

A Flight of Fact
Rudyard Kipling

Most of this tale actually happened during the war about the years 1916 or 1917; but it was much funnier as I heard it told by a Naval officer than it stands as I have written it from memory. It shows, what one always believed was true—that there is nothing that cannot happen in the Navy.

H.M.S. Gardenia (we will take her name from the Herbaceous Border which belonged to the sloops, though she was a destroyer by profession) came quietly back to her berth some time after midnight, and disturbed half-a-dozen of her sisters as she settled down. They all talked about it next morning, especially Phlox and Stephanotis, her left- and right-hand neighbours in the big basin on the east coast of England, that was crowded with destroyers.

But the soul of the Gardenia—Lieutenant-in-Command H.R. Duckett—was lifted far above insults. What he had done during his last trip had been well done. Vastly more important—Gardenia was in for a boiler-clean, which meant four days' leave for her commanding officer.

“Where did you get that fender from, you dockyard burglar?” Stephanotis clamoured over his rail, for Gardenia was wearing a large coir-matting fender, evidently fresh from store, over her rail. It creaked with newness. “You common thief of the beach, where did you find that new fender?”

The only craft that a destroyer will, sometimes, not steal equipment from is a destroyer; which accounts for the purity of her morals and the loftiness of her conversation, and her curiosity in respect to stolen fillings.

Duckett, unmoved, went below, to return with a valise which he carried on to His Majesty's quarter-deck, and, atop of a suit of rat-catcher clothes, crammed into it a pair of ancient pigskin gaiters.

Here Phlox, assisted by her Dandy Dinmont, Dinah, who had been trained to howl at certain notes in her master's voice, gave a spirited and imaginary account of Gardenia's return the night before, which was compared

kipling.txt

to that of an ambulance with a lady-driver. Duckett retaliated by slipping on to his head for one coquettish instant a gravy-coloured soft cloth cap. It was the last straw. Phlox and Stephanotis, who had no hope of any leave for the present, pronounced it an offence, only to be wiped out by drinks.

“All things considered,” said Duckett, “I don’t care if I do. Come along!” and, the hour being what it was, he gave the necessary orders through the wardroom’s tiny skylight. The captains came. Phlox—Lieutenant-Commander Jerry Marlett, a large and weather-beaten person, docked himself in the arm-chair by the ward-room stove with his cherished Dinah in his arms. Great possessions and much land, inherited from an uncle, had removed him from the Navy on the eve of war. Three days after the declaration of it he was back again, and had been very busy ever since. Stephanotis—Lieutenant-in-Command Augustus Holwell Rayne, alias “The Damper,” because of his pessimism, spread himself out on the settee. He was small and agile, but of gloomy outlook, which a D.S.O. earned, he said, quite by mistake could not lighten. “Horse” Duckett, Gardenia’s skipper, was a reversion to the primitive Marryat type—a predatory, astute, resourceful pirate, too well known to all His Majesty’s dockyards, a man of easily injured innocence who could always prove an alibi, and in whose ship, if his torpedo-coxswain had ever allowed any one to look there, several sorts of missing Government property might have been found. His ambition was to raise pigs (animals he only knew as bacon) in Shropshire (a county he had never seen) after the war, so he waged his war with zeal to bring that happy day nearer. He sat in the arm-chair by the door, whence he controlled the operations of “Crippen,” the wardroom steward, late of Bolitho’s Travelling Circus and Swings, who had taken to the high seas to avoid the attentions of the Police ashore.

As usual, Duckett’s character had been blackened by My Lords of the Admiralty, and he was in the midst of a hot campaign against them. An able-seaman’s widowed mother had sent a ham to her son, whose name was E. R. Davids. Unfortunately, Engineerroom-Artificer E. Davies, who swore that he had both a mother and expectations of hams from her, came across the ham first, and, misreading its address, had had it boiled for, and at once eaten by, the Engineers’ mess. E. R. Davids, a vindictive soul, wrote to his mother, who, it seems, wrote to the

kipling.txt

Admiralty, who, according to Duckett, wrote to him daily every day for a month to know what had become of E. R. Davids' ham. In the meantime the guilty Engineerroom-Artificer E. Davies had been transferred to a sloop off the Irish coast.

