

THE WORLD PERIL OF 1910

PROLOGUE

A RACE FOR A WOMAN

In Clifden, the chief coast town of Connemara, there is a house at the end of a triangle which the two streets of the town form, the front windows of which look straight down the beautiful harbour and bay, whose waters stretch out beyond the islands which are scattered along the coast and, with the many submerged reefs, make the entrance so difficult.

In the first-floor double-windowed room of this house, furnished as a bed-sitting room, there was a man sitting at a writing-table—not an ordinary writing-table, but one the dimensions of which were more suited to the needs of an architect or an engineer than to those of a writer. In the middle of the table was a large drawing-desk, and on it was pinned a sheet of cartridge paper, which was almost covered with portions of designs.

In one corner there was what might be the conception of an engine designed for a destroyer or a submarine. In another corner there was a sketch of something that looked like a lighthouse, and over against this the design of what might have been a lantern. The top left-hand corner of the sheet was merely a blur of curved lines and shadings and cross-lines, running at a hundred different angles which no one, save the man who had drawn them, could understand the meaning of.

In the middle of the sheet there was a very carefully-outlined drawing in hard pencil of a craft which was[Pg 2] different from anything that had ever sailed upon the waters or below them, or, for the matter of that, above them.

To the right hand there was a rough, but absolutely accurate, copy of this same craft leaving the water and flying into the air, and just underneath this a tiny sketch of a flying fish doing the same thing.

The man sitting before the drawing-board was an Irishman. He was one of those men with the strong, crisp hair, black brows and deep brown eyes, straight, strong nose almost in a line with his forehead, thin, nervous lips and pointed jaw, strong at the angles but weak at the point, which come only from one descent.

Nearly four hundred years before, one of the ships of the great Armada had been wrecked on Achill Island, about twenty miles from where he sat. Half a dozen or so of the crew had been saved, and one of these was a Spanish gentleman, captain of Arquebusiers who, drenched and bedraggled as he was when the half-wild Irish

fishermen got him out of the water, still looked what he was, a Hidalgo of Spain. He had been nursed back to health and strength in a miserable mud and turf-walled cottage, and, broken in fortune—for he was one of the many gentlemen of Spain who had risked their all on the fortunes of King Philip and the Great Armada, and lost—he refused to go back to his own country a beaten man.

And meanwhile he had fallen in love with the daughter of his nurse, the wife of the fisherman who had taken him more than half dead out of the raging Atlantic surf.

No man ever knew who he was, save that he was a gentleman, a Spaniard, and a Catholic. But when he returned to the perfection of physical and mental health, and had married the grey-eyed, dark-browed girl, who had seemed to him during his long hours of sickness the guardian angel who had brought him back across the line which marks the frontier between life and death, he developed an extraordinary talent in boat-building, which was the real origin of the wonderful sea-worthiness[Pg 3] of small craft which to this day brave, almost with impunity, the terrible seas which, after an unbroken run of almost two thousand miles, burst upon the rock-bound, island-fenced coast of Connemara.

The man at the table was the descendant in the sixth generation of the unknown Spanish Hidalgo, who nearly four hundred years before had said in reply to a question as to what his name was:

"Juan de Castellano."

As the generations had passed, the name, as usual, had got modified, and this man's name was John Castellan.

"I think that will about do for the present," he said, getting up from the table and throwing his pencil down. "I've got it almost perfect now;" and then as he bent down again over the table, and looked over every line of his drawings, "Yes, it's about all there. I wonder what my Lords of the British Admiralty would give to know what that means. Well, God save Ireland, they shall some day!"

He unpinned the paper from the board, rolled it up, and put it into the top drawer of an old oak cabinet, which one would hardly have expected to find in such a room as that, and locked the drawer with a key on his keychain. Then he took his cap from a peg on the door, and his gun from the corner beside it, and went out.

