"Well, I'm damned!" ejaculated the first lieutenant, looking up from his breakfast as a barefooted signalman held a slate under his nose. "Just as I'm in the middle of painting ship!"

The navigator, doctor, and assistant paymaster looked up from their plates. "What's up, Number One?" queried the former.

"Only that the new skipper's arrived in the English mail," said the first lieutenant glumly.

"He's coming on board at nine o'clock in the Spartan's steamboat!"

"Good Lord!" protested Cutting, the doctor. "So soon? It was only a week ago we saw his appointment!"

"Can't help that," No. One growled. "He's arrived, and he'll be on

board in exactly three quarters of an hour's time. Lord help us!

You'd better put on a clean tunic and your best society manners, Doc.

You'll want 'em both."

"Why the deuce can't he leave us in peace a bit longer?" complained

Falland, the lieutenant (N).

"And why the devil does he want to come just at the end of the quarter when I'm busy with my accounts?" grumbled Augustus Shilling, the assistant paymaster, blinking behind his spectacles. "I know jolly well what it'll be. For the next week I shan't be able to call my soul my own, and he'll be sending for me morning, noon, and night to explain things. The writer's gone sick, too. Oh, it IS the limit!"

"It is, indeed," echoed the doctor despondently. "Farewell to a quiet life. By George! I haven't written up the wine books for the last fortnight. Have I got time to do 'em before he comes?"

The first lieutenant shrugged his shoulders. "You'd better make an effort, old man," he

said. "He's a rabid teetotaler, and he's sure to ask to see 'em first thing."

"Heaven help us!" cried the medical officer, rising hastily from his chair and disappearing into his cabin.

"What sort of a chap did you say he was, Number One?" Falland queried, with traces of anxiety in his voice.

"I only know him by reputation," the first lieutenant answered

lugubriously. "But he's got the name of being rather … er, peculiar.

At any rate, he hates navigators, so you'd better mind your P's and

Q's, my giddy young friend."

"And I haven't corrected my charts for three weeks or written up the compass journal for a month!" Falland wailed. "Oh, Lor!"

From all of which it will be understood that the wardroom officers of

H.M. Gunboat Puffin were not overjoyed at the advent of their new

Captain.[1]

The date was some time during the last five years of the reign of Queen Victoria; the month, September, and though at this season of the year the climate of Hong-Kong is far too moist and too steamy to be pleasant, the Puffin's officers, adapting themselves to circumstances, had had plenty of shore leave and had managed to enjoy themselves. So had the men.

Their ship, an ancient, barque-rigged vessel of 1,000 odd tons; auxiliary engines capable of pushing her along at 9.35 knots with the safety valves lifting; and armed with I forget how many bottle-nosed, 5-inch, B.-L. guns and a Nordenfeldt or two, was swinging peacefully round her buoy in the harbour. She had swung there for precisely two months without raising steam, ever since her late commander had been promoted and had gone home to England, leaving the ship in temporary charge of Pardoe, the first lieutenant.

Captain Prato had been an easy-going man of serene disposition who allowed little or nothing to worry him, not even the Commander-in-Chief himself. As a consequence the wardroom officers swore by him, and so did Mr. Tompion, the gunner, and Mr. Slice, the artificer engineer. The ship's company were of the same opinion, so the little Puffin was what is generally known as a "happy ship."

But Commander Peter Potvin, R.N., Captain Prato's successor, was the direct antithesis of the former commanding officer, for he had the reputation in the Service of being a veritable little firebrand, and an eccentric little firebrand at that. He was small and thin, and possessed a pair of fierce blue eyes and a short, aggressive red beard, and was even reputed to insist on naval discipline being carried on in his own house ashore. At any rate, it is quite certain that his wife frequently appeared at church with red eyes after her lord and master had held his usual Sunday forenoon inspection of the house, and had discovered a cockroach in the kitchen or a dish-clout in the scullery, while it was true that he permitted his three children to wear good conduct badges, each carrying with them the sum of 1d. per week, after three months' exemplary behaviour. But only one of them, Tony, aged 18 months, had ever worn a badge for more than a fortnight.