"An' what the dooce am I to do?" Duckett asked his guests plaintively.

"Apply for leave to go to Ireland with a stomach-pump and heave the ham out of Davies," Jerry suggested promptly.

"That's rather a wheeze," said Duckett. "I had thought of marrying Davids' mother to settle the case. Anyhow, it was all Crippen's fault for not steering the ham into the wardroom when it came aboard. Don't let it occur again, Crippen. Hams are going to be very scarce."

"Well, now you've got all that off your chest"—Jerry Marlett lowered his voice—"suppose you tell us about what happened—the night before last."

The talk became professional. Duckett produced certain evidence—still damp—in support of the claims that he had sent in concerning the fate of a German submarine, and gave a chain of facts and figures and bearings that the others duly noted.

"And how did your Acting Sub do?" asked Jerry at last.

"Oh, very fair, but I didn't tell him so, of course. They're hard enough to hold at the best of times, these makee-do officers. Have you noticed that they are always above their job—always thinkin' round the corner when they're thinkin' at all? On our way back, this young merchant o' mine—when I'd almost made up my mind to tell him he wasn't as big tripes as he looked—told me his one dream in life was to fly. Fly! He flew alright by the time I'd done with him, but—imagine one's Sub tellin' one a thing like that! 'It must be so interestin' to fly,' he said. The whole North Sea one blooming burgoon of what-come-nexts, an' this pup complainin' of lack of interest in it! Fly! Fly! when I was a Sub-Lootenant—"

He turned pathetically towards The Damper, who had known him in that rank in the Mediterranean.

kipling.txt

"There wasn't much flyin' in our day," said The Damper mournfully. "But I can't remember anything else we didn't do."

"Quite so; but we had some decency knocked into us. The new breed wouldn't know decency if they met it on a dungfork. That's what I mean."

"When I was Actin' Sub," Jerry opened thoughtfully, "in the Polycarp—the pious Polycarp—Nineteen-O-Seven, I got nine cuts of the best from the Senior Sub for occupyin' the bathroom ten seconds too long. Twenty minutes later, just when the welts were beginnin' to come up, y' know, I was sent off in the gig with a Corporal o' Marines an' a private to fetch the Headman of All the Pelungas aboard. He was wanted for slavery, or barratry, or bigamy or something."

"All the Pelungas?" Duckett repeated with interest. "'Odd you should mention that part of the world. What are the Pelungas like?"

"Very nice. Hundreds of islands and millions of coral reefs with atolls an' lagoons an' palm-trees, an' all the population scullin' round in outrigger canoes between 'em like a permanent regatta. Filthy navigation, though. Polycarp had to lie five miles out on account of the reefs (even then our navigator was tearin' his hair), an' I had an hour's steerin' on hot, hard thwarts. Talk o' tortures! You know. We landed in a white lather at the boat-steps of the Headman's island. The Headman wasn't takin' any at first. He'd drawn up his whole army—three hundred strong, with old Martini rifles an' a couple of ancestral seven-pounders—in front of his fort. We didn't know anything about his domestic arrangements. We just dropped in among 'em, so to say. Then my Corporal of Marines—the fattest man in the Service bar one—fell down the landin' steps. The Headman had a Prime Minister—about as fat as my Corporal—and he helped him up. Well, that broke the ice a bit. The Prime Minister was a statesman. He poured oil on the crisis, while the Headman cursed me and the Navy and the British Government, and I kept wrigglin' in my white ducks to keep 'em from drawin' tight on me. You know how it feels! I remember I told the Headman the Polycarp 'ud blow him an' his island out of the water if he didn't come along quick. She could have done it in a week or two; but we were scrubbin' hammocks at the time. I

