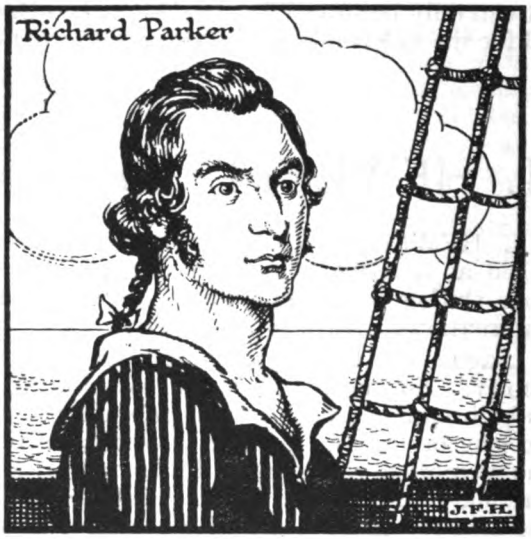
"ADMIRAL" PARKER

In this sketch R. W. Postgate tells the story of the Mutiny at the Nore, 1797, for interesting documents concerning which see his "Revolution: 1789 to 1906," pp. 70-74. The Mutiny cannot be said to be of great historical significance, but as a revolt of the "under-dog" against brutal conditions it is of undoubted interest to proletarians of a later day.

AMONG the quota men taken on board Admiral Buckner's fleet at the Nore in 1797 was one who had seen better days. By name Richard Parker, he was "thirty years of age," writes his historian Neale; "and both in feature and mould of person he was entitled to the term of manly comeliness." Educated at Exeter Grammar School he had entered the Royal Navy as a midshipman, and became in 1783—at 16 years of age—an acting lieutenant. His career was checked partly by his own fault—at least, he gained the reputation of



extreme irritability; and when the Treaty of Versailles removed any probability of early promotion, it appears that he left the Navy with the intention of settling down in Scotland.

Restless as ever, he rejoined the Navy in 1793 as an officer. In December of that year he met the disaster which thrust him out of the respectable class to which he had belonged. He refused to obey an order which he thought unreasonable; was court-martialled and degraded to the rank of a common seaman. A year later he was discharged ill and went home to attempt to earn a living as a schoolmaster. He fell into debt and was imprisoned. To a competent sailor the way out was clear. He took the King's bounty-money—£20—which more than covered his debt, and re-engaged himself as a common seaman.

He found his fellows at the Nore in a condition of great misery. The long and wearing war upon the French Republic had now lasted full three years. Almost unbelievable privations had been undergone by the seamen.

Not even if regularly paid would their wretched wages (19s. a month) have sufficed to keep their families without recourse to parish relief. But their wages remained unpaid for long periods, so much so that they had to petition that no arrears be greater than six months. Deductions were made on various excuses, and, as one of their petitions said, they lived "in indigence and extreme penury." The unrestrained speculation of contractors made their food vile and frequently inedible. The corruption of the administration docked it further in quantity and quality.

To these sufferings were added plain tyranny by the officers. The seamen were in practice submitted absolutely to the arbitrary will of their captain. There is on record a case of a commander killing the leader of a deputation with his own hand. No naval historian denies that the seamen suffered outrageous indignities and brutal punishments, frequently without the least justification. "Rome had her Neros and Caligulas," the Nore seamen wrote in their Address to their countrymen, "but how many characters of their description might we not mention in the British Fleet?"

This extremity of misery and degradation was just tolerable in time of peace; the additional sufferings of war had spread the spirit of revolt. It was an atmosphere of rebellion which Parker found on board the *Sandwich*. Independent and energetic, he at once took the side of the rebels. Rumours were current of firm action taken by the Channel Fleet at Spithead to secure sailors their rights, and a mutiny was probable at any moment. Disloyal the seamen were not, but they were determined to put an end to the horrors of Navy life. One seaman wrote to the Admiralty:—

For the Lords Commissioners of the Board of Admiralty.

Dam my eyes if I understand your lingo or long proclamations, but, in short, give us our due at once, and no more of it, till we go in search of the rascals the enemys of our country.

HENREY LONG.

Nore, of June 1797. On Board his Magesty Ship Champion.

At the beginning of May delegates arrived secretly from the Channel Fleet at Spithead. Briefly, they announced that their fellows had become tired of bad and little food, low wages, imprisonment on board when in harbour. On April 17th, receiving no reply to repeated petitions, they had mutinied, dismissed the unpopular officers, and flown the red flag. The Admiralty had at first replied with violent threats of punishment. The men, however, had stood firm, and in the end the Lords Commissioners had travelled down to Portsmouth, declared practically all their demands granted and promised pardon. But no pardons appeared, the promised reforms were not fulfilled, while the Bill containing their demands was delayed in Parliament. They were not going to suffer the fate of the *Culloden* mutineers, who had surrendered upon promise of pardon and then been murdered. So on May 7th the whole fleet had mutinied again. No one knew what would be the end of it all; therefore, said the Spithead delegates, they were there to ask their brothers of the Nore to follow their example.

Although there were but twelve ships at the Nore, and these not a fleet so much as a casual aggregation of ships put in for various purposes, the seamen showed no lack of *esprit de corps*. There was no hesitation in the answer to the Spithead men. All that was asked of the Spithead delegates was how to organise a mutiny. They listened carefully to the delegates' account of how the Channel Fleet was organised, and imitated it meticulously to the last detail. Each ship was to elect a committee, whose president was

to act as captain. From each ship two delegates were to be sent to the flagship, and the President of the delegates was to act as Admiral of the Fleet.

There was much secret going to and fro between the ships, and in the end Richard Parker was selected for the difficult post of "Admiral." The day selected for the revolt, May 12th, was cunningly chosen, for on that date the superior officers had to attend a court-martial on the *Inflexible*. The ships were thus left in charge of lieutenants, and at half-past nine or thereabouts in the morning the seamen of each ship crowded forward, gave three cheers, and ran up red flags. All the ships were in the hands of the mutineers by the end of the day. Admiral Buckner had not the heart to go back to his flagship, the *Sandwich*, where Parker was already in control. The officers were unprepared, and in a few hours the old authority had disappeared.

The Admiralty received Buckner's report with equanimity. The Spithead mutiny was well on the way to settlement, and they regarded the Nore outbreak as a mere subdivision of it. They expected that the Nore men would automatically return to work when the Spithead seamen did. Thus the Nore mutineers had eight days in which they were practically left to themselves.

They employed this time in organising the fleet. Although the delegates were an elected authority, they were none the less firm in enforcing discipline. Drunkards and rioters were punished. No "private liquor" was allowed. All officers who had not already been sent ashore were retained as hostages, but treated with careful respect.

On each ship there was an elected Committee of twelve, one of whom acted as captain. On board the *Sandwich*, or, more frequently, at the "Chequers" in Sheerness, sat the delegates, two from each ship. At their head was the President, Richard Parker, now in fact, if not in name, Admiral of the Nore Fleet.

(To be concluded next month.)