It was also said, with what truth I do not know, that his servants frequently had their leave stopped for not being "dressed in the rig of the day," and for omitting to wear hideous caps and aprons of an uniform pattern designed by Commander Potvin himself without the assistance of his wife. It was bruited about that the cook, housemaid, and parlourmaid,—the nurse alone being excused,—were turned out of their beds at the unearthly hour of 5.30 a.m. and that, as a punishment for "being found asleep in their hammocks after the hands had been called," they were rousted out at 4 a.m. to chop firewood.

The Potvin ménage was not a happy one, and as a consequence his retainers usually gave notice en masse directly they heard the gallant commander was about to come home on leave. Even the gardener and boot boy followed the general example, so it was lucky for Mrs. Potvin that she had an uncle at the Admiralty who generally managed to send, "dear Peter" to a foreign station. He was rarely at home, or his wife would have been wrought to the verge of lunacy.

No wonder the Puffin's were not pleased at their future prospects, for the milk of human kindness evidently did not enter into the composition of their new commanding officer.

For twenty-four hours after his arrival on board Commander Potvin was too busy paying official calls and unpacking his belongings to make his presence really felt. The fun began the next morning, when, after divisions, he sent for Pardoe to come and see him in his cabin.

"You may have heard, First Lieutenant," he began, very pompously, "that I am a very observant man, and that I notice everything that goes on board my ship?"

"Indeed, sir," said Pardoe politely, wondering what on earth was coming next.

"Yes," said the commander. "I am unnaturally observant, and though some people may think I am a faddist, there is very little that escapes my notice. To start with, I always insist that my officers shall wear strict uniform, and at the present moment I am grieved to see that you are wearing white socks."

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know you would mind. The officers in the flagship wear them with white clothing."

"I was not aware that I had asked you a question, Lieutenant Pardoe," interrupted the skipper, his beard bristling. "Moreover, what they do or do not do in the flagship is no affair of mine. The uniform regulations lay down that socks are to be black or dark blue, and I expect my officers to wear them. I also observed just now that the Surgeon was wearing a watch strap across the front of his tunic, which is in strict defiance of the regulation which says that watch chains and trinkets are not to be worn outside the coat. I do not wish to have to take steps in the matter, but kindly bear it in mind yourself, and inform your messmates, that I insist on strict uniform."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"There are several more matters I wish to discuss," the captain resumed, twiddling his moustaches. "You will doubtless have heard that I like to keep my ship's companies happy and contented, eh?" He looked up enquiringly.

"Er—yes, sir. Of course, sir," said the first lieutenant lamely, having heard precisely the opposite.

"Very good. To keep the men happy and contented one has to keep them employed, so in future there will be no leave to either officers or men until four o'clock in the afternoon. We shall doubtless be able to find plenty for them to do on board."

Number One opened his mouth to expostulate, but thought better of it. "I like the men to feel that their ship is their home," continued the skipper, "and to encourage them to stay on board in the afternoons and evenings instead of spending their money and their substance in these terrible grog shops ashore, these low and vicious haunts of iniquity," he rolled his tongue round the words, "I propose that the officers shall prepare and deliver a series of lectures on interesting topics. I have," he added, "brought a magic lantern and a good stock of slides out from England, and some evening next week I propose to deliver the first lecture myself. The subject is a most instructive one, 'The effects of alcohol on the human body and mind,' and to illustrate it I have prepared a number of most excellent charts showing the increase in the consumption of spirits and malt liquor between 1873 and the present time. The charts, compiled from the most reliable data, are drawn up for most of the best known professions, sailors, soldiers, labourers, policemen, clergymen, and so on, and I can safely promise you a most interesting evening."

Pardoe, quite convinced that he had to deal with a lunatic, gasped and began to wonder how on earth he could leave the ship unostentatiously without damaging his subsequent career. "I'm afraid I'm not much of a hand at lecturing, sir," he said with a forced smile. "In fact there's hardly a subject I know enough about to——."

"Pooh, pooh," laughed the commander. "With due diligence in your spare time you will be able to learn up quite a lot of subjects, and as for the actual lecturing," he shrugged his shoulders, "practice makes perfect, and I have no doubt that before very long we shall find you quite an orator." He smiled benignly.