There are three ways out of Clifden to the west, one to the southward takes you over the old bridge, which arches the narrow rock-walled gorge, which gathers up the waters of the river after they have had their frolic over the rocks above. The other is a

continuation of the main street, and this, as it approaches the harbour, where you may now see boats built on the pattern which John Castellan's ancestor had designed, divides into two roads, one leading along the shore of the bay, and the other, rough, stony, and ill-kept, takes you above the coast-guard station, and leads to nowhere but the Atlantic Ocean.

Between these two roads lies in what was once a park, but which is now a wilderness, Clifden Castle. Castle in [Pg 4] Irish means country house, and all over the south and west of Ireland you may find such houses as this with doors screwed up, windows covered with planks, roofs and eaves stripped of the lead and slates which once protected them from the storms which rise up from the Atlantic, and burst in wind and rain, snow and sleet over Connemara, long ago taken away to sell by the bankrupt heirs of those who ruined themselves, mortgaged and sold every acre of ground and every stick and stone they owned to maintain what they called the dignity of their families at the Vice-Regal Court in Dublin.

John Castellan took the lower road, looking for duck. The old house had been the home of his grandfather, but he had never lived in it. The ruin had come in his father's time, before he had learned to walk. He looked at it as he passed, and his teeth clenched and his brows came together in a straight line.

Almost at the same moment that he left his house an Englishman came out of the Railway Hotel. He also had a gun over his shoulder, and he took the upper road. These two men, who were to meet for the first time that day, were destined to decide the fate of the world between them.

As John Castellan walked past the ruined distillery, which overlooks the beach on which the fishing boats are drawn up, he saw a couple of duck flying seaward. He quickened his pace, and walked on until he turned the bend of the road, at which on the right-hand side a path leads up to a gate in the old wall, which still guards the ragged domains of Clifden Castle. A few hundred yards away there is a little peninsula, on which stands a house built somewhat in bungalow fashion. The curve of the peninsula turns to the eastward, and makes a tiny bay of almost crescent shape. In this the pair of duck settled.

John Castellan picked up a stone from the road, and threw it into the water. As the birds rose his gun went up. His right barrel banged and the duck fell. The drake flew landward: he fired his left barrel and missed. [Pg 5] Then came a bang from the upper road, and the drake dropped. The Englishman had killed it with a wire cartridge in his choked left barrel.

"I wonder who the devil did that!" said Castellan, as he saw the bird fall. "It was eighty yards if it was an inch, and that's a good gun with a good man behind it."

The Englishman left the road to pick up the bird and then went down the steep, stony hillside towards the shore of the silver-mouthed bay in the hope of getting another shot farther on, for the birds were now beginning to come over; and so it came about that he and the Irishman met within a few yards of each other, one on either side of a low spit of sand and shingle.

"That was a fine shot you killed the drake with," said the Irishman, looking at the bird he was carrying by the legs in his left hand.

"A good gun, and a wire cartridge, I fancy, were mainly responsible for his death," laughed the Englishman. "See you've got the other."

"Yes, and missed yours," said the Irishman.

The other recognised the tone as that of a man to whom failure, even in the most insignificant matter, was hateful, and he saw a quick gleam in his eyes which he remembered afterwards under very different circumstances.

But it so happened that the rivalry between them which was hereafter to have such momentous consequences was to be manifested there and then in a fashion much more serious than the hitting or missing of a brace of wild fowl.

Out on the smooth waters of the bay, about a quarter of a mile from the spit on which they stood, there were two boats. One was a light skiff, in which a girl, clad in white jersey and white flannel skirt, with a white Tam o' Shanter pinned on her head, was sculling leisurely towards the town. From the swing of her body, the poise of her head and shoulders, and the smoothness with which her sculls dropped in the water and left it, it was plain that she was a perfect mistress of the art; wherefore the two men looked at her, and admired.

The other craft was an ordinary rowing boat, manned by three lads out for a spree. There was no one steering and the oars were going in and out of the water with a total disregard of time. The result was that her course was anything but a straight line. The girl's sculls made no noise, and the youths were talking and laughing loudly.

Suddenly the boat veered sharply towards the skiff. The Englishman put his hands to his mouth, and yelled with all the strength of his lungs.

"Look out, you idiots, keep off shore!"