kipling.txt

forgot that little fact for the minute. I was a bit hot—all over. The Prime Minister soothed us down again, an' by and by the Headman said he'd pay us a state call—as a favour. I didn't care what he called it s'long as he came. So I lay about a quarter of a mile off-shore in the gig, in case the seven-pounders pooped off—I knew the Martinis couldn't hit us at that range—and I waited for him till he shoved off in his State barge—forty rowers a side. Would you believe it, he wanted to take precedence of the white Ensign on the way to the ship? I had to fall him in behind the gig and bring him alongside properly. I was so sore I could hardly get aboard at the finish.”

“What happened to the Headman?” said The Damper.

“Nothing. He was acquitted or condemned—I forget which—but he was a perfect gentleman. We used to go sailing with him and his people—dancing with 'em on the beach and all that sort of thing. I don't want to meet a nicer community than the Pelungaloos. They aren't used to white men—but they're first-class learners.”

“Yes, they do seem a cheery crowd,” Duckett commented.

“Where have you come across them?” said Jerry.

“Nowhere; but this Acting Sub of mine has got a cousin who's been flying down there.”

“Flying in All the Pelungas?” Jerry cried. “That's impossible!”

“In these days? Where's your bright lexicon of youth? Nothing's impossible anywhere now,” Duckett replied. “All the best people fly.”

“Count me out,” Jerry grunted. “We went up once, Dinah, little dog, and it made us both very sick, didn't it? When did it all happen, Horse?”

“Some time last year. This chap, my Sub's cousin—a man called Baxter—went adrift among All the Pelungas in his machine and failed to connect with his ship. He was reported missing for months. Then he turned up again. That's all.”

“He was called Baxter?” said The Damper. “Hold on a

kipling.txt

shake! I wonder if he's 'Beloo' Baxter, by any chance. There was a chap of that name about five years ago on the China Station. He had himself tattooed all over, regardless, in Rangoon. Then he got as good as engaged to a woman in Hongkong—rich woman too. But the Pusser of his ship gave him away. He had a regular cinema of frogs and dragonflies up his legs. And that was only the beginnin' of the show. So she broke off the engagement, and he half-killed the Pusser, and then he became a Buddhist, or something."

"That couldn't have been this Baxter, or my Sub would have told me," said Duckett. "My Sub's a morbid-minded young animal."

"Maskee1 your Sub's mind!" said Jerry.

"What was this Baxter man—plain or coloured—doin' in All my Pelungas?"

"As far as I can make out," said Duckett, "Lootenant Baxter was flyin' in those parts—with an observer—out of a ship."

"Yes, but what for?" Jerry insisted. "And what ship?"

"He was flyin' for exercise, I suppose, an' his ship was the Cormorang. D'you feel wiser? An' he flew, an' he flew, an' he flew till, between him an' his observer and the low visibility and Providence and all that sort of thing, he lost his ship—just like some other people I know. Then he flapped about huntin' for' her till dusk among the Pelungas, an' then he effected a landin' on the water."

"A nasty wet business—landin' that way; Dinah. We know," said Jerry into the keen little cocked ear in his lap.

"Then he taxied about in the dark till he taxied on to a coral-reef and couldn't get the machine off. Coral ain't like mud, is it?" The question was to Jerry, but the insult was addressed to The Damper, who had lately spent eighteen hours on a soft and tenacious shoal off the East Coast. The Damper launched a kick at his host from where he lay along the settee.

"Then," Duckett went on, "this Baxterman got busy with his wireless and S O S'ed like winkie till the tide came

kipling.txt

and floated the old bus off the reef, and they taxied over to another island in the dark.”

“Thousands of Islands in All the Pelungas,” Jerry murmured. “Likewise reefs—hairy ones. What about the reefs?”

