, sleepless vigilance, for the sea is but a fickle friend.

It had provoked conflicts, encouraged ambitions, and had lured some nations to destruction--as we know. He--man or people--who, boasting of long years of familiarity with the sea, neglects the strength and cunning of his right hand is a fool. The pride and trust of the nation in its Navy so strangely mingled with moments of neglect, caused by a particularly thick-headed idealism, is perfectly justified. It is also very proper: for it is good for a body of men conscious of a

great responsibility to feel themselves recognised, if only in that fallible, imperfect and often irritating way in which recognition is sometimes offered to the deserving.

But the Merchant Service had never to suffer from that sort of irritation. No recognition was thrust on it offensively, and, truth to say, it did not seem to concern itself unduly with the claims of its own obscure merit. It had no consciousness. It had no words. It had no time. To these busy men their work was but the ordinary labour of earning a living; their duties in their ever-recurring round had, like the sun itself, the commonness of daily things; their individual fidelity was not so much united as merely co-ordinated by an aim that shone with no spiritual lustre. They were everyday men. They were that, eminently. When the great opportunity came to them to link arms in response to a supreme call they received it with characteristic simplicity, incorporating self-sacrifice into the texture of their common task, and, as far as emotion went, framing the horror of mankind's catastrophic time within the rigid rules of their professional conscience. And who can say that they could have done better than this?

Such was their past both remote and near. It has been stubbornly consistent, and as this consistency was based upon the character of men fashioned by a very old tradition, there is no doubt that it will endure. Such changes as came into the sea life have been for the main part mechanical and affecting only the material conditions of that inbred consistency. That men don't change is a profound truth. They don't change because it is not necessary for them to change even if they could accomplish that miracle. It is enough for them to be infinitely adaptable--as the last four years have abundantly proved.

III.

Thus one may await the future without undue excitement and with unshaken confidence. Whether the hues of sunrise are angry or benign, gorgeous or sinister, we shall always have the same sky over our heads. Yet by a kindly dispensation of Providence the human faculty of astonishment will never lack food. What could be more surprising for instance, than the calm invitation to Great Britain to discard the force and protection of its Navy? It has been suggested, it has been proposed--I don't know whether it has been pressed. Probably not much. For if the excursions of audacious folly have no bounds that human eye can see, reason has the habit of never straying very far away from its throne.

It is not the first time in history that excited voices have been heard urging the warrior still panting from the fray to fling his tried weapons on the altar of peace, for they would be needed no more! And such voices have been, in undying hope or extreme weariness, listened to sometimes. But not for long. After all every sort of shouting is a transitory thing. It is the grim silence of facts that remains.

The British Merchant Service has been challenged in its supremacy before. It will be challenged again. It may be even asked menacingly in the name of some humanitarian doctrine or some empty ideal to step down voluntarily from that place which it has managed to keep for so many years. But I imagine that it will take more than words of brotherly love or brotherly anger (which, as is well known, is the worst kind of anger) to drive British seamen, armed or unarmed, from the seas. Firm in this indestructible if not easily explained conviction, I can allow myself to think placidly of that long, long future which I shall not see.

My confidence rests on the hearts of men who do not change, though they may forget many things for a time and even forget to be themselves in a moment of false enthusiasm. But of that I am not afraid. It will not be for long. I know the men. Through the kindness of the Admiralty (which, let me confess here in a white sheet, I repaid by the basest ingratitude) I was permitted during the war to renew my contact with the British seamen of the merchant service. It is to their generosity in recognising me under the shore rust of twenty-five years as one of themselves that I owe one of the deepest emotions of my life. Never for a moment did I feel among them like an idle, wandering ghost from a distant past. They talked to me seriously, openly, and with professional precision, of facts, of events, of implements, I had never heard of in my time; but the hands I grasped were like the hands of the generation which had trained my youth and is now no more. I recognised the character of their glances, the accent of their voices. Their moving

tales of modern instances were presented to me with that peculiar turn of mind flavoured by the inherited humour and sagacity of the sea. I don't know what the seaman of the future will be like. He may have to live all his days with a telephone tied up to his head and bristle all over with scientific antennae like a figure in a fantastic tale. But he will always be the man revealed to us lately, immutable in his slight variations like the closed path of this planet of ours on which he must find his exact position once, at the very least, in every twenty-four hours.

The greatest desideratum of a sailor's life is to be "certain of his position." It is a source of great worry at times, but I don't think that it need be so at this time. Yet even the best position has its dangers on account of the fickleness of the elements. But I think that, left untrammelled to the individual effort of its creators and to the collective spirit of its servants, the British Merchant Service will manage to maintain its position on this restless and watery globe.