But it was too late. The long, steady strokes were sending the skiff pretty fast through the smooth water. The boat swerved again, hit the skiff about midway between the stem and the rowlocks, and the next moment the sculler was in the water. In the same moment two guns and two ducks were flung to the ground, two jackets were torn off, two pairs of shoes kicked away, and two men splashed into the water. Meanwhile the sculler had dropped quietly out of the sinking skiff, and after a glance at the two heads, one fair and the other dark, ploughing towards her, turned on her side and began to swim slowly in their direction so as to lessen the distance as much as possible.

The boys, horrified at what they had done, made such a frantic effort to go to the rescue, that one of them caught a very bad crab; so bad, indeed that the consequent roll of the boat sent him headlong into the water; and so the two others, one of whom was his elder brother, perhaps naturally left the girl to her fate, and devoted their energies to saving their companion.

Both John Castellan and the Englishman were good swimmers, and the race was a very close thing. Still, four hundred yards with most of your clothes on is a task calculated to try the strongest swimmer, and, although the student had swum almost since he could walk, his muscles were not quite in such good form as those of the [Pg 7] ex-athlete of Cambridge who, six months before, had won the Thames Swimming Club Half-mile Handicap from scratch.

Using side stroke and breast-stroke alternately they went at it almost stroke for stroke about half a dozen yards apart, and until they were within thirty yards or so of the third swimmer, they were practically neck and neck, though Castellan had the advantage of what might be called the inside track. In other words he was a little nearer to the girl than the Englishman.

When circumstances permitted they looked at each other, but, of course, neither of them was fool enough to waste his breath in speech. Still, each clearly understood that the other was going to get the girl first if he could.

So the tenth yard from the prize was reached, and then the Englishman shook his head up an inch, filled his lungs, rolled on to his side, and made a spurt with the reserve of strength which he had kept for the purpose. Inch by inch he drew ahead obliquely across Castellan's course and, less than a yard in front of him, he put his right hand under the girl's right side.

A lovely face, beautiful even though it was splashed all over with wet strands of dark chestnut hair, turned towards him; a pair of big blue eyes which shone in spite of the

salt water which made them blink, looked at him; and, after a cough, a very sweet voice with just a suspicion of Boston accent in it, said:

"Thank you so much! It was real good of you! I can swim, but I don't think I could have got there with all these things on, and so I reckon I owe you two gentlemen my life."

Castellan had swum round, and they took her under the arms to give her a rest. The two boys left in the boat had managed to get an oar out to their comrade just in time, and then haul him into the boat, which was now about fifty yards away; so as soon as the girl had got her breath they swam with her to the boat, and lifted her hands on to the gunwale.

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"If you wouldn't mind, sir, picking up those oars," said the Englishman, "I will get the young lady into the boat, and then we can row back."

Castellan gave him another look which said as plainly as words: "Well, I suppose she's your prize for the present," and swam off for the oars. With the eager help of the boys, who were now very frightened and very penitent, the Englishman soon had the girl in the boat; and so it came about that an adventure which might well have deprived America of one of her most beautiful and brilliant heiresses, resulted in nothing more than a ducking for two men and one girl, a wet, but somehow not altogether unpleasant walk, and a slight chill from which she had quite recovered the next morning.

The after consequences of that race for the rescue were of course, quite another matter.

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CHAPTER I

A MOMENTOUS EXPERIMENT

On the first day of July, 1908, a scene which was destined to become historic took place in the great Lecture Theatre in the Imperial College at Potsdam. It was just a year and a few days after the swimming race between John Castellan and the Englishman in Clifden Bay.

There were four people present. The doors were locked and guarded by two sentries outside. The German Emperor, Count Herold von Steinitz, Chancellor of the Empire,

Field-Marshal Count Friedrich von Moltke, grandson of the great Organiser of Victory, and John Castellan, were standing round a great glass tank, twenty-five feet long, and fifteen broad, supported on a series of trestles. The tank was filled with water up to within about six inches of the upper edge. The depth was ten feet. A dozen models of battleships, cruisers and torpedo craft were floating on the surface of the water. Five feet under the surface, a grey, fish-shaped craft with tail and fins, almost exactly resembling those of a flying fish, was darting about, now jumping forward like a cat pouncing on a bird, now drawing back, and then suddenly coming to a standstill. Another moment, it sank to the bottom, and lay there as if it had been a wreck. The next it darted up to the surface, cruised about in swift curves, turning in and out about the models, but touching none.

