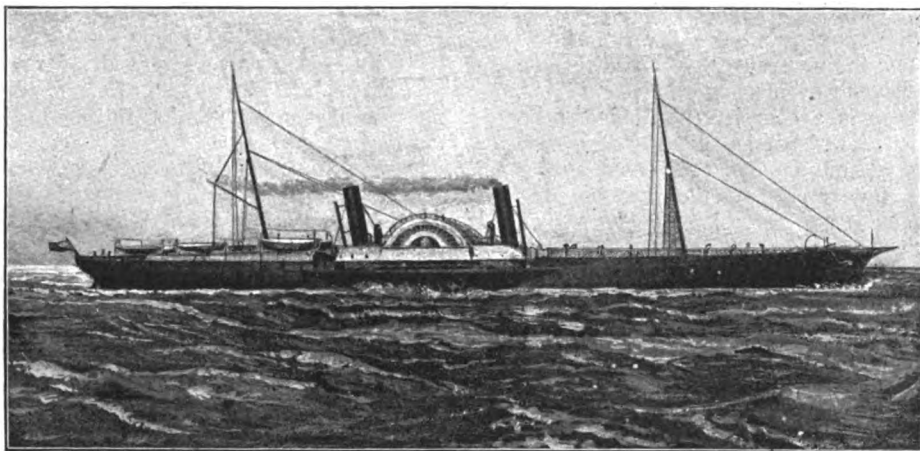


With Her Majesty's Mails to Ireland.

BY EDWARD JOHN HART.



R.M.S. "ULSTER," OF DUBLIN.



UNDERSTAND, I am going to take you from Holyhead to Kingstown by the night mail, and, with a nor'-westerly gale blowing, you will probably require your mackintosh. Here, on the sea rim of Great Britain, we are about to cross to the sister island by the fastest and most famous local line of mail-boats in the world; so let's down to the pier alongside of which is lying the *Ulster*, grinding and straining at her hawsers with a very human-like impatience to be off. But, though time and tide wait for no man, the mail-boat must wait for her mails (sent per rail from London), and to pass the time we may chat about the company and its boats, and hereafter, if we have luck, we may get speech of our captain.

The City of Dublin Steam Packet Company, running the mail between Holyhead and Kingstown, is the oldest Irish mail service in existence, dating back to the year 1833. They continued the service from the Admiralty, and some of their first boats—notably the *Levellyn*—were old Navy boats, and at that time they ran from Liverpool to Howth.

The present fleet of mail-boats—five in all—consist of the *Ulster*, *Munster*, *Leinster*, *Connaught*, and *Ireland*. The first four were built in 1860, and all, with the exception of the *Leinster*, which came from the yards of

Samuda, of London, were constructed by Laird, of Liverpool.

The *Ulster*, by which we are to travel, may be taken as the type of the fleet—with the exception of the *Ireland*—and, like the other four vessels, is painted black, as to the hull and funnels; with the inside, upper works, paddle-boxes, and boats painted white. She is 1,400 tons (builder's measurement), 350ft. in length, furnished with oscillating direct engines of 750 horse-power (nominal), indicating up to about 7,000, and is reckoned a twenty-knot boat.

The distance from jetty to jetty is sixty-four miles, and the contract time allowed for the trip four hours and a quarter, with a fine of £100 for every minute over. But the *Ireland* one November, on a speed trial, crossed in 2 hours and 47min., in the teeth of a very strong easterly breeze and a very nasty choppy sea. Under ordinary circumstances, the average speed in crossing is from sixteen to seventeen knots.

Each vessel is provided with six boats, four life-rafts, and cork jackets for everybody. Nowadays, of course, all the mail-boats are furnished with steam steering gear, and one man steers the vessel in and out of harbour, doing the work that used to be relegated to six or eight. Formerly they had two great steering wheels on the bridge of each ship, and it used to be a fearful heave to get over. One heard a regular chorus of, "All together!

