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The Homecoming of the Oregon

*It's one thing to get news, it's quite another thing to know what to do with it after you get it. On a given day three newspapers may tell of the same facts. But in one of the papers it will be written in good, sprightly English, and displayed in a manner to attract and please the eye of the reader; while in the others it appears as dull, heavy, uninteresting accounts of things happened. The difference is like that between light, sweet, wholesome bread, and the sour, heavy, doughy lump that comes from the hands of the ignorant and unskillful cook. It is the aim of *The Examiner* not only to get the news, but to dress it in attractive shape—to give its readers the best of writing as well as the best of the news. That is why it got Jack London to write up the home-coming of the *Oregon* yesterday, and that is why in the course of the year most of the prominent writers in the world are found as contributors to its columns. As an instance of the way that *The Examiner* treats its readers, we ask them to compare the fresh, lively and picturesque account of the home-coming of the *Oregon*, from the pen of Jack London, with the accounts furnished by our contemporaries. The vivid and virile English in which the event is described by the author of *The Son of the Wolf* doubles the intrinsic interest of the home-coming of our famous battleship. "The best news and the best writing" is *The Examiner's* motto.*

The wharf ends were blackened with people and men ceased from their work to watch the pride of San Francisco go by. The cabins of the ferry-boats disgorged their passengers upon the decks, and the *Oregon* was on everybody's lips. Craft after craft flung out their colored banners, and whistle after whistle added to the volume of joy.

Up, up she swept grandly on the breast of the flood tide, this huge gun platform, this floating fort, this colossus, this mighty 10,000-ton projectile, capable of driving a blow at a velocity of thirty feet per second! At her stern rippled the Stars and Stripes; and from the peak of her one lone fighting mast streamed the homeward-bound pennant—a prodigious, sinuous thing of red, white and blue, greater by far than her own length and in fact and fitness the greatest pennant in the world. Four hundred and twenty feet, if twisted, out from the masthead, while the ship whose homecoming it symbolized measured less by nearly a hundred feet.

With the huge thirteen-inch muzzles projecting from the for'ar turret like the uncovered fangs of a vicious bulldog, she barked the requisite thirteen times to the Admiral's flag on the *Iowa*, received the return, and passed on. At her heels, like petty terriers, scrambled launches and tugs galore and from the shore, gaily decorated from stem to stern, hurried the *Governor Markham* with General Warfield and party aboard, and best of all, the wives and daughters of a number of the officers whose task it is to direct this mighty projectile across the face of the astonished sea.

Well past the *Iowa* and *Philadelphia*, with sea room in plenty for her bulk, she swung to the right, and her long white side, flung full in the face of the westering sun, burst suddenly into

dazzling brightness. But the grimness still remaining, fang after fang was exposed till she fairly bristled with teeth which have tasted.

In truth, one tingled at the sight, and the hot blood rushed backward through all the generations of culture and civilization to things primordial and naked. And in truth, those who rise by the sword, perish by the sword. And still in truth, be it remembered, those who have risen by the sword, and foresworn the sword, none the less have perished by the sword. It was a righteous tingle, a righteous back, and the knowledge that such a splendid fighting machine was ours, made by us, and fought by us, was us—was a good knowledge. Tomorrow?—Ah, yes, tomorrow, when the lion shall lie down with the lamb, we shall beat our *Oregons* into automobiles and electric railways; but today it were well that we look to our *Oregons* and see that they be many and efficient.

Swung full around, with nose to sea and tide and sun and wind, the great anchor leaped into the bay and clenched its stout grip on the muddy bottom. The *Oregon* was home! Home, and here at rest on the very spot which saw her formed and launched and christened. Home, after 55,000 miles of faring and fighting across the zones, from California to the Horn and from the Antilles to the East Indies.

Who has forgotten that record-breaking trip of hers down by Callao and Magellan, up the Atlantic past Rio Janeiro and the Barbadoes, up, up, and in time enough to intimidate the *Cristobal Colon* at Santiago with her thirteen-inch guns? Such a distance, at such a pace, for a battleship, was a thing unheard of, and the world watched and wondered, while the naval experts of all the powers shook their heads gloomily. Well may Swinburne sing, “Praise unto man in the highest, for he is the maker of things,” and well may we sing, we who made this thing, this *Oregon*.

Once aboard, and well lost in her immensity, I looked me about for heroes, specimens rightly and highly prized of the genus homo. And I found them. I chanced upon them in all manner of places, in strange subterranean passages, on open windy places, between the muzzles of frowning guns and precipitous walls of armor, and in the bellies of steel turrets where one felt walled in from all the world.

And right here I wish to revise my conception of heroes. Forwardness, braggadocio, strut and puff? Not a bit of it. And hard it was to realize that these quiet, soft-spoken men had seen life and done deeds and lived romances. Modest they were, and backward; generous of praise to others but hesitating at self-mention, as though it were self-accusation of some monstrous villainy.

I chanced upon one, Murphy—J. E. Murphy—boatswain’s mate. Strong, well-built, with cool-looking eyes and the smile of a maid, the flush of health was on his cheeks and the bronze of sunbeat and weather tan. He was limping cruelly from an accident received at his post of duty at Honolulu and his head was badly gashed. While superintending the letting go of one of the *Oregon*’s anchors, the cable parted and as he leaped for his life to clear it the flying links struck him on the foot, spun him heels over in the air and hurled him to the deck, nearly fracturing his skull. A crippled homecoming for the wedding he looks forward to.