"We will have the lectures once a week, at 8 p.m., say on Thursdays," he went on, "and on Sundays I will conduct an evening service at 6.0., at which, of course, all officers will attend. You will read the lessons and collect the offertory, Mr. Pardoe. That will leave us five clear evenings a week for other harmless occupations, and I propose that on one of them we have readings for the men from the works of well-known authors. Something light and amusing from Dickens or Dumas to start with, and then, as we get on, we might try the more learned writers like Darwin, or—er—Confucius."

The wretched first lieutenant grew red about the face and started to breathe heavily.

"Then on another evening we might encourage the men to play progressive games like draughts, halma, picture lotto, spillikins, ping-pong, and beggar-my-neighbour. My sole object in doing all this, you will understand, is to keep the men amused and instructed, to divert their minds and, therefore, to keep them happy and contented. After a few weeks or so they will all be so anxious to come to our entertainments, that they will have lost all desire to go ashore at all. It is a good idea, is it not?"

The first lieutenant nodded grimly. The idea may have been excellent, but he could hardly imagine Petty Officer Timothy Carey, the horny captain of the forecastle, listening to Confucius; nor Baxter, the Sergeant of Marines, sitting down to a quiet game of spillikins with Scully, the cook's mate. In fact, he foresaw that when he informed the men of the arrangements about to be made for their welfare, he would have all his work cut out to repress the inevitable rebellion. Darwin, Confucius, picture lotto, and beggar-my-neighbour for the hardened ship's company of the Puffin! The Police Gazette, Reynolds' Weekly, pots of beer, and the games known as "Shove ha'penny" and "Crown and Anchor" were far more to their liking.

"Well," said Commander Potvin, "that is all I have to say at present; but I am gratified, very gratified indeed, that you agree with my ideas. I will draw up and issue detailed rules for our evening entertainments, but, meanwhile, I should be obliged if you would cause these to be distributed amongst the men. They will pave the way," he added, smiling as pleasantly as he was able, and handing Pardoe a neat brown paper parcel. "They will pave the way with good intentions, and I have no doubt that within a few

weeks we shall have the happiest ship's company in the whole of the British Navy."

The first lieutenant, too astonished to reply, clutched the parcel and retired to the wardroom, where, flinging his cap on to the settee, he relapsed into the one armchair. "Lord!" he muttered, holding his head, "I believe the man's as mad as a hatter!"

He opened the package to find therein a quantity of bound sheets. He selected one of the pamphlets at random and examined it with a sigh. "Drink and Depravity," he read. "Pots of beer cost many a tear. Be warned in time or you'll repine."

"Great Caesar's ghost!" he ejaculated. "The man IS mad! To think that it should come to this. Poor, poor old Puffin!"

A few minutes later Falland, on his way aft to visit the captain, glanced into the wardroom. Pardoe still sat in the armchair muttering softly to himself with his head bowed down between his hands. The floor, the table, and the chair were littered with tracts of all the colours of the rainbow. "Saints preserve us!" the navigator murmured. The next really interesting incidents occurred on Sunday morning, when the commanding officer made his usual rounds of the ship and inspected the men. So far nothing had officially been said about the new régime; but, in some mysterious way, the ship's company had an inkling of the happy days in store for them, while, through a lavish distribution of tracts, literature which, I am sorry to relate, they solemnly burnt in the galley fire, they were fully aware of their new captain's notions on the engrossing subject of drink. Accordingly, to please him, and to show that they were not the hardened sinners, seasoned reprobates, and generally idle and dissolute characters he perhaps might take them for, they fell in at divisions on that Sabbath morn wearing their most cherubic and innocent expressions, and their newest and most immaculate raiment.

The Puffin had always been a clean ship, but on this particular occasion she surpassed herself, for all hands and the cook had done their very utmost to uphold her reputation. Her burnished guns and freshly scoured brass-work shone dazzingly in the sun; her topmasts and blocks had been newly scraped and varnished, while the running rigging, boat's falls, and other ropes about the deck were neatly coiled down and flemished. The decks themselves were as white as holystones, sand, and much elbow grease could make them, and, with her white hull with its encircling green riband and cherry-red waterline, her yellow lower masts and funnel, and a brand-new pendant flying from the main-truck and large White Ensign flapping lazily from its staff on the poop, the Puffin looked more like a yacht than a man-o'-war. But Commander Potvin also had a reputation to keep up, and he would not be Commander Potvin if he could not find fault somewhere.