Now then, down! All together! Now then, down!" the men getting it over spoke by spoke and standing on it. Then, when the word "Steady!" was given, they let go, and the wheel—owing to the pressure of water against the rudder of the ship going full speed—whirled round, so that you couldn't see the spokes, and the chains rattling out through the waterways frightened the passengers in their cabins.

There is a complete post-office on board, furnished with desks, pigeon-holes, etc., for every separate county. As soon as the mail-bags come on board they are opened and sorted on sloping tables, the ten or fifteen sorters—increased to twenty just before Christmas—working the whole way across. "I've seen a Christmas mail of as many as 600 mail-sacks and forty-seven parcel-post hampers," says the captain; "and as for literary curiosities—well, we get our share of them, I can assure you. The Irish harvest hands who come over to England for work frequently address the covers of letters—letters containing money even—after this inscrutable fashion: 'To my mother in the white cottage with the green door at the end of the village,' 'Betty McGuire at the house forinst the forge'—these, mind you, are actual examples. They send loose coin in paper envelopes—all sorts of live animals, meat, cake, etc., in cardboard boxes; and some of the addresses the mail hands brought up to show us on the bridge I'll defy anyone to make out!"

The post-office is in charge of the mail clerk, and amongst his duties is that of sealing up all the mail-sacks. In former times the mails were in charge of a mail agent, who was generally a retired commander, appointed by the Admiralty, and who wore his naval uniform, had a very good time on board, and was invested with rather peculiar powers.

The captain was supposed to consult with him as to the advisability or otherwise of slowing down in a fog or a gale, or whether in cases of fog, etc., the mails should be put into the boats and landed. This functionary had to enter in a gorgeous red leather pocket-book, with "V. R." stamped on the cover, the time of arrival of the mail train, starting

of the boat, weather remarks, etc., and was a relic of the days when the mails were carried by naval vessels. Formerly most of the officers of the boats were naval men, but this is not now the case. The mail subsidy is £85,000 per annum.

But all this time we have kept the *Ulster* grinding and straining at her hawsers, and as the train has just come down with its sleepy passengers, and its much more important mail-bags, there is nothing further to delay our departure.

From the deck of our trembling steamer it looks cold, wet, and black on the pier. The flickering gas-lights are reflected in the wet of the sodden planks, and shine on the oil-skins of the men, holding hand-lamps and assisting in the preliminaries of departure—and the grinding and straining of the ship increases. The second officer comes

up to the captain and says: "All in, sir." The third and last bell is rung, and the whistle blown—a long, sonorous, re-echoing blast. The gangways are hauled back to the pier, the telegraph rings the "Stand by" below to the engineers, the chief officer goes to the fo'c's'le head and the second beside the quartermaster at the wheel, and then the captain gives the order, "Let go! Turn ahead!"

"All gone, sir," comes back the faint answer from the darkness, and then, with one or two sighs and hisses from the valves, the wheels churn up the sea and she slowly moves ahead.

"Starboard!"

"Starboard, sir," from the second officer, and she gains in speed and feels the starboard helm, and we see there is a clear course to the end of the breakwater, and the order is given, "Full speed ahead!"

In a minute's time the order to the helm is "Steady!" and she flies along for the end of the breakwater, distinguished by a revolving red light, after passing which it is "Starboard!" again, and the course is given, "West-nor'-west quarter north," and the signal is given to the engine-room, "All clear!"

As she rounds the breakwater she takes the first plunge—a long, shuddering lunge into the black water which sends the passengers scuttling down below, and then, as



CAPTAIN KENDALL,
COMMANDER OF R.M.S. "IRELAND."
From a Photograph.

she opens out Holyhead Bay and passes to the north of the flashing white light, marking the South Stack, she gets the full force of the gale, which has romped and roared across the Atlantic to measure strength, as aforesaid, with these black-painted demons of steamers, in the hope of hindering the Queen's Irish mails.