Every now and then John Castellan went to a little table in the corner of the room, on which there was a machine something like a typewriter, and touched two or three of the keys. There was no visible connection between them—the machine and the tank—but the little[Pg 10] grey shape in the water responded instantly to the touch of every key.

"That, I hope, will be enough to prove to your Majesty that as submarine the *Flying Fish* is quite under control. Of course the real *Flying Fish* will be controlled inside, not from outside."

"There is no doubt about the control," said the Kaiser. "It is marvellous, and I think the Chancellor and the Field Marshal will agree with me in that."

"Wonderful," said the Chancellor.

"A miracle," said the Field Marshal, "if it can only be realised."

"There is no doubt about that, gentlemen," said Castellan, going back to the machine. "Which of the models would your Majesty like to see destroyed first?"

The Kaiser pointed to the model of a battleship which was a very good imitation of one of the most up-to-date British battleships.

"We will take that one first," he said.

Castellan smiled, and began to play the keys. The grey shape of the *Flying Fish* dropped to the bottom of the tank, rose, and seemed all at once to become endowed with human reason, or a likeness of it, which was so horrible that even the Kaiser and his two chiefs could hardly repress a shudder. It rose very slowly, circled among the floating models about two feet under the surface and then, like an animal smelling out its prey, it made a dart at the ship which the Kaiser had indicated, and

struck it from underneath. They saw a green flash stream through the water, and the next moment the model had crumbled to pieces and sank.

"Donner-Wetter!" exclaimed the Chancellor, forgetting in his wonder that he was in the presence of His Majesty, "that is wonderful, horrible!"

"Can there be anything too horrible for the enemies of the Fatherland, Herr Kanzler," said the Kaiser, looking across the tank at him, with a glint in his eyes, which no man in Germany cares to see.

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"I must ask pardon, your Majesty," replied the Chancellor. "I was astonished, indeed, almost frightened—frightened, if your Majesty will allow me to say so, for the sake of Humanity, if such an awful invention as that becomes realised."

"And what is your opinion, Field Marshal?" asked the Kaiser with a laugh.

"A most excellent invention, your Majesty, provided always that it belongs to the Fatherland."

"Exactly," said the Kaiser. "As that very intelligent American officer, Admiral Mahan, has told us, the sea-power is world-power, and there you have sea-power; but that is not the limit of the capabilities of Mr Castellan's invention, according to the specifications which I have read, and on the strength of which I have asked him to give us this demonstration of its powers. He calls it, as you know, the *Flying Fish*. So far you have seen it as a fish. Now, Mr Castellan, perhaps you will be kind enough to let us see it fly."

"With pleasure, your Majesty," replied the Irishman, "but, in case of accident, I must ask you and the Chancellor and the Field Marshal to stand against the wall by the door there. With your Majesty's permission, I am now going to destroy the rest of the fleet."

"The rest of the fleet!" exclaimed the Field Marshal. "It is impossible."

"We shall see, Feldherr!" laughed the Kaiser. "Meanwhile, suppose we come out of the danger zone."

The three greatest men in Germany, and perhaps on the Continent of Europe, lined up with their backs to the wall at the farther end of the room from the tank, and the Irishman sat down to his machine. The keys began to click rapidly, and they began to feel a tenseness in the air of the room. After a few seconds they would not have been surprised if they had seen a flash of lightning pass over their heads. The *Flying Fish* had sunk to the bottom of the tank, and backed into one of the corners. The keys

of the machine clicked louder and faster. Her nose tilted upwards to an angle of about sixty degrees. The[Pg 12] six-bladed propeller at her stem whirled round in the water like the flurry of a whale's fluke in its death agony. Her side-fins inclined upwards, and, like a flash, she leapt from the water, and began to circle round the room.