"Seaman's division—'shun!" shouted Falland, the officer in charge, as the commander and first lieutenant made their appearance from under the poop. "Off—caps!"

The men clicked their heels punctiliously and removed their headgear, and the captain, passing down the front rank with his sword trailing on the deck behind him, began his inspection.

"What is your name, my man?" he inquired condescendingly, halting opposite to a burly bearded able seaman.

"Joseph Smith, sir."

"I seem to remember your face," said the commander.

"Yes, sir. I served along 'o you in th' Bulldorg five year ago."

"Indeed. That is most interesting. Well, Smith," eyeing him up and down, "I am always most pleased to see my old shipmates again."

"Yes, sir," answered the burly one, trying hard to look pleased himself, and turning rather red in the effort. As a matter of fact he was wondering if his commanding officer was blessed, or cursed, with a good memory, and if, by any chance, he remembered the occasion when he—Joseph Smith—had last stood before him on the quarterdeck of H.M.S. Bulldog. He had stood there as a defaulter, to be punished with ten days' cells and the loss of a hardly-earned good conduct badge, for returning from leave in a state of partial insobriety, and for having indulged in a heated and more than acrimonious discussion with the local constabulary. It had happened several years before, and since then he had turned over a new leaf, but he grew quite nervous at the recollection.

But the skipper, apparently, had quite forgotten it, for he went on speaking. "I am sorry to see, Smith, that, although you have served with me before, you have forgotten what I must have taken the greatest pains to teach you. Your hair is too long, and your beard is not trimmed in the proper service manner. Your trousers are at least two inches too tight round the knee, and six inches too slack round the ankle, while the rows of tape on your collar are too close together. It will not do," he added, glaring unpleasantly. "The uniform regulations are made to be strictly adhered to. Mr. Falland!"

"Sir."

"Have this man's bag inspected in the dinner hour every day for a fortnight. See that his hair is properly cut by next Sunday, and see that he either shaves himself clean, or that he does not use a razor at all, according to the regulations. I am surprised that you should have allowed him to come to divisions in this condition."

"Very good, sir."

The Commander passed on, leaving the delinquent with his mouth wide open in astonishment and righteous indignation. Smith was firmly of the opinion that his beard was everything that a beard should be, while, quite rightly, he had always prided himself on being one of the best dressed men in the ship. Any little irregularities in his attire, irregularities not countenanced by the regulations, were merely introduced for the purpose of making himself smarter than ever. It was a sad blow to his pride.

But many others suffered in the same way, for hardly a man in the division was dressed according to the strict letter of the law. Some had the tapes on their jumpers too high or too low; others had the V-shaped openings in front a trifle too deep; many, in their endeavours to make their loose trousers still more rakish, wore them in too flowing a manner over their feet, and still more, in their anxiety not to spoil the set of their jumpers, carried no 'pusser's daggers,' or knives, attached to their lanyards. Altogether the first Sunday was a regular débâcle for the Puffin's but an undoubted triumph for Commander Potvin.

"Mr. Falland," he said, having walked round the ranks. "I am sorry to find all this laxity in the important matter of dress, and I rely upon you to take immediate steps to have it rectified."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"And," the skipper continued, "I notice that you fall your men in according to size. I know that some commanding officers like to inspect the men in this way, but personally I prefer to have them grouped according to appearance. For instance, tall men together, short men together, and the same thing with the fat and the thin, the bearded and the clean-shaven."

"Very good, sir. But—" the navigator hesitated.

"But what, Mr. Falland?"

"Suppose a man is tall, thin, and bearded, sir?" asked Falland, in utter perplexity.

"Seize upon his predominant feature, Mr. Falland, and use your own discretion in the matter," said the Captain, half suspecting that his subordinate was trying to make fun of him, but knowing full well that, whatever the navigator did, he could always find fault with it.

He marched forward to continue his rounds, leaving the astonished divisional officer wondering if he was also to form special detachments of red-faced sailors, white-faced sailors, snub-nosed sailors, and bandy-legged sailors.

The inspection of the upper-deck and mess-deck passed without much comment, the Captain even saying that he was glad to see that the ship was 'quite clean,' a term which made the zealous Pardoe writhe with annoyance; but the next thing which caught his attention was a small hencoop containing eight or nine miserable, bedraggled-looking fowls.

