

# Sims's Circus When It Gets Shore Leave

## Destroyers' Crews Have Naval Club at British Base That Rivals Any at Home, but the "Doves Special" Holds Greatest Personal Interest

By HERMAN WHITAKER,  
Author of "The Planter," "The Settler,"  
"Over the Border," &c.

"YOU must go now and see the Men's Naval Club," said my friend, the Ensign. "It is the finest side show in all this circus."

He it was that had christened our destroyer flotilla "Sims's Circus," because of the rainbow camouflage which shamed by its varied daubing the ring streaked zebras of Barnum & Bailey's aggregation. He had already initiated me into the Yacht Club, where the "Bridge" rests from the sea and warms its chilled feet at as much of the fire as can be seen through some British officer's wide spread legs. Also we had run in a motor boat up river to a golf links, where it relaxes nerves overstrung from constant watching for torpedoes that come at one like swift death in the night. Whereafter I had been introduced to one of those firesides which the kindly country gentry place at the service of weather worn officers.

Green grass and a fireside, these are the two things a sailor always craves, and a destroyer officer who had not acquired at least one of the latter was reckoned a lonely soul, quite out of the running. And speaking of grass—I had hiked six miles that very morning with five skippers who prowled through green fields like so many cats on a velvet carpet, delicately feeling the soft sward with their feet. Also I had voyaged with them in mined seas chasing the elusive submarine, so the Men's Naval Club alone remained to complete the picture of destroyer life in the danger zone.

### Contrast With the Open Sea.

Dusk was falling thickly over the harbor when we walked down to the quay wall. Here, under the shelter of a high hill, the tides lapped softly around the hundred and odd vessels whose golden lights dotted the gloomy waters with shimmering reflections. But having only come in from the sea that morning, I knew that beyond the harbor heads the swells were running mountain high under the urge of a heavy wind.

Out there, far to sea, all our destroyers were now heaving their noses up to the dark skies, again plunging head downward into a watery abyss. But we had finished our trick at that. With a reminiscent but comfortable shudder we turned to watch the boats whose red and green lights flitted like brilliant moths between the ships and the quay.

Under the golden glare of the stair lights, the dark mass of a boat would take form and resolve into a crowd of figures topped by two-score of bright up-turned faces. Being foreign born myself I can give without suspicion of national conceit the impression made upon me by both these lads and those I had seen at sea. Clear cut, simple and direct in speech, quiet and courteous in manner, they look all that we know them to be—the finest type of the world's young manhood.

As boat after boat unloaded there came a toy whistle, the lights of a train came speeding around a curve into the station at the end of the quay.

### Girls Come to See the Boys.

"The 'Doves' Special," the Ensign explained. "Having more money to spend our boys cut most of the Irish lads up in the city out of their girls and so many ructions resulted we had to put it out of bounds. But when the mountain wouldn't come to Mahomet, he just naturally went to the mountain. Now the sailors can't go to the girls, the girls come to the sailors. Hundreds of them come down every night on this train."

The "doves" were already pairing when we gained back to the street. Its side-walks rang to the tippity tap of small feet moving in rhythm with heavier sailor treads. Under the electric glare of a shop window the face of a pretty colleen flashed out just ahead of us, the cheeks fresh from persistent kissing by climatic fogs and rains, the Irish blue eyes and red mouth laughing up at a tall sailor lad. Her speech ran over her white teeth in a torrent too swift for his ears. His apology, delivered in a delightfully slow, soft, Southern drawl, drifted back to us.

"Ah, really doan' know what's the mat-tah with me. Ah'm that dull I doan'

seem to heah yu'. Will you all please to say that oyah ag'in'?"

The repetition was evidently quite satisfactory. His hand tightened on her arm. The arm pulled the hand close to her side in a little squeeze. Then they passed into the gloom beyond the window lights. It was all very pretty and innocent—as young love always is. Already this nightly pairing has resulted in a few international marriages of the natural, healthy kind that cannot be held up as awful warnings in the Sunday supplements.

Following in this couple's wake we came presently to the one native attempt to supply the flotilla with amusement. If 5,000 English or French sailors were to be suddenly "based" in some small American city it goes without saying that a week would see it transformed by enterprising amusement caterers into a miniature Coney Island. But a roller skating floor, laid down in a ramshackle barn on top of a hill, was all that the need had so far produced.