Away, seven miles to the north-east of us, is the white fixed light of the Skerries, by which pass all the Atlantic liners outward bound from Liverpool; and now the captain and chief officer settle themselves comfortably in the starboard corner of the bridge behind the dodger or weather-cloth, knowing they have a long three hours before them.

To them staggers a courageous passenger, who hazards the original remark: "Dirty night, captain, isn't it?"

"What—you here?" says the captain. "Yes, it is dirty; you'd better go below—you can't stay here, you know."

At this moment the *Ulster* takes a tremendous plunge, and tons of green water come over the bow, deluging everybody; but the staunch vessel shakes herself free and springs forward like a racehorse, and then, besides ourselves, only the chief and the third officers, the man at the wheel, and the look-out man are left on deck, though the captain appears and re-appears at short intervals, and fidgets about, for he doesn't like the look of the weather.

Presently the look-out man sings out: "Green light on the starboard bow, sir!" and we find it belongs to one of the North Wall Company's boats from Dublin, with cattle, running before the gale. She passes by and goes into Holyhead, the boats showing each other their quarter-lights as they pass.

We are about three-quarters of an hour out, when a steamer's red light on the starboard bow is reported, and from the height and size of this and other lights, she is made out to be an Atlantic liner steaming down Channel, crossing our course from starboard to port. By the rule of the road, we are the

giving-way ship, so the order is given "Port!"—"Port, sir!" and we pass under the stern of the big fellow; then, "Go your course!" and we resume our course.

After a while the "look-out" sings out, "Green light off port bow," and as it is a small, unsteady light, we see it is a poor sailing ship, close-hauled under close-reefed topsails, trying to weather the Skerries, and, as she is the weaker, we give way again. "Starboard!" is the steering order given, so as not to cross his bows and make him feel uncomfortable; we go round the sailing ship's stern, and then, when she is cleared, the word is, "Steady—go your course."

We are just coming to the conclusion that this howling waste of waters is rather crowded after all, and that it is simpler to steer a bicycle than a steamboat, when we find that we have reached the half-passage, by noticing that the quarter-masters are changed.

Every half-hour the boatswain comes to the officer of the watch and reports, "All lights burning brightly, sir—and half-past nine," or whatever the hour may be, for on these boats no bells are struck at sea, as the sound is found to be confusing and may drown that of steamers' whistles, etc.

Suddenly, we nearly jump out of our shoes, for the look-out man literally yells, "Steamer's

light *right ahead!*" (It must be some "tramp" or light steam collier returning from Ireland in ballast, running before the gale and blowing his smoke ahead of him and downwards, veiling his lights—for at first it is but a black spot, while the next second discovers the three lights of a steamer.)

Instant is the order, "Port! Hard aport—*hard over!*"

"Hard over, sir!" the steersman replies, the wheel flying round the while, and we hold our breath. She goes over to starboard, just getting out of the way in time, and this fellow shoots by, he himself, likely as not, unaware of anything being near till he sees our lights right close beside him.



CAPTAIN THOMSON,
COMMANDER OF R.M.S. "MUNSTER."
From a Photo. by Stevens, Holyhead.

Then some very heavy squalls accompanied by blinding sleet come down on us in quick succession, and wet, chilled through, with nerves a little disordered by the recent narrow shave, we go below, if only to get a brief cessation from the noise of the howling, shrieking wind. Here we find the captain, whom we had only missed a moment before from the deck, holding on to a stanchion with one hand, and with the other trying to lift a cup of hot coffee to his mouth.

"Doesn't this remind you, captain, of a bad November crossing we once had, when you were second under Old Trip?"

"That was much worse," answers the captain, between his sips. "I shouldn't have thought you could have remembered it."

"Who was 'Old Trip'?" somebody inquires.

"What, never heard of 'Old Trip'—the famous Captain Triphook? He was twenty-five years in the mail service, and when he retired in '76, he had never lost a life, and had never once been fined for landing mails late."

"Tell us about him, captain," say several of the passengers.

