

William Laird Clowes (1887) *The Great Naval War of 1887*



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A Future War novel about the coming naval war between Great Britain and France.

THE GREAT NAVAL WAR OF 1887.

(St. James's Gazette.)

I.-THE DISASTER AT SPITHEAD.

At the beginning of March, 1887, the various difficulties which in the course of the previous four or five years had arisen between Great Britain and France were as far as they had ever been from a settlement. A British garrison still remained in Egypt, a French force still held the New Hebrides, and French and English fishermen still quarrelled in the Channel. In England the public had gradually grown accustomed to this condition of affairs; and though it was sometimes suggested that, with an accumulation of unadjusted differences, any sudden exasperating accident might drive the two nations into war, no heed was paid to the warning. The utter unreadiness of Great Britain to withstand the onslaught of a well-prepared Power like France was well known to all who knew anything of the matter at all. Seeing the very doubtful state of our foreign relations, some of these men continued to raise their voices from time to time. But just as often they were met with the cry of "Alarmists" the official authorities remained calm in their optimism, and whatever fears may have been excited amongst the public were laid to rest.

Therefore it was with something like amazement that on a certain morning in March the country learned that the storm which was never again to approach these shores was on the very point of bursting over our heads, And not only was the country amazed, but its Government, its official persons, were surprised and confounded. A purely accidental circumstance had suddenly inflamed the French people to fury; their Government were not unprepared for such accidents; certain messages were rapidly interchanged between Paris and Petersburg, Petersburg and Berlin; and within a period measurable by hours war between Great Britain and France was practically a settled thing.

Panic reigned in London of course, for nobody believed that we were at all prepared. The Government offices seemed, for the moment, to be paralysed. The funds fell with unexampled rapidity; there was a run upon the banks, and in the streets a feeling too nearly akin to despair was visible. But as the day grew older and the first violence of the shock was spent public confidence began to return. There was no enthusiasm as yet, but there was no shrinking. A Cabinet Council was held that same day, and this being known Ministers were warmly applauded by the crowd that had gathered in Downing-street. In the city too, in spite of the panic on the Stock Exchange, notice was promptly given of a meeting to be held at the Mansion House in support of the Government. Not, of course, that there was any lack of funds. It was the lack of preparation, lack of stores, lack of trained men, deficient or ineffective armament that imperilled the country; and those who on the Saturday had been blandly sneering at the warnings of the patriotic Press were on the Monday quite ready to admit that Britain was totally unprepared for action.

And now everything was done pell-mell. Measures were taken at once for calling out the Volunteers and for embodying the Militia and Reserves, which was not exactly necessary at that stage. More to the purpose, the ships of the Coastguard Squadron, two only excepted, were ordered to assemble with the utmost speed at Portland. One of them, the *Penelope*, being obsolete, was directed to go to Chatham and to turn over her ship's company to the *Warspite*, and the *Belleisle* was sent to Pembroke. Several other vessels were directed to prepare in all haste for sea, and the ships of the Channel Squadron, which by good fortune was at Portland, were ordered to their respective ports. All the available merchant steamers that happened to be within reach were hired, and preparations were made to arm them, some of them being ordered to the naval ports to receive their guns, while ordnance of all

dates and calibres was despatched for others to Liverpool, Glasgow, and elsewhere. Tugs, and even barges, were hired for purposes of river and harbour defence – all in the largest spirit, and without any regard to cost. But the time for effective preparation had gone by. The machinery of the Admiralty and War Office all but collapsed under the strain so suddenly thrown upon it, and where there was so much confusion there were necessarily many risky and many wasteful blunders. One of the things promptly and rightly done was to send a couple of cruisers that same evening into the Channel to watch the French coast. But there was no fleet ready to support them; and although at Portsmouth, Devon- port, and Sheerness, an almost frantic activity prevailed, it was bitterly felt that the work that had to be done ought to have been completed months or years before.

The declaration of war was not long delayed. The news of it reached London at about midday on Tuesday, the 15th of March. Once more the Ides of March had brought in a catastrophe.

On that eventful Tuesday the ships of war in commission in the Channel ports were as follow :

At PORTLAND	Tons	Speed (knots)
Invincible	6,010	13.8
Colossus	9,150	15.4
Impérieuse	7,390	17.0
Calypso	2,770	13.9
Active	3,080	15.1
Rover	3,460	14.5
Volage	3,080	15.1
Hecla		
Bloodhound		
Handy		
Medway		
Six 1st class TB	19.0	

(TB = torpedo boats)

AT SPITHEAD	Tons	Speed (knots)
Sultan ..	9,290	13.5
Monarch	8,320	14.9
Fearless..	1,430	16.0
3 gun-boats		
IN THE SOUND		
Agincourt	10,693	14.8
Iron Duke	6,010	12.5
Black Prince	9,210	13.6
Inconstant	5,780	16.2
Amphion	3,750	16.5
Landrail..	785	15.0
Racoon ..	1,630	16.5

