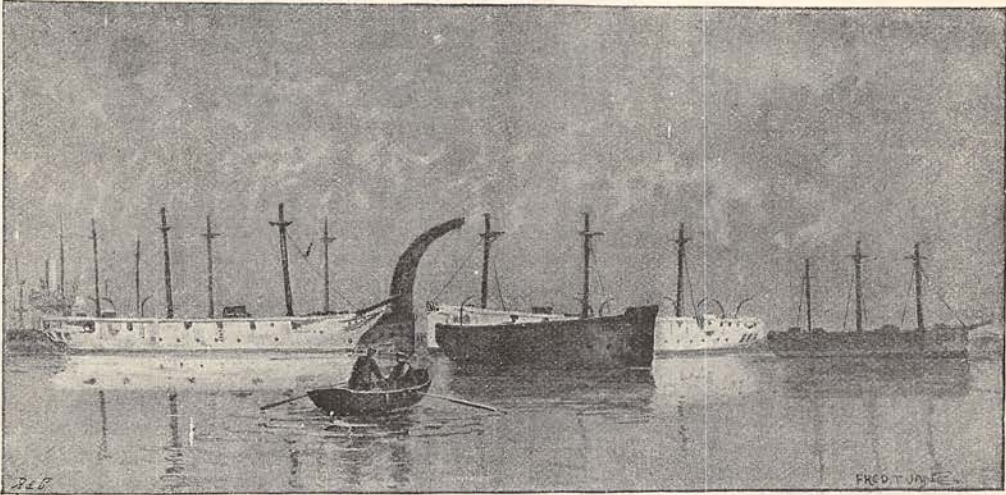


A ROYAL DOCKYARD.

BY FRED T. JANE.



OLD GUNBOATS AND THIRD-CLASS CRUISERS, CHATHAM DOCKYARD.



CHATHAM YARD, when one considers its propinquity to London, is very little known for a Royal Dockyard.

This, doubtless, is in some measure due to the town, which is not of a sort to attract either the lover of the beautiful or the seeker after fresh air; for though both these commodities are to be found by the man who knows where to look for them, they are not visible at first sight to the stranger arriving by rail. That both beauty and air exist in the neighbourhood of the "four towns"—Chatham, Brompton, Rochester, and Stroud—is provable, the first by the pictures that Mr. Wyllie, A.R.A., has painted around them, and no one who has penetrated the recesses of the dockyard will be prepared to deny the existence of the latter in almost too liberal quantities. But, as I remarked above, they require looking for.

Chatham town has altered but little since Mr. Pickwick wrote of it in his famous journal; and "soldiers, sailors, Jews, chalk, shrimps, officers, and dockyard-men" are still its "principal productions," though the yard has grown since those days, and is now the second largest in the Empire.

The road leading to the principal yard gateway has a very martial appearance, being lined with a succession of barracks and fortifications, the obsolescence of these latter in no way detracting from, but rather adding to, their imposing effect. The gateway itself does not proclaim its office save to the initiated eye, being more like the entrance to a nobleman's mansion or modern workhouse



AN ENGLISH JOSS-HOUSE—FIGURE-HEADS.

than aught else; indeed, I have known strangers go there to ask where the dockyard is. Yet the experienced in such matters will easily recognise it by the large notice-board bearing the inscription sacred to all dockyards—

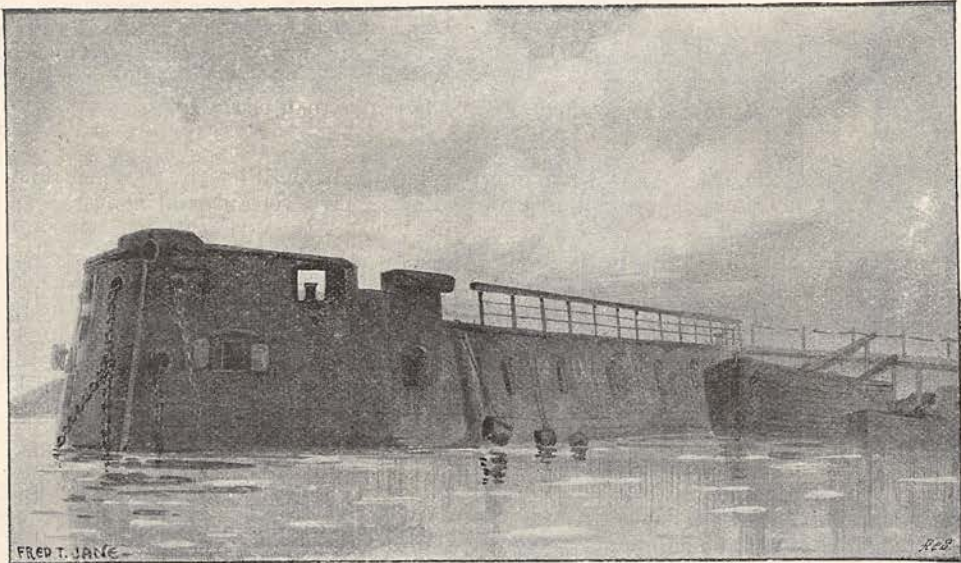
“BRING NO MATCHES INTO THIS
YARD.”

