He was a very junior young officer indeed when the powers that be first gladdened his heart and ruined his clothes by sending him to a destroyer. A mere sub-lieutenant with "(acting)" after his name, which, as any proper "sub" will tell you, is a sign of extreme juniority. Moreover, the single gold stripe on his monkey jacket was still suspiciously new and terribly untarnished.

Not so very long before he had been a "snotty" (midshipman) in a battleship, a mere "dog's body," who had to obey the orders of almost every officer in the ship except those few who happened to be junior to him. It is true that he exercised his authority and a severe discipline on those midshipmen who had the misfortune to be a year or so younger than himself, and that he expressed a lordly contempt for the assistant clerk. But he lived in the gun-room, slept in a hammock, kept all his worldly possessions in a sea-chest, and bathed and dressed in the company of fifteen other boisterous young gentlemen.

Then he had his watches to keep at sea and his picket boat to run in harbour, while his spare time was fully employed in mastering the subtleties of gunnery, torpedo work, and electricity, and in rubbing up his rapidly dwindling knowledge of engineering and x and y. It was well that he did so, for at some distant period when the war ceased he would have to pass certain stringent examinations before he could be confirmed in the rank of lieutenant.

So on the whole he had been kept fairly busy, more particularly as watch-keeping at the guns with the ship at sea in all weathers in war time was not all jam.

But when he was sent to a destroyer he found the life was more strenuous, for the little ship spent far more time at sea. The weather was sometimes very bad indeed, and at first he was sea-sick, but it was always a consolation to have a cabin of his own, to live in the wardroom, and to be treated as a responsible officer instead of a mere "makee learn."

He had to work at least six times harder than he had in a battleship. For one thing he had all the charts to correct and to keep up to date, no small labour with pencil, dividers, parallel rulers, and much red ink in these days of war, prolific minefields, dangerous areas, extinguished lights, and removed buoys. He also assisted with the ship's gunnery, and at sea kept a regular three watches, eight hours out of every twenty-four, with the first lieutenant and gunner. But it was the sense of responsibility and the feeling that he was doing really useful work which gladdened his heart and

kept him keen and energetic.

"Have you ever been in a destroyer before?" his commanding officer had asked him as soon as he joined.

"No, sir."

"Ever kept officer of the watch at sea?"

Again the answer was in the negative.

"Well, you'll have to do it here, my son. If you want to know anything come to me. There's nothing much in it so long as you keep your eyes skinned. You'll soon learn."

* * * * *

The skipper had said there was nothing in it, but the first night at sea he found himself alone on the bridge in charge of the ship he thought differently.

A light cruiser squadron and two flotillas of destroyers were steaming at 20 knots in close formation without lights. The night was as black as the wolf's mouth, and the rapidly rising wind cut the tops off the short seas and sent them flying over the bridge in constant showers of spray. Moreover, the perpetual pitching and rolling soon gave our friend a squeamish and altogether nasty sensation in the region of his waistcoat, and in ten minutes, by which time the water had found its way through his oilskins and was trickling merrily down the back of his neck, he felt miserable.

The ship was in the middle of a line of eight destroyers. Two hundred yards ahead of him he could just discern the dim black blur of the next ahead and the occasional splutter of whity-grey foam in her wake as her stern lifted to the seas. At times, when a driving rain squall came down from windward, he seemed to lose sight of her altogether, and, through inexperience and in his anxiety to catch up, increased the revolutions of the engines not wisely but rather too much. The next thing that happened was that the squall cleared, and he found himself almost on top of her, and had to put the helm over and sheer out of line to avoid a collision. At the same time he reduced speed to drop back into station. Sometimes he reduced more than he should, with the consequence that the next astern nearly bumped him, while the leader shot ahead and vanished into the darkness like a ghost.

It was then that he had horrible thoughts of being scrubbed for the deadly sin of losing touch with the flotilla and meandering about the ocean like a lost sheep looking for his next ahead. If he did not succeed in finding her somebody's blood would be required.

It was rather trying for a novice, and many times he remembered the commanding

officer's standing orders. "Do not hesitate to call me if you are in doubt or difficulty," they said, with the "Do not" underlined twice. Should he rouse the skipper or should he not? He was asleep in his clothes on the cushioned settee in the charthouse underneath the bridge and would be up in ten seconds if required. But the acting "sub" did hesitate to call him unnecessarily. After all, it was quite possible that the "C.O." might be rather peevish if he was hauled out for no reason. He was not really "in difficulty," he persuaded himself, and he certainly did not wish to patent the fact that he could not keep the ship in station, whatever the circumstances.

No; he would not call him. He solved the problem by increasing the speed of the engines ever so slightly above the normal, and five minutes later heaved a sigh of profound relief as the black shape of the next ahead hove up out of the darkness.

In an hour his helpless feeling had gone and he was jogging merrily along without any difficulty.

* * * * *

But the skipper, who was accustomed to the ways and tricks of newly-joined officers generally, and sub-lieutenants in particular, had been awake the whole time. He always slept with one eye open at sea, and as the charthouse was immediately beneath the bridge and the shafting of the wheel and engine-room telegraphs passed within a few feet of his head, he knew at once from their agitated movement when anything really desperate was happening. So when the helm went overhand the revolution telegraph revolved frantically five or six times in quick succession he yawned wearily, flung off his rug, and sat up.

"I won't go up and interfere unless he sends for me," he thought to himself. "He must learn." He had been a "sub" in a destroyer himself. The summons never came.

At three o'clock, by which time the dawn was breaking, the "C.O." did appear on the bridge.

"Well, Sub?" he asked. "What d'you think of station keeping at night?"

"Quite easy, sir," said that young officer blandly, quite unaware of the acoustic properties of the charthouse. "As easy as falling off a log."

"Did you have any difficulty in seeing the next ahead?"

"Not much, sir. It was a bit dark at times, though."

The "C.O." smiled to himself. He knew.

* * * * *

The "sub," he has passed out of the "acting" stage, is now an expert at the game, and, to use the phraseology of his latest confidential report, is "energetic and trustworthy" and a "most promising and capable officer."