

"ON TIDE DUTY."



THE old truth that one half of the world does not know how the other half lives, holds good even in Government appointments. The light-hearted clerk who bustles out of Whitehall or Somerset

House at the exact stroke of release, chatting with merry comrades and hurrying home probably to a cheery circle of friends, has very little idea indeed of the life of the "tide-waiter." Very, very rarely does he cast a thought down the great river to the humble Customs officer, who also is, strictly speaking, a member of the Civil Service. And yet if arduous duties, long service, quaint sights, and the spice of romance be attractions, a little attention might well be bestowed upon this worthy. Very frequently the tide-waiter is an old army pensioner, who, from keeping guard on tented field or in barrack square, has come, by an odd turn of fortune's wheel, to do the same on ship-deck. His duty is readily understood. As a vessel enters any British port—London, Liverpool, or a minor one—he is put on board her, under the command of the tide-surveyor, to watch. The waiter has to see that no goods are improperly transferred or landed; that no artifice baffles the lynx-eyes of H.M. Customs officers. To all intents and purposes he is a Man in Possession, living on board both day and night, until the docks are entered, the cargo discharged, and the official permits granted.

On the Thames, quite a little army is thus employed. Continually coming and going between Gravesend and London Bridge, the full volume of life in the Pool is open to their gaze. "The din, the duskiness, the discord of order, activity, and industry," is monotonously familiar, and the chance of an occasional collision grows far more stirring to the old stager than that beauty, moment, and endless variety which sends the casual visitor into ecstasies of admiration.

At all seasons of the year, in all weathers, on all sorts of ships—home and foreign, old and new, large and small, well-found and poverty-stricken—tide-duty has to be done. The amount of work varies very greatly, both in bulk and in the individual instance. When commerce is flourishing, and the breeze holds firmly at certain points of the compass, extra hands have to be drafted off in considerable numbers; and, according to the size of the ship, the time she takes to make the docks, her accommodation, and the strength

of the Customs detachment who walk her planks, is the task of the tide officer himself hard or easy.

To a certain extent, and varying with the special routine of special ports, probationers are employed. It is a stern and useful test at the outset of their Civil Service careers. It tries their courage, their endurance, their resource, their tact. It gives them a practical *grip* of their calling such as years of guide-book study and of oral instruction on shore would be powerless to impart. Very unpleasant it may seem to the tyro, a sad shock to those rose-tinted dreams which showed him only ease, certainty, and emolument in "Her Majesty's Service." But in later years, and when the experience has grown mellow by a constant recapitulation in younger ears, it is not regretted, but rather, indeed, gloried in.

The order of things is something like this:—An advertisement appears prominently in the daily papers of an open competition for a limited number of posts as out-door officer of Customs. A young man—most frequently of the lower half of the middle class—has his ambition at once fired. He writes off to the Secretary of the Civil Service Commission for particulars and forms; obtains them, and finds the list of examining subjects well within his powers. Those subjects comprise Handwriting, for which 200 marks are the maximum; Orthography, 200 marks; Arithmetic, as far as vulgar and decimal fractions, 300 marks; and English Composition, 200 marks again. A failure in *any* of these subjects will be absolutely fatal to his chances; but then he has not the slightest intention of failing. The fee for examination he thinks moderate enough, and so, at 15s., it really is. The lowest rate of commencing salary, if actually appointed, is £55 per annum, rising regularly by a fair increment, and with good chances of promotion, either by seniority, approved service, or a further competition. There is added a list of some fifteen towns whereat the struggle will take place simultaneously; and with places so widely apart as London and Dublin, Glasgow and Portsmouth, he has small difficulty in finding one to suit him. He works up, by aid of a coach or otherwise, and in due course, in the technical slang, "sits the exam."

Our friend waits a weary while on the tenter-hooks of suspense to know the result, and ultimately, when just on the verge of despair, receives a communication announcing his success. The subsequent investigation as to character, age (19 to 25), and health is likewise satisfactory, and, being high on the list of placed candidates, he has the choice of a location from amidst a dozen or more of ports. Which shall it be? For the sake of example, we will say that he elects to go to Liverpool. A date of trial is fixed, and comes. His first few days on probation pass swiftly and pleasantly with