“Oh, they kept on hittin’ reefs in the dark, till it occurred to them to fire their signal lights to see ’em by. So they went blazin’ an’ stinkin’ and taxyin’ up and down the reefs till they found a gap in one of ’em and they taxied bung on to an uninhabited island.”

“That must have been good for the machine,” was Jerry’s comment.

“I don’t deny it. I’m only tellin’ you what my Sub told me. Baxter wrote it all home to his people, and the letters have been passed round the family. Well, then, o’ course, it rained. It rained all the rest of the night, up to the afternoon of the next day. (It always does when you’re in a hole.) They tried to start their engine in the intervals of climbin’ palm-trees for coco-nuts. They’d only a few biscuits and some water with ’em.”

“’Don’t like climbin’ palm-trees. It scrapes you raw,” The Damper moaned.

“An’ when they weren’t climbin’ or crankin’ their engine, they tried to get into touch with the natives on the next nearest island. But the natives weren’t havin’ any. They took to the bush.”

“Ah!” said Jerry sympathetically. “That aeroplane was too much for ’em. Otherwise, they’re the most cosy, confidential lot I ever met. Well, what happened?”

“Baxter sweated away at his engine till she started up again. Then he flew round lookin’ for his ship some more till his petrol ran out. Then he landed close to another uninhabited island and tried to taxi up to it.”

“Why was he so keen on uninhabited islands? I wish I’d been there. I’d ha’ shown him round the town,” said Jerry.

“I don’t know his reasons, but that was what he wrote

kipling.txt

home to his people," Duckett went on. "Not havin' any power by that time, his machine blew on to another reef and there they were! No grub, no petrol, and plenty of sharks! So they snugged her down. I don't know how one snugs down an aeroplane," Duckett admitted, "but Baxter took the necessary steps to reduce the sail-area, and cut the spanker-boom out of the tail-tassels or whatever it is they do on an aeroplane when they want her to be quiet. Anyhow, they more or less secured the bus to that reef so they thought she wouldn't fetch adrift; and they tried to coax a canoe over that happened to be passing. Nothin' doin' there! 'Canoe made one bunk of it."

"He tickled 'em the wrong way," Jerry sighed. "There's a song they sing when they're fishing." He began to hum dolefully.

"I expect Baxter didn't know that tune," Duckett interrupted. "He an' his observer cursed the canoe a good deal, an' then they went in for swimmin' stunts all among the sharks, until they fetched up on the next island when they came to it—it took 'em an hour to swim there—but the minute they landed the natives all left. 'Seems to me," said Duckett thoughtfully, "Baxter and his observer must have spread a pretty healthy panic scullin' about All the Pelungas in their shirts."

"But why shirts?" said Jerry. "Those waters are perfectly warm."

"If you come to that, why not shirts?" Duckett retorted. "A shirt's a badge of civilization—"

"Maskee your shirts. what happened after that?" said The Damper.

"They went to sleep. They were tired by that time—oddly enough. The natives on that island had left everything standing when they bunked—fires lighted, chickens runnin' about, and so forth. Baxter slept in one of the huts. About midnight some of the bold boys stole back again. Baxter heard 'em talkin' just outside, and as he didn't want his face trod on, he said 'Salaam.' That cleared the island for the second time. The natives jumped three foot into the air and shoved off."

"Good Lord!" said Jerry impatiently. "I'd have had 'em eating out of my hand in ten seconds. 'Salaam' isn't the

word to use at all. What he ought to have said--"

"Well, anyhow, he didn't," Duckett replied. "He and his observer had their sleep out an' they woke in the mornin' with ragin' appetites and a strong sense of decency. The first thing they annexed was some native loin-cloths off a bush. Baxter wrote all this home to his people, you know. I expect he was well brought up."

"If he was 'Beloo' Baxter no one would notice--" The Damper began.