The captain looks half inclined to try, takes a run up on deck to see that everything is going smoothly, and then, coming down again, commences:—

"Well, Old Trip—Captain Triphook—was formerly an officer of the Royal Navy. On one occasion when he was off the coast of Ireland in charge of a Revenue cutter—*The Chance*—he sighted a schooner in distress—on shore in a terrible gale. 'Who'll come with me in a boat to help that schooner?' he sings out to his men. 'I can't order a boat's crew, but I'm going myself in the boat, and I want four men to help me—who'll volunteer?' The whole lot of them volunteered.

'No,' he says, 'I only want four,' and four men and the captain left for the schooner, Trip in the meantime having given his second in command instructions how to manœuvre the cutter. Well, gentlemen, he rescued that schooner's crew, and picked up his own cutter again, and for this splendid bit of work the Admiralty presented him with a service of plate."

"Tell us some more about him," chorus the knot of passengers, but the captain has again disappeared to the bridge, whence he presently returns with the smiling announcement that the weather shows signs of moderating.

"Tell you more about Old Trip! I could spin enough yarns about him to keep you listening for a month. Once during the autumn gales, the guardship at Kingstown—the *Royal George* (not the *Royal George*, of course), which had been in the Crimean War—an old, wooden line-of-battle ship, fitted with auxiliary steam—broke from her regulation moorings and drifted against the breakwater, where the wind held her broadside on. Trip came in in the *Ulster*, and, seeing the ship with her topmasts and yards down and canting over, could not make it out,



THE LATE CAPTAIN R. S. TRIPHOOK, R.N.,
COMMANDER OF R.M.S. "ULSTER."
"OLD TRIP" WITH HIS DOG "CHANCE."
From a Photo. by Craufeld & Co., Dublin.

and signalled, 'Can I tow you off?' The answer came back, 'Yes, if you can,' so he backed in—a very difficult piece of manœuvring in cramped space when you're unable to go ahead with one paddle and reverse with the other, as you are in some boats—and towed the warship out through all the crowd of small craft (which were moored so as only to provide a narrow lane for the mail-boat to come in and go out), to where she could safely anchor. Then he went out himself and came in again, same as usual, to the jetty—as he had to do, in order to get along-

side from the position he had left the guardship.

"This was thought a great feat of seamanship at the time.

"Triphook, you must know, was an old man when I knew him. He had perfectly white hair, and always wore his cap on one side of his head, and his uniform frock-coat tightly buttoned up. I don't think any man now living ever saw him without his fox-terrier Chance—wherever the captain was, there was Chance.

"I daresay a good many of you have heard of the Stag Rock in Holyhead Harbour, the existence of which was supposed by many to be mythical, because, after a searching Admiralty survey, no trace of it could be found. This was owing to the fact, as was afterwards ascertained, that it was a single-sugar-loaf pinnacle on which the lead would not lodge, but dropped down the side.

"Well, one day in a dense fog the *Ulster* touched on this. She was going dead slow and touched very lightly, but hung there, and Trip stopped her instanter. He didn't reverse his engines or do anything, but just waited for the tide to rise, when she lifted off of her own accord. The divers went down and reported that several feet of the keel were broken away and several plates strained, and the ship was ordered into dry dock at Liverpool.

"Trip stormed, and fumed, and swore that he didn't believe any damage was done, and one morning he quietly plunged over the steamer's side; some of the deck-hands seeing this, thought that the accident preying on his mind had driven him to suicide, and raised the cry of 'Man overboard!'

"The crew ran to the starboard side where he was last seen, and leaned over, speculating, pitying, commiserating, and dangling lifebuoys and rope-ends in the water against the reappearance of the hapless skipper, when, to everyone's astonishment, the voice of the said hapless skipper was heard on the port side, abusing every-

body in antiquated but profane sea English of a bygone day, for not holding out a rope's-end to him. When he came on board he triumphantly informed all and sundry that he had dived under his ship and felt along the keel, and that no damage was done.

