HENRY TAPRELL DORLING

THE 'MUCKLE FLUGGA' HUSSARS

She was a member of that gallant and distinguished corps after which this article is named. You will not find her regiment mentioned in any British Army List, nor, so far as I am aware, and for all the foreign sound of it, in the Army List of His Imperial Majesty the Czar of All the Russias. The name does not appear in any Army List at all, for the Hussars to which she belonged are a sea regiment, pure and simple.

Her uniform of dull grey, with no facings or trimmings of any sort or description, was strictly in keeping with her surroundings, for her favourite habitat was anywhere in the wild waste of waters lying between Greenland, the North Cape, the Naze, and the Orkneys.

Some people with a libellous sense of humour referred to her as a member of "Harry Tate's Own," while others, most unkindly, said she belonged to the "Ragtime Navy." But she did not seem to mind. She knew in her heart of hearts that her work was of paramount importance, and, complacent in the knowledge, smiled sweetly as a well-conducted lady should when jibes and insults are hurled at her long-suffering head.

She had a great deal to put up with in one way and another. Thanks to her enormous fuel capacity she spent a long time at sea and had very brief spells in harbour. Her work, though important, was always dull and monotonous, while in bad weather it was even worse. She had no prospect of sharing in the excitement of a big sea battle like her more warlike sisters, though, with them, she ran the chance of encountering hostile submarines and of having an altercation with an armed raider. But, taking it all round, she had comparatively little to hope for in the way of honour and glory; she merely had to be at sea for many weeks at a time to prevent money-grabbing neutrals from reaping a rich harvest by supplying munitions of war and articles of contraband to an impoverished Hun who could not be trusted to put those commodities to any gentlemanly purpose.

Muckle Flugga, I believe, is a remote headland in the Shetlands, and she, a member of the corps called after it, flew the White Ensign of the British Navy and was an armed merchant cruiser.

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Before the war she was a crack passenger liner. On her upper deck, and expressly designed for the use of potentates and plutocrats, she had regular suites of

apartments. Gorgeous suites they were, furnished like the rooms in a mansion ashore. The sleeping cabins had white enamelled panels and comfortable brass bedsteads. The day cabins or sitting-rooms, panelled in bird's-eye maple, oak, walnut, or mahogany, had large square windows, regular fireplaces, and were fresh with flowered chintzes, while the tiled bathrooms were fitted with all the different appliances for hot baths, tepid baths, cold baths, needle baths, shower baths, and douches. One simply turned a handle and the water came. A telephone in each sitting-room communicated with a central exchange somewhere deep down in the bowels of the ship, and one could summon a barber to trim one's hair, a manicure expert to attend to one's hands, a tobacconist with samples of cigars, cigarettes, and tobacco, or the presiding genius of a haberdashery establishment with quite the latest things in shirts, collars, socks, and neckties. In fact, living in one of the expensive suites was exactly like being in a large and luxurious hotel, except that it was vastly more comfortable.

Lower down in the ship were the single, double, and treble-berthed cabins for the first and second-class passengers. They, though small, were very comfortable, and were fitted with telephones through which one could summon a stewardess with a basin or a steward with a whisky and soda. Down below, too, were the saloons, huge apartments with carved panels, ornamental pillars, glass-pictured domes, coloured frescoes, and dozens of small tables. There was also the Louis XIV. restaurant, if one preferred a simple beefsteak to the more formal dinner, and smoking-rooms, reading-rooms, libraries, drawing-rooms, writing-rooms, not to mention the swimming bath and the children's nursery.

We can imagine the great liner, spick and span in her spotless paint and gleaming brasswork, steaming through a placid summer sea. Her long promenade decks would be plastered with deck-chairs filled with recumbent passengers, some dozing, others smoking and talking. Some energetic enthusiast would be passing from group to group to collect sufficient people to play deck cricket, quoits, or bull-board, while yet another, armed with a notebook and a pencil, would be endeavouring to inveigle recalcitrant ladies with strict notions as to the sins of gambling into taking tickets for a sweepstake on the next day's mileage.

One would hear the laughter of children as they chased each other round the decks, and the sotto-voce remarks of some old gentleman roused from his afternoon nap by the sudden impact of a podgy infant of four tripping heavily over his outstretched feet.

After dark in some secluded corner one might happen upon a man and a girl. They would be sitting very close together, and behaving… well, as men and maidens sometimes do, to beguile the tedium of voyages at sea.

Everything would be calm and peaceful. Everybody would be happy, even the young gentleman with no prospects travelling second class, who having won the sweepstake on the day's run and suddenly finding himself £20 the richer, celebrated his luck with

his friends in the smoking-room.

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But then the war came and changed everything.

The Admiralty requisitioned the ship and armed her with guns. They painted her a dull grey all over, and tore down all her polished woodwork to lessen the chances of fire in action, leaving nothing but the bare steel walls. Most of the cabins were stripped of their furniture and fittings, only enough being left intact to provide accommodation for the officers.

The carved woodwork and most of the tables and chairs in the saloons were taken away, and though the painted frescoes and glass domes still remained, they were dusty and neglected.

In one corner of the first-class saloon was the wardroom, a space partitioned off by painted canvas screens to provide messing accommodation for the more senior officers. Opposite to it was the gunroom, a similar enclosure for the juniors.

They manned her with a crew of between three and four hundred Royal Navy Reserve men, with a leavening of Royal Navy ratings and a few Marines. They appointed a Captain R.N. in command and two or three other naval officers, but by far the greater proportion of officers and crew belonged to the Reserve, and excellent fellows they were.

Certain of the men had served on beard in peace-time, and had elected to remain on, but the majority came to her for the first time when she commissioned as a man-of-war. Some were Scots fishermen, men from trawlers and drifters, excellent, hardy creatures used to small craft, bad weather, and boat work. Others, having served their time in the Navy, had taken to some shore employment, and in August 1914 had been recalled to their old Service.

Nearly every imaginable trade was represented. In one of the first-class cabins was the barber's shop, presided over by a man who in pre-war days had worked in a hair-cutting establishment not far from Victoria Station. Next door lived another man who had been a bootmaker, and he, bringing all the appurtenances of his trade to sea with him, carried on a roaring business as a "snob." There was also a haberdashery emporium kept by a seaman who had been employed in some linen-draper's shop in his native town, while a professional tailor in blue-jacket's uniform spent all his spare time in making and repairing the garments of his shipmates. Even the ship's electric laundry was manned by folk who were well acquainted with starching and ironing.

Most of the cooks and stewards had left, but sufficient remained to provide for the

needs of the officers and men. The catering was still run by the company to which the vessel belonged, and, as she had roomy kitchens and all manner of labour-saving devices in the way of electric dish-washers and potato-peelers, the messing was even better than that on board a battleship.

Gone were the troops of laughing children and the passengers. A pile of wicked-looking shell and boxes of cartridges for the guns lay ready to hand in the nursery, while the promenade decks resounded to the tramp of men being initiated into the mysteries of the squad and rifle drill and the work at their guns.

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They have been at it for two years; two years of strenuous naval routine and discipline which have transformed the passenger liner into no mean man-of-war.