At sight of this notice the law-abiding citizen is supposed to hand over the forbidden articles to the police at the gate, thereby helping—so they say—to reduce the vote for lights under the head of “dockyard maintenance.”

The principal gate at Chatham is not to be passed lightly, for it is guarded by a posse of policemen, who at once pounce upon anyone entering and demand his business, and generally

terminable wall—whereon from time immemorial the dockyardmen have been wont to chalk up their opinions of each other and of the world in general—the yard suddenly appears below, a jumble of yellow masts and funnels nestling amid the trees. At eventide this road is filled with a crowd of “dockies”—as the blue-jackets term the dockyard hands—an almost endless crowd of the proletariat, returning home with the briskness that marks a Government employé at the close of day.

Of the 17,000 men employed in the Royal Dockyards, over 6,000 earn their living at Chatham, with an average wage of £68 per annum. In France, where the dockyards give employment to something like 21,000 men, the average wage is only £40 a year; but, as the Englishmen get through nearly



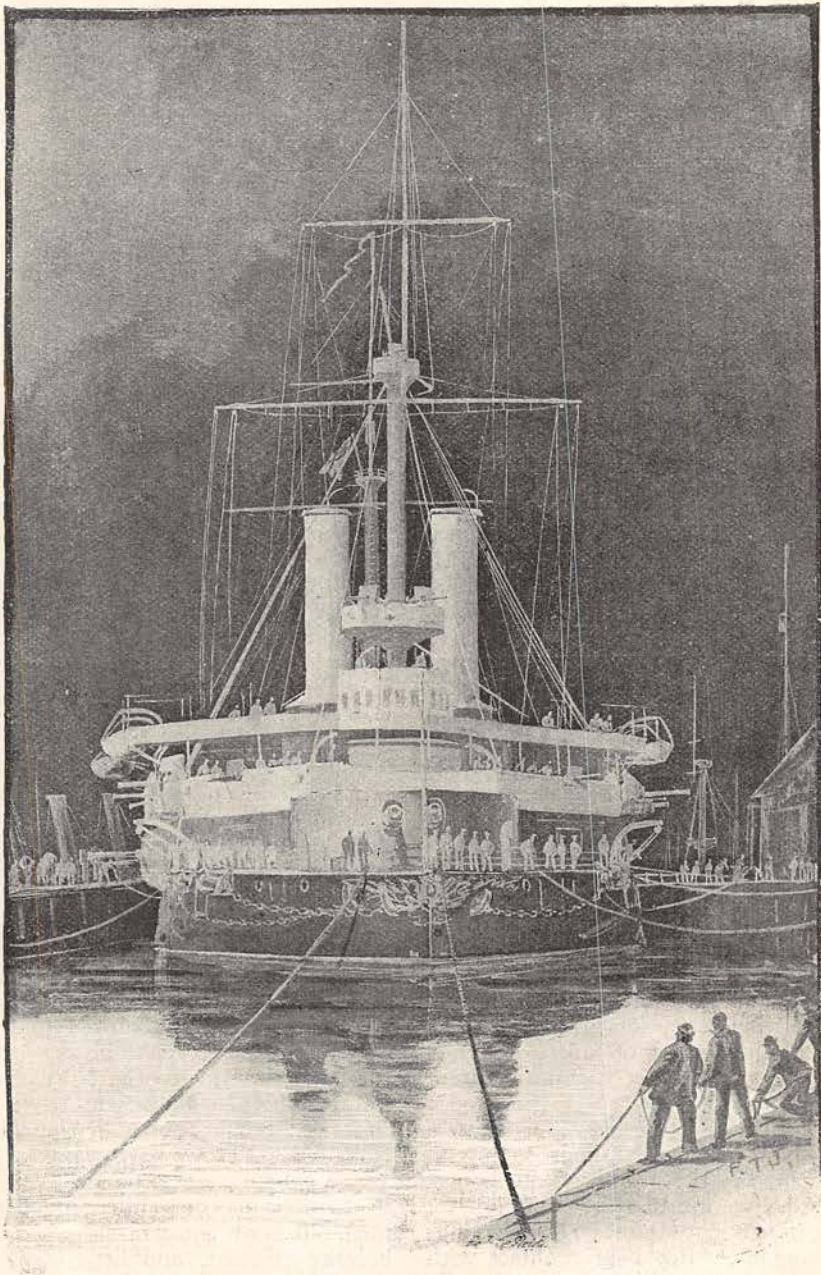
AN OLD WARRIOR—THE FLOATING BATTERY *TERRIBLE*, USED BEFORE SEBASTOPOL.

finish by sending him round to the lower gate, that lies a good half-mile further along the dusty road which follows the dockyard wall. This is certainly so if the stranger, desirous of roaming about the yard unattended, seeks to gain his end by stating his desire to visit some particular ship. Only once has this portal been passed by an unescorted civilian, a well-known publisher, who, with deep cunning, announced his business as a lunch with an admiral—whom he never managed to find when he got in.