"Bless my soul, First Lieutenant!" said he. "Look at these fowls!" They were sorry looking birds, it is true, but Chinese chickens are not renowned for their beauty and sprightliness of appearance at the best of times.

"They seem quite healthy, sir," the First Lieutenant answered, putting his head on one side in a most judicial manner.

"Yes, yes," murmured the Commander. "But they are all the colours of the rainbow. White, yellow, brown, grey, and black."

"So they are, sir," said Pardoe, as if he had observed the astounding fact for the first time.

"Who do they belong to?"

"They're yours, sir. Your steward looks after them."

"Does he, indeed?" said the skipper, rather nonplussed. "Well, send for my steward."

The portly and dignified Ah Fong presently appeared.

"Is it not possible for you to buy fowls of all the same colour?" the

"Owner" wanted to know.

Ah Fong stared in hopeless bewilderment, trying to grasp his master's meaning. "My no savvy, sah," he said, shaking his head.

"Can you not buy your chickens, or my chickens, rather, all one colour?

White, for preference, as the weather is hot."

"I savvy, sah," exclaimed the Chinaman, with a beatific smile slowly spreading over his countenance. "You no likee black piecee hen, sah?"

"No, no, that's not what I mean at all," said Potvin, going off into a long explanation.

At last Ah Fong began to understand what was wanted. "No can do, sah!" he expostulated. "S'pose I go 'shore catch piecee hen. I say to one man, I wanchee plentee fat piecee hen, no wanchee olo piecee, wanchee young plenty big piecee hen for capten...."

"I really cannot waste my time listening to this senseless conversation!" interrupted the Captain, with some petulance. "Mr. Pardoe, you will kindly explain to him that in future all the fowls on board are to be white in the summer, and blue... 'er, I mean black, in the winter. I will have them in the proper dress of the day like the ship's company, do you understand?"

"I do, sir," said the wretched Pardoe with an inaudible sigh, as the little procession moved on.

He did explain to the steward what was required, and Ah Fong was confronted with a dilemma. However, he had his wits about him, and the next Sunday morning, to Number One's intense astonishment, every wretched fowl in the coop, black, grey, or brown, had been freshly whitewashed. Their feathers were all plastered together, and they looked supremely unhappy and more bedraggled than ever, but the captain's aesthetic eye was apparently satisfied, for he passed them by with a glance and made no adverse remarks.

After the ordeal of divisions the mess-stools, chairs for the officers, and reading desk were brought up and placed on desk under the awnings, and at 10.30, when church had been "rigged," the tolling of the bell summoned the officers and ship's company to divine service. Pardoe, after satisfying himself that everything was ready, went aft to report to the Captain, and, somewhat to the surprise of everyone, Commander Potvin presently appeared without his tunic, advanced to the reading desk, and started the service.

At first people thought that he had discarded his jacket merely for the sake of coolness, and, as the day was unusually hot, some of the other officers were half inclined to follow his sensible example. But when at last church was over and Pardoe had occasion to see the Captain again, he discovered the real reason for the "Owner's" removal of his outer garment.

"You may have noticed, Lieutenant Pardoe, that I took the precaution to remove my tunic before reading the Church service," said the skipper.

"I did, sir," answered the First Lieutenant. "In fact, it was so hot, that I nearly followed your example."

Potvin glared. "I hardly understand what you mean, Mr. Pardoe?" he said with asperity. "The fact of its being hot or cold does not effect my religious ideas."

"I beg your pardon, sir. I thought that..."

"Kindly do not impute these motives to me," the Commander went on to say. "I consider that we should all attend divine service in a state of the utmost humility, and I removed my tunic so that I should appear before the Almighty in the same simple garb as the men, not as their commanding officer!" He puffed out his chest with importance.

Pardoe merely gasped, for the idea that the Almighty might be unduly influenced by the sight of the three gold stripes and curl on his captain's shoulder-straps was quite beyond his comprehension. Nevertheless, Commander Potvin was quite serious, and on leaving his presence Pardoe repaired to his cabin, and wrote a fervent appeal to a former captain of his, asking that officer to use his influence to have him removed from his present appointment. He loved his little Puffin, it is true. He would be very sorry to leave her; but anything was better than serving in a ship commanded by a lunatic.