"Men at peace on a peaceful shore,"

learning, listening, and with what he thinks the lightest

of duties. But by-and-by come rumours of "the tide." Those belonging to his department who have faced the ordeal are foremost in mild, unpalatable hints. They tell him of privation and discomfort with countenances on whose expression mischief wears the mask of condolence. Like the cabin-boy who is crossing the Line for the first time, the beginner hears many an antiquated joke with no suspicion either of its falsehood or of its staleness. His heart sinks within him; but, like a black thunder-cloud, the time of tide probation draws nearer and yet nearer. It is not long before he is actually enveloped therein—is out on the broad bosom of the Mersey, amid strangers and foreigners, tossed to and fro, from panting steam-tug to stately sailing ship, from unsavoury Eastern barque to speckless Cunarder. For the first time, it may be, "the romance of the sea" becomes to his ears something more than a phrase. In change after change, kaleidoscopic in suddenness and strangeness, its wonders, its contrasts, its mysteries are vividly impressed upon his memory. He may never live this life again, even for a day, but he will never forget it. Of course, the experience, whether it lasts for only a brief fortnight or three times as long, is soon over, and once passed is, so far as the probationer is concerned, over for ever; but all the same, and despite its novelty, it is a real trial. It means long hours, and very often some unpleasant adventures; natural anxiety, and in some weathers inconvenient exposure may be added.

At the smaller out-ports, although less continuous, tide-duty is probably quite as disagreeable. Conveniences are less, and the Customs officer must depend even more exclusively on his own tact and foresight. Since smuggling along our coasts went out of fashion as a recognised profession, the attempts at systematic and extensive evasion have naturally fallen to a minimum. Yet many an odd episode even now takes place. The tide-waiter and his masters on shore get queer glimpses often into human weakness and human cunning. Many an amusing dodge is tried to get suspicious parcels landed on the quiet. Probably, if it was not for the barrier of official secrecy and reserve, a whole volume might be compiled of comical and striking anecdotes from the memories of widely-separated Customs officers.

But here, by our side, is a gentleman in uniform who has actually been on tide-duty. Let us hear his story, and first ask a question.

"Oh, yes, sir! A tide-waiter has a fine chance to pick up a language or two. I've known several do it; carrying a grammar with them, committing its rules to memory while on watch, and learning the pronunciation from the natives they ran across. A queer school, you think—ship-deck, on the river; but it makes things stick in the memory a lot better than a professor's lecture or a pedagogue's cane could do. I've been on more than one ship myself where nobody besides could speak a word of English distinctly, and for which, on entering the docks, an interpreter had to be found.

"You want the record of a fortnight's work? Well, I'll start from a Sunday I had spent on shore; that'll be a sort of guide to my recollections.

"There was first the *Bertha*, a German—very rough crew—mixed cargo—ten hours' duty on her alone. Then three English ships, the largest the *Queen Coquette*. I and a comrade spent two days and two nights on her—and here comes the pinch. Of course, the constant change is interesting and all very well, and the pay is calculated pretty fairly, but the tide-waiter gets his share of hardships withal.

"One or other of us had to be on deck all the while, just like a sentinel; and if you split the twenty-four hours levelly into halves, that'll give twelve a piece for us of actual *bonâ fide* watching. A long day's work, you will admit; and sometimes it's worse. A vessel may have only one tide-waiter on board, and then, if anything delays her beyond the time estimated, the strain comes pretty heavy.

"Our sleeping berths would have been comfortable this time in the extreme, but for rats. The *Queen Coquette* was quite an old ship, and once these pests get into a vessel's timbers, it is the hardest task in the world to dislodge them. My off-time came first, and I went below and dropped into a doze in a very few minutes. What was it disturbed me? A most uncanny noise surely! Scrape, scrape, scrape, like a whole dozen of fret-saws going at once. A faint light from a river signal flashed in through the cracks and revealed—Ugh! I sprang to my feet, and tried in various ways to rout the invading host, but with small success; and—will you believe it?—sooner than go to sleep again under these circumstances, I went up above and kept my mate company. It was summer, luckily, and no hardship as regarded weather. It strikes me, too, that many an artist would have been glad to have held such a watch; night amongst the shipping would be a grand subject for a painting.

"The next three vessels to which I was transferred, one after the other, were by a coincidence all foreigners—number one was a Portuguese barque, with the usual mixed crew, presenting no points of special interest. Number two was a French ship from Rangoon. Very little English was spoken on her boards; but in answer to the ordinary inquiries as to health, the incidents of the voyage, &c., I learned that the captain had died on this journey, and that the ship was consequently in the charge of the chief mate. He was a jovial, good-natured fellow, who believed in treating the tide-waiter as he ought to be treated—with civility and the best he had to offer. The crew were not so pleasant a sample; as I had often found to be the case with strangers, they ate their meals on deck, in the open air.

"A succeeding English vessel was followed by a Norwegian, memorable only for its excellent trim and for having a captain I had known of yore. There, sir! that's a fair specimen of the work our fellows have to perform. In bad weather, as you may guess, it comes hard."

Our narrator is right, and, as was said at the beginning, the life of the tide-waiter is at least worthy of a little attention. In discomfort, in privation, in veiled and unveiled dislike, he goes about his task, and is not the least useful of those in "Her Majesty's Service."