The lower gateway is less pretentious than the first, looking, indeed, much like a decayed turnpike. Coming round the seemingly in-

twice as much work, the expenditure on any given piece of construction is about equal. The cost of the dockyards in the latest naval estimates is laid at a trifle under two million sterling for the *personnel*, and a little over the same amount for shipbuilding materials; this included the foreign as well as the home yards.

For purposes of description, Chatham Yard is best treated as though visited from gate No. 1, whence one passes down through a shady avenue consisting of trees interspersed with figure-heads and old guns. These figure-heads are the relics of departed three-deckers and frigates, and though they



TOWING H.M.S. HOOD INTO DOCK. (LARGEST TURRET-SHIP IN THE WORLD.)

may have and did look well enough in their original places, they are not pleasant objects to contemplate at close quarters. There is a chamber—or shall I say temple?—specially devoted to these old monsters, and, looking at them as they stand, figure after figure, in a horrible perspective, glaring till the whole place seems full of snakes and demons, one

cannot help feeling that the monopoly of quaint joss-house does not lie entirely with Eastern nations. That is, till one remembers all that those glaring old eyes have looked upon, the scenes of valour and glory in which they have taken part. It is a pity that they are kept thus stowed away, though the wonder is that no economical Government

has as yet sold them for firewood. Seeing that they *have* survived, it is a matter of regret that they are not put up in some public place—say Hyde Park—where the memories that they evoke might make the nation remember how the sailors who manned the ships that bore them built up England and made her what she is. There is need enough, for never was there a nation with the sea for its life-blood so devoid of pride or interest in its creators as the English. The navy is sacrificed to party politics, and the end of the chapter will be an awakening too late to the fact that no adequate defence exists for the rights that we have all been scrambling for.

However, this is a description of Chatham Dockyard. The region of figure-heads is soon passed, and a district of huge sheds takes its place. From the mouths of many of these protrude the rams of great vessels being built; along and outside of them runs a little railway track, whereon a small engine, usually crowded with as many dockyardsmen as can get a foothold upon it, travels at break-neck speed. The rails are laid in an iron pathway, which has a curious and little-known history. In the old days every three-decker carried tons and tons of pig-iron as ballast, and the genesis of iron ships found the dockyards crowded with an immense quantity of pig-iron blocks—veritable white elephants—until some genius hit on the brilliant idea of using them as paving-stones. And so in every dockyard one walks on iron pathways. Hard by the launching-slips are the machinery sheds, steam hammers, and things of that ilk, which I do not propose to write about, as they are dilated on *ad nauseam* by the policeman who takes people round. These policemen are terrible encyclopædias—some of them—and in the matter of tall stories they can give the blue-jacket points without number.

There is a difference, however; for whereas the sailor spins his with humorous intent, the policeman's is the result of an honest endeavour to live up to the reputation for knowledge assigned to him by street-songs and barrel-organs. From his contact with salt water the sailor's efforts are generally taken *cum grano salis*, but the policeman's account is always believed in as the literal truth; and thus it is that the average citizen returns greatly impressed from a dockyard visit, and initiates his fellows into the mysteries of guns that throw shot of 100 tons in weight, torpedo-boats that dive under ironclads, and, exploding, blow them sky-high in little fragments, and other interesting information of equal value. Such an one

once told me that horse marines really existed, as he had been shown in a man-of-war the place where the horses were kept—the policeman who trotted him round having mixed up horses with *hawsers*!

The building-sheds at Chatham open out into the Medway, as do also a couple of small dry-docks hard by them. After a vessel is launched she is taken down the river by tugs, and then drawn up through the basins by wire hawsers, till she reaches the place set apart for her completion. The largest vessels—the *Hood*, for instance, was—are occasionally built in a dry-dock, and when sufficiently advanced, the water is admitted, and they are "floated out." The objection to this is that the dock is rendered useless for a considerable time; but, on the other hand, the risk of damage that always attends the launch of a big vessel is obviated.

The small docks alluded to above do duty for gun-vessels and torpedo-boats; one of them is often full of these last wicked-looking little craft. These are first-class boats, averaging some 125 feet in length; the second-class boats, which are often under seventy feet long, are treated with less ceremony, being taken bodily out of the water and stowed in sheds and around odd corners, until such time as they may be needed as part of the necessary top hamper of a battleship preparing for sea.