4 harbour gunboats

The coastguard ships Ajax, Devastation, Hercules, Hotspur, Northampton, Rupert, and Shannon were on their way from their various stations to Portland ; the Polyphemus, which has just returned from the Mediterranean, was under repair at Ports- mouth, and the Warspite, together with one or two smaller vessels, was at Chatham. As for the Calypso, Active, Rover, and Volage, which formed the training squadron, they had recently come back from the West Indies. The immediately available force was small indeed, and, to make matters worse, several new ironclads at Portsmouth and Chatham were waiting for big guns which had not yet been manufactured. Fortunately, however, about a dozen other ships and several torpedo-boats were ready for commission. Of these mention will be made later on. In these days even the most desperate and momentous conflicts are soon over. There is no time now to fall back on latent resources ; a victory is half assured to that combatant who succeeds in dealing rapidly the first effective blow. No nation under- stands that better than France, except Ger- many, perhaps. Taught by a terrible experience, the French had made full preparations, and had well thought out their plans beforehand. No sooner was war declared than they cut the submarine cables that connected Great Britain with other countries. On the other hand, no plan of campaign had been prepared for the British squadrons on foreign stations, and none could now be sent to them. When this fact became known an instant renewal of panic ensued ; and the consternation was intensified by the news which, after two nights and a day of anxiety, startled London on Thursday, morning It has already been explained that the Sultan, Monarch, Fearless, and three gun- boats were lying at Spithead. They were joined on Wednesday afternoon by the transport Serapis, which arrived from India with detachments of several regiments on board, accompanied by more than ninety women and children. She should have at once gone into harbour ; but, owing to the bustle of preparations, she was ordered to remain for the night at Spithead. The forts there had not yet been manned, the men not being at once available. But the Commander-m- Chief at Portsmouth had issued detailed instructions for the protection of the anchorage by

means of booms and mine-fields ; and not only had the work been begun, but a few picket-boats had been sent out. Moreover, the Owers and Warner Lights had been extinguished ; but, thanks to the confusion that prevailed, the lights on the Isle of Wight and at Southsea were left burning as usual. In the meantime the two ironclads were ordered to coal.

At about 1 o'clock on Thursday morning, it being then quite calm but cloudy and very dark, a sudden alarm was given. A flotilla consisting of three French cruisers, which proved to be the Milan, D'Estaing, and Faucon, accompanied by fifteen torpedo boats of the gardes-côtes class, swooped round by the eastern point of the Isle of Wight, and in a few minutes was among the anchored vessels. Coming on at full speed, and without lights, they were not sighted by the picket-boats until it was too late. The Fearless, which had steam up, went at them in the most prompt and gallant manner, but was soon enshrouded in the smoke from the guns of the larger ships. The struggle was much more brief than is usually the case when British ships are worsted. Taken by surprise, the Monarch was hopelessly crippled by two torpedoes and presently foundered, while the unfortunate Serapia-no doubt mistaken by the enemy for another ironclad-shared a similar fate. A torpedo struck her amidships on the port side; she heeled over, showing her crowded decks for a moment to the crew of the Fearless, and then, with all her freight, she went to the bottom. The Sultan escaped, a coal barge which lay alongside receiving the torpedo that had been intended for her, while as for the Fearless, she not only escaped, but sank a couple of the French torpedo boats. The British gun-boats, which lay apart, were not touched, and the enemy, who received considerable damage, at once drew off, after firing two or three nitro-glycerine shells into Southsea. But the loss of an ironclad, a troopship, and so many hundreds of lives-this was a terrible price for a nation to pay offhand and at once for having so criminally neglected the protection of her chief anchorage station. And that was not all the punishment she had earned.

For a brief space, however, the national feeling received some solace and encouragement from the events which immediately followed upon this disaster. The gallantry of British officers and seamen is not to be extinguished by any amount of mismanagement at headquarters ; though it is easy enough so to shackle it as to make every victory a bloody and a desperate one.

The Admiralty order to proceed to Port-land had reached the Devastation at Queens-ferry at about 2o'clock on Monday afternoon. Captain Percy Lighter, her commander, succeeded in getting underway in the remarkably short space of two hours ; and, steaming at full speed with forced draught, he reached the mouth of the Thames at about midday on Wednesday. He was there joined by the torpedo-cruiser Mohawk, and the torpedo-gunboat Grasshopper, from Sheerness ; and, continuing: his voyage, he arrived off Selsea Bill very early on Thursday morning, just as the French flotilla was drawing off from its attack on Spithead. The enemy, owing to the injuries which the D'Estaing had received, was steaming at not more than ten knots ; and the Devastation and her consorts gave chase and soon overhauled the crippled cruiser. Some miles ahead of her were the two other cruisers, which, with the thirteen torpedo boats, gallantly turned. The

Devastation had meanwhile made two ineffectual attempts to ram the D'Estaing, and had narrowly escaped being struck by a torpedo ; but a fortunate shell from the right 35-ton gun in the ironclad's fore turret burst in the Frenchman's magazine and blew her up. The British ship was thus left free to attend to the Milan and Faucon, while the small vessels dealt with the torpedo-boats. The latter had discharged nearly all their torpedoes at Spithead, and were, without a single exception, run down and sunk by the Mohawk and Grasshopper. The Milan succeeded in evading the Devastation and in getting away ; but the Faucon was rammed full amidships, the huge turret ship passing clean through her. Only about thirty of her crew succeeded in scrambling on to the deck of the ironclad.

Other posts of possible interest:

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Stevenson, P. L. (1899) How The Jubilee Fleet Escaped Destruction and the Battle of Ushant

Anonymous (1883) The Story of the battle of Port Said