The Kaiser shut his teeth hard and watched. The Chancellor opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, and shut it again. The Field Marshal stroked his moustache slowly, and followed the strange shape fluttering about the room. It circled twice round the tank, and then crossed it. A sharp click came from the machine, something fell from the body of the *Flying Fish* into the tank. There was a dull sound of a smothered explosion. For a moment the very water itself seemed aflame, then it boiled up into a mass of seething foam. Every one of the models was overwhelmed and engulfed at the same moment. Castellán got up from the machine, caught the *Flying Fish* in his hand, as it dropped towards the water, took it to the Kaiser, and said:

"Is your Majesty convinced? It is quite harmless now."

"God's thunder, yes!" said the War Lord of Germany, taking hold of the model. "It is almost superhuman."

"Yes," said the Chancellor, "it is damnable!"

"I," said the Field Marshal, drily, "think it's admirable, always supposing that Mr Castellán is prepared to place this mysterious invention at the disposal of his Majesty."

"Yes," said the Kaiser, leaning with his back against the door, "that is, of course, the first proposition to be considered. What are your terms, Mr Castellán?"

Castellán looked at the three men all armed. The Chancellor and the Field Marshal wore their swords, and the Kaiser had a revolver in his hip pocket. The Chancellor and the Field Marshal straightened up as the Kaiser spoke, and their hands moved instinctively towards their sword hilts. The Kaiser looked at the model of the *Flying Fish* in his hand. His face was, as usual, like a mask. He saw nothing, thought of nothing. For the moment[Pg 13] he was not a man: he was just the incarnation of an idea.

"Field Marshal, you are a soldier," said Castellán, "and I see that your hand has gone to your sword-hilt. Swords, of course, are the emblems of military rank, but there is no use for them now."

"What do you mean, sir?" exclaimed the Count, clapping his right hand on the hilt. After what he had seen he honestly believed that this Irishman was a wizard of science who ought not to be trusted in the same room with the Kaiser. Castellán went back to his machine and said:

"Draw your sword, sir, and see."

And then the keys began to click.

The Field Marshal's sword flashed out of the sheath. A second later the Chancellor's did the same, and the Kaiser's right hand went back towards his hip pocket.

Castellán got up and said:

"Your Majesty has a revolver. Be good enough, as you value your own safety, to unload it, and throw the cartridges out of the window."

"But why?" exclaimed the Kaiser, pulling a Mauser repeating pistol out of his hip-pocket. "Who are you, that you should give orders to me?"

"Only a man, your Majesty," replied Castellán, with a bow and a smile; "a man who could explode every cartridge in that pistol of yours at once before you had time to fire a shot. You have seen what has happened already."

William the Second had seen enough. He walked to one of the windows opening on the enclosed gardens, threw it open, dropped the pistol out, and said:

"Now, let us have the proof of what you say."

"In a moment, your Majesty," replied Castellán, going back to his machine, and beginning to work the keys rapidly. "I am here, an unarmed man; let their Excellencies, the Chancellor and the Field Marshal, attack me with their swords if they can. I am not joking. I [Pg 14] am staking my life on the success or failure of this experiment."

"Does your Majesty consent?" said the Field Marshal, raising his sword.

"There could be no better test," replied the Kaiser. "Mr Castellán makes an experiment on which he stakes his life; we are making an experiment on which we stake the welfare of the German Empire, and, perhaps, the fate of the world. If he is willing, I am."

"And I am ready," replied Castellán, working the keys faster and faster as he spoke, and looking at the two swords as carelessly as if they had been a couple of walking sticks.

The sword points advanced towards him; the keys of the machine clicked faster and faster. The atmosphere of the room became tenser and tenser; the Kaiser leaned back against the door with his arms folded. When the points were within three feet of Castellan's head, the steel began to gleam with a bluish green light. The Chancellor and the Field Marshal stopped; they saw sparkles of blue flame running along the sword blades. Then came paralysis! the swords dropped from their hands, and they staggered back.