Along the river-front, below the launching-slips, lies an old warrior in the shape of the armoured floating battery *Terrible*, which took part in the bombardments of the Crimean War. She belongs to the era of wooden steamships, and represents the birth of the ironclad idea, since which all finality in the matter of type has been lost, though it is possibly nearer now than heretofore.

Second-class torpedo-boats set out from this spot on trips to the Nore and back, for the training of stokers, who have a miserable time of it shut down in these lively little craft. When they have acquired the double art of existing and attending to their duties in these boats, they are reckoned dependable men. It takes some of them a long time to become efficient, and little wonder, for no one yet met a stoker who could be impressed with the horrors of the place where the bad niggers go to.

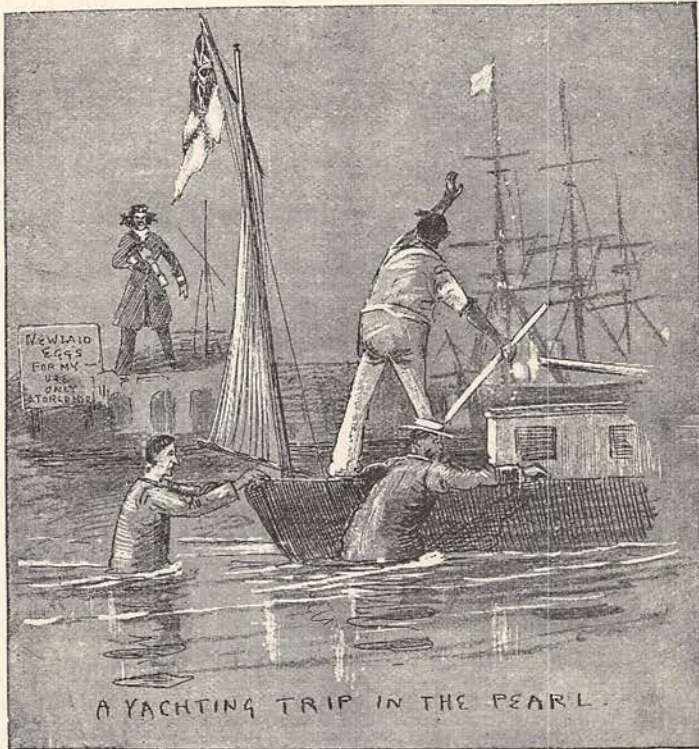
Beyond the launching-slips lies a great piece of waste land, covered here and there with stacks of coal, timber, old iron, and such like lumber, which one has to pass before coming upon the rest of the yard.

There are in all three large basins—each of them getting on for a mile in circumference—and they are generally crowded

with ships, so crowded at times that there is not room for the vessels all to lie alongside, and they are moored two, or even three, abreast.

Altogether, from forty to fifty ships generally lie at Chatham, some too old and others *too new* for foreign service. It is no

time lay the *Northampton*, champion "snug billet" and champion lame duck of the British navy. Just before being put out of commission this ship was sent to look for a wreck in the North Sea, and going full speed under steam and sail, just managed to make three knots an hour. She sighted the wreck



(From a sketch in a journal published on board H.M.S. "Northampton.")

uncommon thing for a new vessel to lie for years in the basin, never leaving it save for the annual manœuvres.

The upper basin is devoted principally to vessels completing for sea or refitting; and off this basin all the big dry docks are situated. Here, until recently, could be seen the unfortunate *Howe*, which grounded so badly at Ferrol, the *Empress of India*, and other new vessels. Here, too, I once had the good fortune to see the *Hood*, the largest turret-ship in the world, towed into dry-dock; and an impressive sight it was to see the enormous ironclad—telling out bright against the thundercloud behind, till even her vastness seemed exaggerated—glide silently and slowly into her berth. She was, of course, drawn in by hawsers and steam-power; one turn of her mighty screws would have washed away both dock and spectators.

In the corner of this upper basin for a long

once or twice, but it always drifted too fast for the *Northampton* to come up with it! Later, when she came to be docked at Chatham, no less than eighty tons of barnacles and seaweed were scraped off the ironclad's bottom!

She lay in the basin for a good while afterwards, in inglorious repose, and there she was likely to lie till sold as old iron or used as a hulk, though she was not launched longer ago than 1876, being one of the first examples of an armour-belted cruiser—"her speed enabling her to easily escape the swiftest hostile ironclad," etc. etc., as she was described in 1881. We have moved on since then.

However, a use has at length been found for the "good old *Northo*," and decorated in the most approved spick-and-span man-of-war fashion, she is in commission as a sea-going training-ship for boys who join the Royal Navy at the different ports she visits.