Sixteen years ago, when the ships of the Royal Navy still disported themselves in black hulls, with red water-lines, white upper works, and yellow masts and funnels, she was a smart cruiser attached to one of the large fleets. She was as spick and span as elbow grease and ingenuity could make her, and the show ship of her squadron and the pampered darling of the admiral, went by the name of "the yacht."

She was easily one of the cleanest ships afloat. Her blue-black side, anointed daily with some mysterious compound rubbed on with serge, a compound the exact ingredients of which were known only to her commander and the painter who mixed it, was as smooth and as shiny as a mahogany table. Her decks were as clean as scrubbers, holystones, sand, and perspiring blue-jackets could make them, and woe betide the careless sailor who defiled their sacred whiteness with a spot of paint, or the stoker who left the imprint of a large and greasy foot on emerging into the fresh air from his labours in the engine-room or stokehold.

Her guns, steel, and brass-work winked and shimmered in the sun. Her funnels were brushed over at frequent intervals with a wash the colour and consistency of cream, and before she went to sea her yellow masts and yards used to be swathed in canvas lest they should be defiled by funnel smoke. Her boats, with their white enamel inside and out, their black gunwales with the narrow golden ribbon running round inside, the well-scrubbed masts, oars, thwarts, bottom-boards, and gratings, the brass lettered backboards, and cushioned sternsheets, were the pride of her midshipmen and the envy of nearly all the other young gentlemen in the squadron.

But then, of course, this all happened in the "good old days," the palmy days when men-of-war spent no great portion of their time at sea and when, in some ships, Messrs. Spit and Polish were still the presiding deities. No doubt, as we were sometimes asked to believe before the war, the Service has gone to the dogs since 1900, for noisy and blatant Mr. Gunnery has usurped the place of the above-mentioned pair and life generally has become more strenuous. The ability to hit a hostile ship at a distance of twenty miles or so cannot be inculcated in the fastnesses of a harbour. The job simply must be taken seriously.

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If you turn up her name in the "Navy List" of to-day—wild horses will not make me disclose it and the Censor would not pass it if I did—you will see that she still figures as a cruiser, though the fact remains that she never goes to sea for any war-like

purpose. They have even added insult to injury by removing some of her guns.

This may be a matter for deep regret on the part of her officers and men, who, since they belong to the Royal Navy or the Royal Naval Reserve, naturally long to assist in an active manner at the discomfiture of some floating Hun. Their thoughts may not exactly be pleasant when they read and hear of the warlike doings of their seagoing sisters, but they may console themselves by recollecting that the ship of 1916 is probably infinitely more valuable to the country than that of 1900, and that at the present time the Navy could not do without her.

She is still clean but is no longer a "yacht," for her purpose is strictly utilitarian. She performs the multifarious duties of a depôt ship, and as such attends to the ailments, aches and pains of, caters for the needs of, and generally acts as a well-conducted mother to a large number of destroyers. You have only to ask these latter what they think of their parent, and there is not one of them who would not tell you that they could not get on without her. Of course they cannot! For destroyers, like delicate children prone to catch mumps, whooping-cough, and measles, cannot thrive without careful nursing, particularly in war time.

And so, if the depôt ship receives a plaintive wail by signal to say that one of her children has been punctured through the bows by a projectile from a belligerent Hun, or that another, in a slight altercation at sea with one of her sisters, has developed a "slight dent" in herself to the accompaniment of leaky rivets and seams, she merely says, "Come alongside!"

The destroyer does so, and, lo! an army of workmen step on board with their tools, and with much hammering and drilling, the outward application of a steel plate, some oakum, and some white lead, her hurts are plastered and she is rendered seaworthy once more.

Sometimes the defects may be even more serious, as, for instance, when one of her charges, having been badly cut into in a thick fog or having unwisely sat down upon a mine, limps back into harbour with several compartments full of water and serious internal injuries as well. But the depôt ship is quite equal to the emergency. She sends her shipwrights, carpenters, and other experts on board the afflicted one and, with a large wooden patch, more oakum, and buckets of red and white lead, the destroyer is made sufficiently seaworthy to proceed to the nearest dockyard.

Again, there may be engine-room defects, such things as over-heated thrust-blocks, stripped turbines, and leaky valves. There are boiler troubles and the periodical cleaning of the boiler tubes. There can be defects in the guns, torpedo-tubes, searchlights, or electrical fittings; defects anywhere and everywhere, even in the galley-stove funnel or the wardroom pantry. Mother has a large family and their ailments are very varied and diverse. But she competes with them all and, save in

cases of very severe damage, rarely confesses the job to be beyond her powers and has to send her troublesome child to a dockyard.

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But this is not all she does. If Spud Murphy, able seaman of a destroyer, carves the top off his finger or complains of "'orrible pains in th' stummick," he is sent to mother to be nursed back to health by her doctors. If Peter Jones imagines he has not received the pay to which he is entitled, if he wishes to remit a monthly sum to his wife, or if he desires to become the possessor of a pair of boots, a tooth-brush, and a pair of new trousers, mother will oblige him. Moreover, the fond parent distributes the mails and supplies the beef, vegetables, bread, rum, haricot beans, tinned salmon, raisins, sugar, tea, flour, coffee, and a hundred and one other comestibles necessary for the nourishment of those on board her protégées. She will also supply many other unconsidered trifles in the way of ammunition, torpedoes, rope, canvas, paint, emery paper, bath-brick, oil, bolts, nuts, pens, red ink, black ink, hectograph ink, foolscap, pencils, paper fasteners, postage stamps … I will leave it at that.

Heaven alone knows what else she can disgorge. She seems to resemble a glorified Army and Navy Stores, with engineering, ship fitting, ship chandlery, outfitting, haberdashery, carpentry, chemists, dry provisions, butchers, bakers, stationery, postal, and fancy goods departments. We have forgotten the certificate office or research department, where they will tell you the colour of the eyes of any man in the flotilla, the number of moles on the back of his neck, and the interesting fact that Stoker "Ginger" Smith has a gory heart transfixed by an arrow, together with the words "True Love," indelibly tattooed on his left forearm.

The Criminal Investigation Department, which seems to be aware of the past history of everybody, will deal with offenders, while, to go to the opposite extreme, the depôt ship's padre will be only too happy to publish the banns of marriage for any member of his flock.

In addition to all this the officers of the flotilla are honorary members of mother's wardroom, where, despite the fact that she sometimes has great difficulty in collecting the sums due at the end of the month, she allows them to obtain meals, drinks, and tobacco. Lastly, she gets up periodical kinematograph or variety shows to which all are invited, free, gratis, and for nothing.… What more could her children want? She is a very good mother to them. Her greatness has not departed.