"He wasn't. He was just a simple, virtuous Naval Officer--like me. He an' his observer navigated the island in full dress in search of the natives, but they'd gone and taken the canoe with 'em. Baxter was so depressed at their lack of confidence that he killed a chicken an' plucked it and drew it (I bet neither of you know how to draw fowls) an' boiled it and ate it all at once."

"Didn't he feed his observer?" The Damper asked. "I've a little brother what's an observer up in the air. I'd hate to think he--"

"The observer was kept busy wavin' his shirt on the beach in order to attract the attention of local fishin' craft. That was what he was for. After breakfast Baxter joined him an' the two of 'em waved shirts for two hours on the beach. An' that's the sort of thing my Sub prefers to servin' with me!--Me! After a bit, the Pelungaloos decided that they must be harmless lunatics, and one canoe stood pretty close in, an' they swam out to her. But here's a curious thing! Baxter wrote his people that, when the canoe came, his observer hadn't any shirt at all. 'Expect he'd expended it wavin' for succour. But Baxter's shirt was all right. He went out of his way to tell his people so. An' my Sub couldn't see the humour of it one little bit. How does it strike you?"

"Perfectly simple," said Jerry. "Lootenant Baxter as executive officer in charge took his subordinate's shirt owin' to the exigencies of the Service. I'd ha' done the same. Pro-ceed."

"There's worse to follow. As soon as they got aboard the canoe and the natives found they didn't bite, they

kipling.txt

cottoned to 'em no end. 'Gave 'em grub and dry loin-cloths and betel-nut to chew. what's betel-nut like, Jerry?"

"Grateful an' comfortin'. Warms you all through and makes you spit pink. It's nonintoxicating."

"Oh! I've never tried it. Well then, there was Baxter spittin' pink in a loin-cloth an' a canoeful of Pelungaloo fishermen, with his shirt dryin' in the breeze. 'Got that? Well, then his aeroplane, which he thought he had secured to the reef of the next island, began to drift out to sea. That boy had to keep his eyes open, I tell you. He wanted the natives to go in and makee-catchee the machine, and there was a big palaver about it. They naturally didn't care to compromise themselves with strange idols, but after a bit they lined up a dozen canoes—no, eleven, to be precise—Baxter was awfully precise in his letters to his people—an' tailed on to the aeroplane an' towed it to an island."

"Excellent," said Jerry Marlett, the complete Lieutenant-Commander. "I was gettin' worried about His Majesty's property. Baxter must have had a way with him. A loin-cloth ain't uniform, but it's dashed comfortable. An' how did All my Pelungalooos treat 'em?"

"We-ell!" said Duckett, "Baxter was writin' home to his people, so I expect he toned things down a bit, but, readin' between the lines, it looks as if—an' that's why my Sub wants to take up flyin', of course!—it looks as if, from then on, they had what you might call Garden-of-Eden picnics for weeks an' weeks. The natives put 'em under a guard o' sorts just for the look of the thing, while the news was sent to the Headman, but as far as I can make out from my Sub's reminiscences of Baxter's letters, their guard consisted of the entire male and female population goin' in swimmin' with 'em twice a day. At night they had concerts—native songs versus music-hall—in alternate what d'you call 'em? Anti-somethings. 'Phone, ain't it?"

"They are a musical race! I'm glad he struck that side of their nature," Jerry murmured.

"I'm envious," Duckett protested. "why should the Flyin' Corps get all the plums? But Baxter didn't forget His Majesty's aeroplane. He got 'em to tow it to his island

kipling.txt

o' delights, and in the evenings he an' his observer, between the musical turns, used to give the women electric shocks off the wireless. And, one time, he told his observer to show 'em his false teeth, and when he took 'em out the people all bolted."

"But that's in Rider Haggard. It's in King Solomon's Mines," The Damper remarked.

"P'raps that's what put it into Baxter's head then," said Duckett. "Or else," he suggested warily, "Baxter wanted to crab his observer's chances with some lady."

"Then he was a fool," The Damper snarled. "It might have worked the other way. It generally does."

