We were steaming to the westward, towards the spot where the sun, glowing like a disc of molten copper, was slowly nearing the horizon. It had been one of those hot, breathless sort of days with no breeze; and now, near sunset, nothing but an occasional cat's-paw stole gently across the sea to ruffle its glassy surface in irregular-shaped patches. Elsewhere, the water, shining like a mirror, reflected the blazing glory of the sky.

Some distance off lay the coast, its familiar outline dim, purple, and mysterious in the evening mist. But it was neither the sunset, glorious as it was, nor the scenery which held our imagination. It was the shipping.

All manner of craft there were. First came the Spurt, of Tromsö, a Norwegian tramp of dissolute and chastened appearance, whose deliberate, plodding gait and general air of senility belied her name, or at any rate the English meaning of it. Her rusty black hull was decorated with three large squares painted in her national colours, red, with a vertical white-edged stripe of blue in the centre. Next a bulbous, prosperous-looking Dutchman, who seemed to waddle in her, or his, stride. She was slightly faster than the ancient Spurt, but was no flyer, and boasted a canary-yellow hull bearing her name in fifteen-foot letters, and enormous painted tricolours striped horizontally in red, white, and blue.

Then two Swedes with unpronounceable names who, by their embellishments, informed the world that they hailed respectively from Göteborg and Helsingborg. They also sported large rectangles, painted in vertical stripes of yellow and blue, while close behind them, a Dane, with an absurdly attenuated funnel and long ventilators sticking at all angles out of her hull like pins from a pincushion, ambled stolidly along like a weary cart-horse. She, scorning other decoration, merely showed the scarlet white-crossed emblem of her country. Some of the neutrals carried signs bearing their names which could be illuminated at night, and all seemed equally determined not to afford any prowling Hun submarine a legitimate excuse for torpedoing them on sight.

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But the craft which outnumbered the others by more than four to one were the British. They bore no distinctive marks or colouring on their sides, and their travel-stained and weather-beaten appearance, their rusty hulls, discoloured funnels, and the generally dingy and unpretentious look about them showed that they were kept far too busy to trouble about external appearances. The only token of their nationality was the wisp of

tattered red bunting fluttering at the stern of each; the gallant old Red Ensign which, war or no war, still dances triumphantly on practically every sea, except the Baltic.

Many of the passing vessels looked out of date and old-fashioned. Some veterans of the 'eighties or 'nineties, fit only to sail under a foreign flag according to pre-war standards, may have been dug out of their obscurity to play their part in the war. And a very important part it is. Ships must run, and, at a time when the Admiralty have levied a heavy toll for war purposes upon all classes of ships belonging to the Mercantile Marine, every vessel which will float and can steam can be utilised many times over for the equally important work of carrying cargo. It is not peaceful work, either, in these days of promiscuous mine-laying and enemy submarines armed with guns and torpedoes ready to sink without warning.

The important work of the yachts, pleasure steamers, trawlers, and drifters used for mine-sweeping, patrol work, and other naval purposes need not be entered into here; but the Mercantile Marine proper, what, for want of a better term, we may call "the deep sea service," has supplied the Royal Navy with many thousands of splendid officers and men who are now serving their country in fighting ships as members of the Royal Naval Reserve. Moreover, numbers of its ships of all classes are employed for war purposes as armed merchant cruisers, transports, oil fuel vessels, colliers, ammunition ships, storeships, and the like. But the function of those ships which are left for their legitimate purpose of cargo carrying is of equal importance to the country, of inestimable value, in fact, since we could not exist without them. Their duty is fraught with constant peril. Submarines may be lurking and mines may have been laid upon the routes they have to traverse, but never have there been the least signs of unreadiness or unwillingness to proceed to sea when ordered to do so.

Most of the officers and men of the Mercantile Marine are not trained to war like their comrades of the Royal Navy. They are not paid, and their ships are not built, to fight; but yet, time and time again, their natural pluck and intrepidity has shown itself in the face of an entirely new danger.

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Instances are so numerous that it is impossible to mention them all. Remember the gallant fight of the Clan MacTavish, with her single gun, against the heavily-armed German raider Moewe. Take the case of the "Blue Funneller" Laertes, Captain Probert, which was ordered to stop by an enemy submarine, but, disregarding the summons, proceeded at full speed, steering a zigzag course, and so escaped, Remember the little Thordis, Captain Bell, which, after having a torpedo fired at her, actually rammed and sank the submarine which fired it.

Again, there was the transport Mercian, Captain Walker, which was attacked by gunfire from a hostile submarine in the Mediterranean. Some of the troops on board

were killed, others were wounded, and nobody could have blamed the captain if he had surrendered. But what did he do? He endured a bombardment lasting for an hour and a half, and, thanks to the bravery and skill of all on board, the ship escaped.

There was also Captain Palmer, of the Blue Jacket, who, though his ship had actually been torpedoed, stood by her in his boats, reboarded her, and, in spite of her damage, steamed her to a place of safety. Recollect Captain Clopert, whose vessel, the Southport, was captured by a German man-of-war, was taken to the island of Kusaie, and was there disabled by the removal of certain important parts of her machinery. She was evidently to be utilised as a collier, but no sooner had the enemy left than the master, officers, and men set to work to effect repairs. How they did it with the meagre appliances at their disposal only they themselves can say, but the fact remains that the ship escaped.

These cases are only typical. Whole volumes might be written round the warlike deeds of our "peaceful" merchantmen, and from the many instances of gallantry we read of and the still greater number which do not achieve publicity it is evident that on every occasion of encountering the enemy the master of the ship, backed up most nobly by his officers and crew, has not only done everything possible to save his ship from capture in the first instance, but has never hesitated to defend his vessel in accordance with the generally accepted tenets of International Law, which state that a merchant ship can defend herself when attacked.

Courage in the face of the enemy when one can return shot for shot is one thing, but heroism of the same kind in an unarmed ship is on rather a different plane.

The work of the Royal Navy and the Mercantile Marine is largely interdependent. The two great sea services of the country must ever work hand in hand and side by side, and let us never forget what we owe to the latter.