### Crashed Through the Wall.

Its quality may be judged by the fact that just after we stepped in a burly destroyer fireman and his little colleen partner shot through the end wall and down the hill with ease and celerity that surpassed the famous "Flivver Four" in its best movie stunt. Fortunately they were not hurt. The shriek of horror that followed the crash had scarcely subsided before the fireman lifted the girl back up through the breach. Quite unconcerned they joined again in the skating.

Music there was none; none of the moonlight numbers or kaleidoscopic light changes beloved of skating fans in all American rinks. Neither is a skating sailor the most graceful of Nature's creatures. As the lads struck out, right and left, their wide trousers moved with raven flappings in rhythm with the graceful swing of their partners' skirts.

The arm movement of beginners was also wonderful to behold, for when uncertain of his balance a sailor reaches naturally for a rope. Such snatchings at each other and the empty air! But what cared they for appearances! The night was young; the floor good; their partners pretty; what more could Youth ask? Mingled with laughter and small screams the roar and scrape of their skates followed us down hill to the Naval Club.

A low, rambling building, the club squats on the quay wall, so close to the water that one might pitch a stone onto the destroyers whose crews meet the cheer of its lighted windows coming in on dark nights from the sea. Through its hospitable doorway we passed at once into a wide kitchen and dining room, where bright lights, clean white tables and appetizing odors combined in the best of welcomes.

Half a hundred of the lads we had seen come ashore were turning sea appetites loose on short orders of steak, chops, fried chicken and the like, served with vegetables, bread, butter and a mighty mug of hot "Java," all at prices no higher than those which obtained in the United States before the war. Nothing would suit the boatswain in charge but that I should test the fare, and having eaten with the fo'castle messes during my cruise; having seen, moreover, the captain call for the men's dinner in prefer-

ence to his own, I am in position to say that in our navy the man before the mast eats as well if not better than his officer.

Like other men, however, sailors do not "live by bread alone," and the club supplies other needs—a library, reading and writing rooms, billiard room, dormitories, baths; most important of all from the men's point of view, a cinema theatre, are all gathered under one roof. The pictures shown are of both British and American manufacture and after seeing several I share the men's preference for the home made article.

Your British picture moves slowly with very little action; quite often points a moral rather than adorns a tale, for not content to let manliness, virtue, truth proclaim themselves, their scenario writers label them largely and drive the moral into your thick skull at the end with a heavy club. The British director, on the other hand, does not show any skill in handling his crowds. Accordingly his efforts are not well patronized.

But when a Fairbanks or a Pickford picture is shown—well, the theatre, which seats at least 800, is packed with officers and men. Unless you have been bucking the big seas for a few months in a jack-knife of a destroyer with mines and torpedoes loose all around, you are not in position to feel the unalloyed joy which is to be obtained from the sight of Dong Fairbanks perched on a chandelier while a saloon brawl seethes beneath.

Neither can you feel as these lads feel sympathy for the simple girl who endures the horrors of virtuous poverty—on the screen—for the modest compensation of \$5,000 a week. When, after the customary harassments, she snuggles into the manly hero's arms, safe at last from further persecutions, a stir passes always through the sailor audience. You know—that is, if you were ever young, you know—the embrace has recalled to each a whiff of rice powder, the caressing touch of a soft cheek, the thrill of clinging lips, the wonderful evening when his first sweetheart was won.

### Saturday the Best Night.

To see the club at its best, however, you must go there as I did to the Saturday evening concert. The savory odors that greeted me at the door were if possible richer and more enticing. Certain tootles and trumpeting mingled with them, filtering in from the theatre where the flotilla bandmaster—a pay clerk who bears up bravely under the handicap of having two-thirds of his orchestra always afloat—was drilling the residue left him by cruel war. There have been occasions when its vicissitudes left him only the drum and trombones, but to-night he was rejoicing in a fair instrumental balance.

It is a point with all of the destroyer skippers to make port on this night if they can. Indeed, if a tithe of the curses that have been wished on laggard, six knot convoys ever came home to roost the U-boat would win hands down in the submarine war. By 8 o'clock one could see through a thick tobacco haze that the pit and gallery were crowded with officers and men.

Thick? It was so thick that the calcium beam for the first picture stabbed through it like a sunbeam filtered through a crack into a dusty room. By the time the orchestra split the evening wide open with a rattling march the old familiar oxygen was conspicuous by its absence.

## Just What Happened to His Cigar

"NOT being a plutocrat, either predatory or benevolent," said Mr. Stickleby, "I don't buy expensive cigars. I walk right past the cases in which the two for a quarter and the 25 and 50 cents apiece cigars are kept to halt at that section where they keep the five centers.