"He was seventy-four years of age when he accomplished this feat.

"Still, the fiat had gone forth that the ship must be docked, so into dry dock she went, when it was found that the old man was right, and that only a little paint was scratched off her keel.

"On another occasion an old naval shipmate came to see him, when his was the lying-by ship at Holyhead, and was amazed at the sight of the six boats with the iron davits turned inboard, and the boats resting on chocks secured by lashings and covered with tarpaulins.

"He had never been shipmates with iron davits before, having only been used to the wooden cranes on which boats were hoisted on the old-fashioned wooden warships, and he maintained that it would be impossible to get these boats out in time to save the life of a man overboard. 'Would it?' said Trip. 'I'll show you later on, and bet you a dinner it can be managed.'

"The bet was made and as soon forgotten, and the next morning the captain mounted the paddle-box to exercise the crew at fire-drill. 'Fire in the fo'c's'le!' he shouted,

and immediately afterwards, as the crew were crowding forward, 'Fire in the ladies' cabin!' Then he looked at his watch, buttoned his uniform frock-coat close up to his throat, and the next moment a voice was heard calling out, 'The captain's overboard! Pick him up!' and when the startled crew looked up the commander had disappeared from the paddle-box. Triphook's old friend cried out in genuine consternation, 'Your captain's fallen overboard, my men! Save poor old Trip, save your captain! Oh, be quick, there's good fellows!'

"The officers and boats' crews needed no



CAPTAIN THOMAS,
COMMANDER OF R.M.S. "LEINSTER."
From a Photograph.

such incitement, for the old sea-dog was greatly beloved, and they rushed to their stations, striving to see who could first get their boat into the water. Triphook was hauled into a boat without ceremony, together with his dog, Chance, who had jumped in after his master, as a matter of course, and a rope being thrown to him, he came up the ship's side hand over hand, and so reached the deck, where he was overwhelmed with the condolences and congratulations of his old friend.

"Taking no notice of these, the old man pulled out his watch, looked at it, and ejaculating, 'H'm! Four minutes—not so bad! Now you'll have to stand me that dinner!' went to his cabin to change his clothes.

"While the men were absorbed in their fire-drill, he had taken the time, stepped outside the railing of the paddle-box, and dropped feet foremost into the water—a drop of over thirty feet—singing out as he went down. A little after this, by the smartness of one of his boat's crews, he saved two men from an overturned boat, as the mail-boat was leaving the harbour, in much about the same time.

"I remember one time when the *Ulster* was in mid-Channel, going half-speed in a dense, impenetrable fog, though the wind was blowing half a gale, some vast, mysterious white bulk suddenly loomed up amidships. As always in a fog, the engineers were standing-by below, and the captain was on the bridge. With that ready presence of mind which never failed him, the old man instantly set the telegraph at 'Full speed ahead,' and the mail-boat sprang forward like a racehorse. It was not a moment too soon, for the next second a full-rigged ship, running before the wind, with every stitch set, dashed past his stern - so close as almost to graze the paint. 'Nearly had my tail that time!' said Old Trip, looking round with his genial smile. 'If that there meteor flag of England had been flying from the staff, she'd have torn it!' and those who were astern at the time afterwards said that this was a literal fact. Had he hesitated for a second, or attempted to reverse his engines, a frightful collision would have resulted.

"It was a great sight to see Old Trip bring his boat alongside. When all was fast, no one dared to stir, as they never knew whether he wouldn't move his engines ahead or astern again, till he shouted 'Mail ho!' whereupon Chance lifted up his head and gave one short bark of satisfaction. Then the captain

on his way down from the paddle-box stopped to pat his dog, and remark, 'Very well brought alongside, Chance! Very well, indeed!' and proceeded on his way, distributing smiles as he went."

"And what became of this fine old fellow after he retired in '76?" asks a passenger.

"He died not long after—I think something under two years—his retirement; to the last beloved and honoured by all who had ever met or served with him."

There was silence for a moment.