But bravely he takes it—as bravely as when a like thing happened him on the collier Merrimac one dark night in Santiago channel.

“I was on the *Iowa*,” he said, “when the call came for volunteers for Hobson’s expedition.” On pressing, he reluctantly admitted that he was the only one chosen out of the 250 men in the crew of the *Iowa*. He went on, in a low, pleasant voice, “where I had charge of letting

go the bow-anchor and of setting off the for'ard mine. I could never quite make out what did it," he mused, "whether it was the mine or a Spanish shell."

"What? Did what?"

"Oh, when I got the signal..."

Then I threw up my hands in despair and he saw that he would have to come down to sordid details.

"Well," he began again, this time somewhat defiantly, as though it were a nasty job, and he might as well go through with it— "Well, when we were a quarter of a mile away from the entrance, each mother's son of us as naked and silent as sin, the Spaniards opened fire. And they kept it up, too. As we neared, the *Merrimac* began to give off and Hobson called to the man at the helm 'to port.'

"Port! Hard a-port!" he cried, the second time. 'Hard a-port she is, sir,' the man answered. And the *Merrimac* still refused to answer. You see, the Spaniards had shot the rudder clean away.

"Then Hobson, from the bridge, pulled the signal rope fast to my arm three times—the signal to let go, and he meant it to swing the *Merrimac* around and into place by a last desperate effort. When I felt the jerks I let go with the anchor and brought together the two wires which made the contact for the mine."

"And?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know what it was, but just then I was lifted into the air and came down across the chains."

"It may have been the mine, but I think it was the explosion of a shell. Then I went aft and reported to Lieutenant Hobson."

"What did he say when he learned you were hurt?"

"O, he didn't know. I didn't think it worth while to report a little thing like that when the whole fleet and all the forts were blazing out at us at close range and our own boilers pierced and blowing up besides.

"There was nothing to do then but wait, so we all laid down under the superstructure. Hobson and Ganner Sherritt called the roll and we were all there except Kelly. We worried about him, but when he did come, in the dark, we drew our revolvers on him. With everything going to smash about us, he looked at us coolly and said, 'Bedad, an' how long is this going on? I thought the *New York* was firing blanks.'

"This raised a laugh and the next thing we know the *Merrimac* was standing on end, bow in the air. Then down it came and it kept on going down and I kept floating up on the hatch cover. Most of the men were drawn under by the suction, but they all came up and collected around the catamaran, which had turned bottom up.

"When Admiral Cervera came out on the launch and picked us up, he congratulated us upon our marksmanship. You see," Boatswain Murphy explained with a twinkle in his eye, "the Dons had been firing into each other and thinking it was us. That is all, I believe"—he paused a moment to consider—"except that the Spanish papers published full accounts of a United States battleship and 250 men destroyed."

Then I fell in with a lot of gay young cubs who, while not "heroes," had all the making of heroes, given only the chance; and certainly to look at them they ached for the chance. And gay they were, with health-flushed faces and full of vitality, the free roll and large airs of the sea in their carriage. But little satisfaction did they give, and little could be expected of time-expired

men in a home port and gazing at San Francisco on her many hills. Life was fresh and joyous; there was a pay day at hand, and they were drunk with sheer delight.

“What speed did the *Oregon* make when she chased the *Colon*?”

“Sixteen and one-half knots.”

“Ah, gwan! Seventeen!”

“Don’t I know? 17.2”

“Seventeen? Seventy-five by the log.”

General laugh, after which a merry-eyed fellow pipes up, “That will be all right when Scott fixes it.” Another huge open-air laugh.

“That’s what Murphy said when he broke his leg!”

“And Captain Dickens when we went on the rocks in Pechili!”

So, I gave them up and departed into a turret, where I found a pearl beyond price—J. R. Rose, a native son and a captain of a six-inch gun at the battle of Santiago. And if ever a man were cursed with two attractions which prevented him telling a good story, why that man was J. R. Rose, gunner’s mate. The first was that he was home. At Newark, just over the bay, were his people and all his children’s scenes. This was God’s country and the fleshpots of old times did not compare.

And the second was the *Oregon*. Never was there such a ship! For soundness, durability and efficiency she had no equal. Nothing ever broke, nothing ever went wrong with her. She was a marvel of perfection! Even the rocks of Pechili only temporarily embarrassed her.

And that was not her fault. And just look how she had stood it! “Scott will fix it?” he demanded, ironically. “There’s nothing for Scott to fix.” And as for speed, just look at her record.

However, he was in the battle of Santiago. *Oregon* fired the first shot. Gunner O’Shea did it. Yes, everybody was glad when they knew the battle was on. There was some cheering, and every gun was ready for action before the Spaniards were fully out of the harbor. They came out with their big No. 1 flags flying—a beautiful sight. A calm, bright day, the water like a mill pond. And then—why, then the Americans proceeded to batter them to pieces, to sink them and to pile them up on the rocks. That was the way it was. Yes, he felt somewhat exhilarated when he went into action, then he settled down to the work, and it was for all the world like target practice. Ah! but the *Oregon*! Of the whole American fleet she displayed the fastest speed, and three shots from her big thirteen-inch guns were sufficient to frighten the *Colon* onto the rocks.

“Bully boy,” is what Commodore Schley said, when he passed the *Oregon* in his gig, were the last words of J. R. Rose, native son and gunner’s mate, as I crawled out of the turret; and I doubt not he is sitting there yet, full of the delight of being home and descanting upon the virtues of the *Oregon*.