For a week the gunboat's officers and men endured the new routine with what fortitude they could muster. On Monday they had their progressive games, when the watch on board,—the watch whose turn it was to go on leave had gone ashore to a man,—were compelled, much to their disgust, to squat round on the upper deck with draughts, halma, and picture-lotto boards spread out before them. The proceedings were not exactly jovial, for the men looked, and were, frankly bored, while a party of four able seamen, finding the innocent attractions of Happy Families hardly exciting enough, were subsequently brought up before the First Lieutenant on a charge of gambling.

Half an hour after the games started, moreover, two other men, one a marine and the other the ship's steward's assistant, fell in to see him.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Well, sir," the marine explained. "It's like this 'ere. I was told off to play draughts along o' this man, an' all goes well until I makes two o' my men kings an' starts takin' all 'is. Then 'e says as 'ow I've been cheatin', so I says to 'im, polite like, as 'ow I 'adn't done no such thing, an' wi' that 'e ups an' 'its me in the eye, sir, which isn't fair."

"He hit you in the eye?" asked Number One.

"Yes, sir," said the sea-soldier, exhibiting a rapidly swelling cheek.

"What have you to say?" the First Lieutenant asked the alleged assailant.

"What he says isn't true, sir. I did say he had been cheatin', becos he had, becos he was movin' all his other pieces over the board how he liked. I says he mustn't do that, becos it isn't the game, but he says that as he's been told off to play, he'll play how he bloomin' well likes. I says it's cheatin', and he hits me on the nose, so I hits him back, and we has a bit of a dust up." He exhibited a gory handkerchief as proof of his injuries.

"Do either of you men bear any grudge against the other?" asked Pardoe, knowing that they had often been ashore together.

"No, sir," came the immediate reply.

"Well, go away, and don't make such fools of yourselves again. We can't have all this bickering and fighting over a simple game of draughts."

The two combatants retired grinning, and Pardoe, sighing deeply, walked up and down the deck wrapped in thought. One fact was quite patent, and that was that if the innocent amusements for the ship's company were suffered to continue, he would require the wisdom and patience of a Solomon to arbitrate between the disputants.

On Tuesday they had a reading from Shakespeare, conducted by the Captain, and, to judge from the sotto-voce remarks of the audience, they were neither amused nor instructed.

"'E must be wet if 'e thinks we liken listenin' to this 'ere stuff!" muttered Able Seaman McSweeny dismally. "'E talks abart 'is ruddy merchant o' Venice, but I doesn't want to 'ear nothin' abart a.... Eyetalian shopkeeper. I expec's 'e was one o' these 'ere blokes wot wheeled an ice-cream barrer. S'welp me I do!"

A loud titter greeted his utterance, and Commander Potvin stopped reading for a moment, and glanced round with a fierce expression, without being able to see whence the sounds of merriment emanated.

No, judging from the trite remarks from the men, the reading from the works of England's most famous poet and playwright was not an unqualified success.

On Thursday came the Captain's lecture on the effects of alcohol, at which, to Pardoe's great astonishment, there was an unusually full attendance. Even men belonging to the watch ashore were present, some of them bringing friends from other ships with them.

The audience, suspicious at first, eventually became strangely enthusiastic, loud cheering, much stamping on the deck, and even shrieks and cat-calls completely drowning the lecturer's voice for moments at a time. The applause became more

vociferous still when the man attending the magic lantern inadvertently placed his hand on its almost red-hot top, and interrupted the proceedings with a loud and very startled: "Ow! The bloomin' thing's burnt me!"

Anyone but the Commander might have detected something sarcastic and ironical in the excessive applause, but he, the possessor of a skin like unto that of an armadillo, was very pleased with the reception of his discourse.

"I told you I had an interesting subject," he said afterwards to the First Lieutenant. "The hearty applause was very gratifying, and it is wonderful how a little straight talk goes down with the men."

"I only hope my lecture will be an equal success, sir," answered

Pardoe, rather at a loss what to say.

His subject was "Cities of Ancient Greece."