"For years I have bought for 5 cents one particular cigar that I found quite satisfactory. It was a sizable cigar with considerable stock in it and of a fair quality of tobacco; a good solid smoke for a nickel and it was always the same—but:

"One day about six months ago when I went in I found that the price of my favorite 5 cent cigar had been jacked up to 6 cents. Some rise that was. I am not much of a mathematician, but as I figure it that was an advance of 20 per cent. Really it was a jolt to me.

"Some three months ago when I dropped

in one day for one of my now 6 cent cigars I found that they had shortened it by about one-quarter or three-eighths of an inch.

"This cigar, as I said, had always been a robust, solid cigar, with plenty of stock in it, a very generous smoke for the money, but some of this brand that I have bought lately have seemed to me to be softer under the fingers as if they were looser rolled with less stock in them, which, if I am correct in my surmise, would amount practically to still another rise in the cost of the cigars to the consumer.

"I cannot but admire the ingenuity with which these several raises have been effected, and I am still buying this cigar, for it is still the best I can get for the money, but I hope they won't do much more to it, for if they do they will raise me out of the cigar smoking class entirely and set me back to smoking a pipe."

How the trombones scoured atmosphere enough for their purposes I really do not know. But they did. The noise was there to prove it.

After the overture the flotilla comedian, who had once done "time" on the Keith & Proctor and Orpheum circuits, gave a sympathetic account of how "It Takes a Long, Tall, Brown Skinned Gal to Make a Cull'r'd Preacher Lay His Bible Down." He was really good—so good that though the lads smacked their lips and said "Oooooh-oo!" at the pretty model in the "Artist and the Ice Man," this was merely the persiflage of the budding male animal; it did not diminish the comedian's laurels.

It requires, however, a sentimental ballad of the good old fashioned sort really to get under a sailor's skin. This happened when a raw old sea dog who looked as though music and all its affinities were quite alien to his soul produced a fine tenor voice from his capacious chest and rendered therewith a touching ditty about tears and fears and smiles and wiles, sighs, blue eyes and similar phenomena. Talk about a hit! Not till he had sung all he knew about mother, home, sweethearts, wives—not till he had wrung their deepest and tenderest feelings, did they let that man off the stage.

### Only Sailors Know Sentiment.

Sentimental, you say? Bosh! What do we landsmen know of sentiment? Surrounded by love, with a surfeit of femininity always under our eyes, we are not in a position to know the real thing.

That which would be sentimentality in us is genuine feeling in a sailor, honest and sincere, raised to the nth degree by long dreaming in the cold night watches on dangerous seas. Living always on the borderland between life and death, expectant of the torpedo or mine that will send him across, love, friendship and affection, the finest of human relations, are in him deepened and intensified.

I quite understand the sailor lad who said with deep conviction: "All women are pretty." He merely stated truth as it is mirrored in the sailor soul. And many a landsman's wife will envy the girl whose destroyer husband writes to her every day.

His letters, it is true, arrive in batches of fifteen and twenty, but happy in her knowledge of the deep love in which his pen is dipped she reads them over and over again. Asked by a comrade what in the world he could find to write about in the narrow life at sea, this husband answered with cryptic truth:

"My lad, there's a whole lot of things hidden yet from you." This husband was more fortunate than the other poor fellow into whose envelope addressed to his wife the naval censor slipped by mistake the ardent love letter of another man. The writing was different of course, but the name "Your loving Bill," was the same.

### Bill Always Under Suspicion.

With deep feminine craft she argued that it would be quite easy for him to get some other man to pen the epistle, and it is said that a combined affidavit of the Captain, censor and crew to the effect that her "Bill" was almost ridiculously true was required to persuade her to give him one more trial. It also goes without saying—every husband knows it—that let "Bill" walk never so straitly he will be under suspicion for the rest of his life.

The same deep sailor feeling turned up again when after the concert the boatswain showed me the portraits of his young wife and two babes while serving a stirrup cup of hot Java in his room. They hung over his cot where his eyes opened upon them in the morning. I wish she could have seen him look at them! But she must know!

From them his glance went to a framed portrait of Admiral Sims that stood leaning against the wall, and while sipping the Java we judiciously debated as to the best place to hang it in the club. If the good man had had only his own wish to consult it would undoubtedly have gone up between his children and wife. But that would not have been fair to the other men! It must be hung in a good light where every one could see it the moment they stepped in the club!

Just where it was eventually placed I cannot say. But this much I do know—judging from the keen disappointment of the entire flotilla when illness pre-