

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

7 *The Ballad of the “Clampherdown”*

This was originally written for the “St. James’s Gazette” as a deliberate skit on a letter by a correspondent who seemed to believe that naval warfare of the future would be conducted on the old Nelsonic battle lines, including boarding, etc. By some accident it was treated from the first as a serious contribution — was even, if I remember rightly, set to music as a cantata. I never explained this till now.

It was our war-ship *Clampherdown*
 Would sweep the Channel clean,
Wherefore she kept her hatches close
When the merry Channel chops arose,
 To save the bleached Marine. 5

She had one bow-gun of a hundred ton
 And a great stern-gun beside.
They dipped their noses deep in the sea,
They racked their stays and stanchions free
 In the wash of the wind-whipped tide. 10

It was our war-ship *Clampherdown*
 Fell in with a cruiser light
That carried the dainty Hotchkiss gun
And a pair of heels wherewith to run
 From the grip of a close-fought fight. 15

She opened fire at seven miles —
 As ye shoot at a bobbing cork —
And once she fired and twice she fired,
Till the bow-gun dropped like a lily tired
 That lolls upon the stalk. 20

“Captain, the bow-gun melts apace,

“The deck-beams break below,
“Twere well to rest for an hour or twain,
“And botch the shattered plates again.”
And he answered, “Make it so.” 25

She opened fire within the mile —
As ye shoot at the flying duck —
And the great stern-gun shot fair and true,
With the heave of the ship, to the stainless blue,
And the great stern-turret stuck. 30

“Captain, the turret fills with steam,
“The feed-pipes burst below —
“You can hear the hiss of the helpless ram,
“You can hear the twisted runners jam.”
And he answered, “Turn and go!” 35

It was our war-ship *Clampherdown*,
And grimly did she roll;
Swung round to take the cruiser’s fire
As the White Whale faces the Thresher’s ire
When they war by the frozen Pole. 40

“Captain, the shells are falling fast,
“And faster still fall we;
“And it is not meet for English stock
“To bide in the heart of an eight-day clock
“The death they cannot see.” 45

“Lie down, lie down, my bold A. B.,
“We drift upon her beam;
“We dare not ram, for she can run:
“And dare ye fire another gun,
“And die in the peeling steam?” 50

It was our war-ship *Clampherdown*
That carried an armour-belt;

But fifty feet at stern and bow
Lay bare as the paunch of the purser's sow,
 To the hail of the Nordenfeldt. 55

"Captain, they hack us through and through;
 "The chilled steel bolts are swift!
"We have emptied our bunkers in open sea,
"Their shrapnel bursts where our coal should be."
 And he answered, "Let her drift." 60

It was our war-ship *Clampherdown*
 Swung round upon the tide,
Her two dumb guns glared south and north,
And the blood and the bubbling steam ran forth,
 And she ground the cruiser's side. 65

"Captain, they cry, the fight is done,
 "They bid you send your sword."
And he answered, "Grapple her stern and bow.
"They have asked for the steel. They shall have it now;
 "Out cutlasses and board!" 70

It was our war-ship *Clampherdown*
 Spewed up four hundred men;
And the scalded stokers yelped delight,
As they rolled in the waist and heard the fight,
 Stamp o'er their steel-walled pen. 75

They cleared the cruiser end to end
 From conning-tower to hold.
They fought as they fought in Nelson's fleet;
They were stripped to the waist, they were bare to the feet
 As it was in the days of old. 80

It was the sinking *Clampherdown*
 Heaved up her battered side —
And carried a million pounds in steel

To the cod and the corpse-fed conger-eel,
And the scour of the Channel tide. 85

It was the crew of the *Clampherdown*
Stood out to sweep the sea,
On a cruiser won from an ancient foe,
As it was in the days of long ago,
And as it still shall be! 90

1892

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