But at last came the time when the Puffin was ordered to sea, and at 8.30 on that fateful morning the gunboat, with her gallant commander standing on the poop in the attitude of Sir Francis Drake starting on his circumnavigation of the world, paddled gently down the crowded harbour and out through the Lye-mun pass. It was in this narrow passage that they had their altercation with a lumbering Chinese junk tacking slowly to and fro against the tide.

"Hard a-port!" ordered Falland, who was conning the ship.

"Hard a-starboard!" contradicted the Commander excitedly. "What are you thinking about, Mr. Falland?"

The Navigator's order would have taken the ship well clear, but the helmsman, perplexed by having two diametrically opposite commands hurled at his head simultaneously, and not knowing which to obey, did nothing.

There came a howl from the gunboat's forecastle and a frantic, blasphemous yelling from a party of Chinamen clustered on the junk's high poop.

"Full speed astern!" roared Potvin.

But it was too late, for a moment afterwards the Puffin's flying jib-boom slid neatly through the very centre of the matting sail on the junk's mizzen mast. More shrill cursing and strident execration from the junk, followed by a series of bumps and crashes as the two vessels collided, bow to stern. A large pig, suspended, according to the pleasant habit of the Chinese, in a wicker-work basket over the junk's quarter, also

two similar baskets filled with fowls, became detached from their moorings and fell overboard. Then the junk's mizzen-mast began to bend ominously, and before long, amidst more shrieks and yells, it snapped off short and collapsed on the poop, knocking one elderly Chinaman and two children into the water as it fell. It was followed almost immediately afterwards by the Puffin's flying jib-boom.

The gunboat's engines were stopped and the two vessels drifted together side by side, while a party with axes set to work to clear away the wreckage.

"Why on earth don't you look where you're going?" the Commander bawled at the junkmaster.

"Yah me ping wi taow!" howled the Chinaman, which, being interpreted, means, "You tailless son of a devil," the greatest possible insult.

It was followed by more mutual abuse and recrimination, but the gentleman in the junk, since Commander Potvin could not understand a word he said, was popularly supposed to have got the best of the wordy encounter.

But the skipper was quite determined to have somebody's blood, and seeing he could make no impression on the junk, vented his spleen on the Navigator.

"Mr. Falland!" he exclaimed, his eyes flashing and his heart full of rage. "The collision was entirely your fault. I shall report the matter to the Admiral, and meanwhile you will remain in your cabin under arrest!"

"But, sir. I really——"

"I require no explanations, sir. You are guilty of gross neglect and carelessness!"

Falland left the poop.

The damage was not sufficiently serious to delay the ship, and, having chopped herself free, she proceeded on her journey, her Commander taking upon himself the duties of the deposed Navigator.

It was unfortunate that, in calculating the course to be steered, he applied 3° deviation the wrong way. It was equally unfortunate that he miscalculated the set of the current, since it was these two things which, at 11.53 a.m. precisely, caused the gunboat to come into violent contact with a ledge of rocks with barely six feet of water over them at high water.

"Good heavens! What's that?" shouted the skipper, as there came a series of muffled, grinding crashes under water and the ship stopped dead.

"We've hit something, sir," said Pardoe, who was on the poop. They had, and for some hours remained stuck fast. In fact, the Puffin's bones would have been there to this day if she had not been steaming at her leisurely, economical speed of 7 1/2 knots, and it was only by sheer good luck, and with the assistance of salvage tugs and appliances from Hong-Kong, that she was ever got off at all. As it was she was merely badly damaged, and came back into harbour in tow of one tug, while a couple of others, with their pumps working at full speed and gushing forth streams of water, were lashed alongside her.

Falland was not court-martialled, but a week later Commander Potvin, after an interview with the Admiral and certain medical officers, found that the climate of Hong-Kong was too rigorous for his constitution, and embarked on board a P. and O. steamer for passage home to England en route for Yarmouth.

The gunboat's officers watched her until she was out of sight, and then repaired to the wardroom and indulged in cocktails.

"I'm sorry for him," said No. One, lifting his glass with a grin.

"Here's luck to him, and to us."

"Salve," nodded the doctor, swallowing his potion at a gulp.

The Royal Naval Hospital for mental cases is situated at Yarmouth.

[1] The commanding officer of a man-of-war, whatever his rank, is always "the captain." More familiarly he may be referred to "the owner," "skipper," or "old man."