"Captain," someone else inquires, "wasn't the *Connaught* once in a rather strange sort of collision? It was a very queer fix, wasn't it?"

"Well, it was rather remarkable," says the captain, smiling and looking at his watch, "but I shall only have time to tell you about it briefly before I must go topside.

"The *Connaught* was taking the Irish day mails from Kingstown to Holyhead, during a very thick fog, and proceeding dead slow. About half-passage a vessel was suddenly sighted on the port bow, close aboard, going in the opposite direction, and before either vessel could check the little way they had on them, the two ships were in collision. One of the paddle-boxes of the *Cambria*—a cargo boat belonging to the London and North-Western Railway Company—had smashed into and under the port paddle-box of the *Connaught*. She, being the larger and higher vessel, went partly over the sponson beams and paddle-wheel of the other ship, breaking it in; and thus they were locked together with the iron and wood of the *Cambria's* sponson beam forming a sort of bar in through the *Connaught's* wheel, and in such a jam that neither vessel could move or free herself from the other.

"The sea was calm, so the ships lay quite quiet beside one another, while the engineers went into the wheels, and by working hard with hammer and cold chisel and crowbar for eight hours, slowly cut through all the iron and wood of the *Cambria's* smashed paddle-box and sponson beams, till at last the ships were freed, and both proceeded slowly to Holyhead—the *Connaught* standing by the *Cambria* until safely inside the harbour.

"And now, gentlemen, it is time to look out for the light": and so saying, the captain goes up on deck, whither we follow him.

We have been three hours out from Holyhead, and it is time for the Bailey Light, at the end of Howth Promontory, which is like a small Gibraltar and forms the north side

of Dublin Bay—Kingstown Harbour forming the south—to make its appearance.

Presently this is sighted, and the next to look out for is the Kish Lightship, warning mariners off the Kish Sandbank, which is like the Goodwins, only that it never dries. It is about half-past five in the morning as we pass close to the lightship, tossing and tumbling about in the murk of the early dawn, and now we shape our course to clear the Burford Bank, two and a half miles further in.

At last we've entered Dublin Bay, and the sea is much smoother, though the full force of the wind is felt blowing off the low lands on the west side of the bay, which indeed afford no shelter from the wind. The hardy passenger of last night here turns up, just as we sight Kingstown East Pier head light, and now all hands are going to their stations for entering harbour and going 'longside.

The chief officer goes to the bows, the captain to the bridge, and as we enter, the telegraph rings the order, "Stand by, below," to call the engineers to their posts.

Now the order is "Starboard!" and with the starboard helm she makes a grand sweep into the harbour, flying by the lighthouse and still at full speed.

Just inside the lighthouse "Half-speed" is commanded, immediately followed by the steering order "Steady!"—and a few seconds afterwards "Port!" At this moment the

telegraph rings to "Slow" and two seconds after that "Stop her!" The captain has gone on the paddle-box—and here are the lamps, paling in the grey dawn, all along the jetty to which we almost seem to be rushing, till we fear that they'll never be able to stop her in time, or keep her from dashing on to that grim wall of rock ahead.

About fifty yards from the stopping-place the order is "Full speed astern!" and at the same time ropes are hove and caught by men on the jetty—and now the captain sings out, "Hold on forrard!" and "Stop her!" to the engine-room.

Now she's berthed steady alongside, and gangways are run on board. The telegraph rings, "That'll do, below!"—the releasing order to the engine-room; the captain comes down from the paddle-box, and the first officer returns to the bridge from the bows to note the time of landing the mails, the first bag of which is landed three minutes from passing the East Pier Lighthouse. The passage has occupied three hours and fifty minutes, and the entry in the log is "North-west strong gale, with rain, squalls, and heavy sea."

The ship is blowing off steam; the valves are opened, and the steam is roaring out of the pipes. Here we are, safely arrived in Kingstown, and I hope you enjoyed the crossing.

I have!



KINGSTOWN HARBOUR.