"Well, one can't foresee everything," said Duckett. "Anyhow, Baxter didn't complain. They lived there for weeks and weeks, singin' songs together and bathin' an'-oh, yes!- gamblin'. Baxter made a set of dice too. He doesn't seem to have neglected much. He said it was just to pass the time away, but I wonder what he threw for. I wish I knew him. His letters to his people are too colourless. What a life he must have led! Women, dice and song, an' your pay rollin' up behind you in perfect safety with no exertion on your part."

"There's a dance they dance on moonlight nights," said Jerry, "with just a few banana leaves-- Never mind. Go ahead!"

"All things bright and beautiful-fineesh," Duckett mourned. "Presently the Headman of All the Pelungas came along--"

"My friend? I hope it was. A first-class sportsman," said Jerry.

"Baxter didn't say. Anyhow, he turned up and they were taken over to the capital island till they could be sent back to their own ship. The Headman did 'em up to the nines in every respect while they were with him (Baxter's quite enthusiastic over it, even in writin' to his own people), but, o' course, there's nothing like first love, is there? They must have felt partin' with their first loves. I always do. And then they were put into the full uniform of All the Pelungaloo Army. What's that like, Jerry? You've seen it."

kipling.txt

"It's a cross between a macaw an' a rainbow-ended mandrill. Very tasty."

"Just as they were gettin' used to that, and they'd taught the Headman and his Court to sing: 'Hello! Hello! Who's your lady friend?' they were embarked on a dirty common sailin' craft an' taken over the ocean and returned to the Cormorang, which, o' course, had reported 'em missing and dead months before. They had one final kick-up before returnin' to duty. You see, they'd both grown torpedo-beards in the Pelungas, and they were both in Pelungaloo uniform. Consequently, when they went aboard the Cormorang they weren't recognized till they were half-way down to their cabins."

"And then?" both Captains asked at once.

"That's where Baxter breaks off—even though he's writin' to his own people. He's so apologetic to 'em for havin' gone missin' and worried 'em, an' he's so sinful proud of havin' taught the Headman music-hall songs, that he only said that they had 'some reception aboard the Cormorang.' It lasted till midnight."

"It is possible. What about their machine?" said Jerry.

"The Cormorang ran down to the Pelungas and retrieved it all right. But I should have liked to have seen that reception. There is nothing I'd ha' liked better than to have seen that reception. And it isn't as if I hadn't seen a reception or two either."

"The leaf-signal is made, sir," said the Quartermaster at the door.

"Twelve-twenty-four train," Duckett muttered. "Can do." He rose, adding, "I'm going to scratch the backs of swine for the next three days. G'wout!"

The well-trained servant was already fleeing along the edge of the basin with his valise. Stephanotis and Phlox returned to their own ships, loudly expressing envy and hatred. Duckett paused for a moment at his gangway rail to beckon to his torpedo-coxswain, a Mr. Wilkins, a peace-time sailor of mild and mildewed aspect who had followed Duckett's shady fortunes for some years.

kipling.txt

"Wilkins," he whispered, "where did we get that new starboard fender of ours from?"

"Orf the dredger, sir. She was asleep when we came in," said Wilkins through lips that scarcely seemed to move. "But our port one come orf the water-boat. We 'ad to over'aul our moorin's in the skiff last night, sir, and we-er-found it on 'er."

"Well, well, Wilkins. Keep the home fires burning," and Lieutenant-in-Command H.R. Duckett sped after his servant in the direction of the railway-station. But not so fast that he could outrun a melody played aboard the Phlox on a concertina to which manly voices bore the burden:

When the enterprisin' burglar ain't aburglin'-ain't
aburglin',
 When the cut-throat is not occupied with crime-'pied
with crime.
He loves to hear the little brook agurglin'--

Moved, Heaven knows whether by conscience or kindness, Lieutenant Duckett smiled at the policeman on the Dockyard gates.