

In the Wake of The Fleet

(By W. R. Dunlop)

Semper paratus! ("Always ready!") The old Latin maxim came to mind as the squadron rode at anchor in the Bay. Battlemented turrets, monster guns, intricate mechanisms clean as a pin and ready for action stirred a sense of pride and security; and the personnel in appearance and conduct suggested the kind of men who have read Nelson's signal and are ready to follow it.

It was the "Lady Alexandra's" maiden trip as we went to meet and welcome the great ships. Out in the open we were all a-tiptoe. The surroundings seemed just as usual—water, water everywhere. Suddenly, like a black shaft shot through the air, a dark object materialised, rushed furiously past us and was gone—the cut of the craft shewing the Destroyer "Patrician," like the pilot-engine of the Royal train. Gossip ceased as by magic; every eye glued on the sky-line and there at last it was unmistakable—a vague something gradually merging into vast shadowy forms, a thin thread of smoke disclosing their course. As they came nearer and the huge turrets and barbets appeared like moving fortresses we turned with the "Princess Patricia," each gay with bunting, and escorted the flagship to the mouth of the Narrows and within sound of the volleys of loud huzzahs from the crowds on shore-line and cliff. These gallant officers and men, accustomed as they are to the sights of the seven seas, must have been genuinely impressed by popular welcome and natural beauty as the giant ships wheeled gracefully round Brockton Point and into the inner harbour.

Vancouver and his wife naturally gave first thought to the "Hood" because of its place among the superlatives, and whatever the impressions they will last. Many, no doubt, with the mechanical or engineering turn of mind would glean much from a close survey and from the informative talks given with such evident knowledge by the bluejackets; but to me the main impression was of the towering strength, grim and orderly, conjoined with the kindly features which spelt a time of peace. Looking from "aloft" at the wide foredeck it was not an expanse of naked iron that met the eye but a wood floor finely seamed, suggestive of a social gathering or a merry hornpipe. Here and there in a cosy corner a tar was spinning a yarn with his mate, while others were caring for the ship's pets. Happy groups of children, fearlessly astride mighty engines of war, seemed little harbingers of a day when the lion and the lamb will walk together and a little child lead them; and down in the depths the tiny Anglican church with its altar reminded us of the fine motto of the British Navy: "Fear God: honour the king." And those great searchlights at night—how they crossed and re-crossed like Titans at play and anon swooped down to the level, picking out the wharf lounge "to the last button!" I thought of Keats: "Prithee do not turn

The current of your heart from me so soon"

and wondered if certain amorous couples in pleasant attitudes along the waterfront felt in the same way of this sudden "current" of blaring publicity. With the aid of lively fancy, which, like humour, is of the saving salt, there was something of the war touch when, I made out the dark outline of the "Princess Charlotte" stealing quietly past the grim walls and guns of the cruiser, while those great piercing lights swept the heavens as if in search for bombing planes. And then something happened. In a moment the "Charlotte" was a phantom ship of light; in a moment all was darkness again and the ship passed on in safety, her presence and purpose signalled to the other units by those twinkling lights at the masthead that seemed to mean so little, yet meant so much. It seemed to indicate the British way: no needless destruction

of innocent vessels or again, in the hour of victory a chance of life to the fallen foe:

"Ye are brothers, ye are men
And we conquer but to save."

The mighty flagship, under whose nose I travelled daily, suggests its namesake; and it is an interesting coincidence that this year is the bicentenary of Admiral Viscount Hood's birth. It is interesting also that his main experience was in the West Indian and North American Stations, though he may have the more picturesque fame as Nelson's senior officer in the Mediterranean in 1793 around the days of the French "Terror." An old man of ninety-two when he died, he had already passed the fourscore mark—his active day's work done—when Nelson "sought out" Villeneuve in 1805, to use a characteristic British naval phrase in the recent war. Hood was of the group of "Admirals all," including Rodney, Howe and Boscawen, between the daring doughty commanders of Elizabethan times on the one hand and Nelson and his Captains on the other; while two other names in that wide span call for apt remembrance: Blake in the middle of the seventeenth century who effectively countered Van Tromp's broom with a whip, and Duncan of Camperdown in the closing years of the eighteenth who, when about to engage Admiral de Winter in battle, remarked with grim humour to his staff: "Gentlemen, you see a severe winter approaching; I have only to advise you to keep up a good fire." The temperamental quality of the naval tar which dubs him "the handy man" is reflected in this cool humour of commanders in critical hours—thus: Drake and his game of bowls on the Hoe (let us admit it, an example of folly condoned only by success); Blake and his emblematic whip in the English sea and the Zuyder Zee; Duncan and his warm winter fire; Nelson turning his blind eye to an inconvenient signal. —

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