"Great God, this is too much," gasped the Chancellor. "The man is impregnable. It is too much, your Majesty. I fought through the war of '70 and '71, but I surrender to this; this is not human."

"I beg your pardon, Excellency," said Castellan, getting up from the machine, and picking the two swords from the floor, "it is quite human, only a little science that the majority of humanity does not happen to know. Your swords, gentlemen," and he presented the hilts to them.

"Bravo!" exclaimed the Kaiser, "well done! You have beaten the two best soldiers in the German Empire, and you have done it like a gentleman. But you are not altogether an Irishman, are you, Mr Castellan?"

"No, sir, I am a Spaniard as well. The earliest ancestor that I know commanded the *Santiago*, wrecked on Achill Island, when the Armada came south from the[Pg 15] Pentland Firth. The rest of me is Irish. I need hardly say more. That is why I am here now."

The Kaiser looked at the Chancellor and the Field Marshal, and they looked back at him, and in a moment the situation—the crisis upon which the fate of the world might depend—was decided. It was not a time when men who are men talk. A few moments of silence passed; the four men looking at each other with eyes that had the destinies of nations in the brains behind them. Then the Kaiser took three swift strides towards Castellan, held out his hand, and said in a voice which had an unwonted note of respect in it:

"Sir, you have convinced me. Henceforth you are Director of the Naval and Military operations of the German Empire, subject, of course, to the conditions which will be arranged by myself and those who are entrusted with the tactical and strategical developments of such plan of campaign as I may decide to carry out on sea and land. And now, to put it rudely—brutally, if you like, your price?"

Castellan took the Kaiser's hand in a strong, nervous grip, and said:

"I shall not state my price in money, your Majesty. I am not working for money, but you will understand that I cannot convert what I have shown you to-day into the fighting reality. Only a nation can do that. It will cost ten millions of marks, at least, to—well, to so far develop this experiment that no fleet save your Majesty's shall sail the seas, and that no armies save yours shall without your consent march over the battlefields of the world's Armageddon."

"Make it twenty millions, fifty millions," laughed the Kaiser, "and it will be cheap at the price. What do you think, Herr Kantzler and Feldherr?"

"Under the present circumstances of the other monarchies of Europe, your Majesty," replied the Chancellor, "it would be cheap at a hundred millions, especially with reference to a certain fleet, which appears to be making the ocean its own country."

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"Quite so," said the Field Marshal. "If what we have seen to-day can be realised it would not be necessary to pump out the North Sea in order to invade England."

"Or to get back again," laughed the Kaiser. "I think that is what your grandfather said, didn't he?"

"Yes, your Majesty. He found eight ways of getting into England, but he hadn't thought of one of getting out again."

Since the days of the Prophets no man had ever uttered more prophetic words than Friedrich Helmuth von Moltke spoke then, all unconsciously. But in the days to come they were fulfilled in such fashion that only one man in all the world had ever dreamed of, and that was the man who had beaten John Castellan by a yard in the swimming race for the rescue of that American girl from drowning.

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CHAPTER II

NORAH'S GOOD-BYE

The scene had shifted back from the royal city of Potsdam to the little coast town in Connemara. John Castellan was sitting on a corner of his big writing-table swinging his legs to and fro, and looking a little uncomfortable. Leaning against the wall opposite the windows, with her hands folded behind her back, was a girl of about nineteen, an almost perfect incarnation of the Irish girl at her best. Tall, black-haired,

black-browed, grey-eyed, perfectly-shaped, and with that indescribable charm of feature which neither the pen nor the camera can do justice to—Norah Castellan was facing him, her eyes gleaming and almost black with anger, and her whole body instinct with intense vitality.

"And so Ireland hasn't troubles enough of her own, John, that you must bring new ones upon her, and what for? To realise a dream that was never anything else but a dream, and to satisfy a revenge that is three hundred years old! If that theory of yours about re-incarnation is true, you may have been a Spaniard once, but remember that you're an Irishman now; and you're no good Irishman if you sell yourself to these foreigners to do a thing like that, and it's your sister that's telling you."

"And it's your brother, Norah," he replied, his black brows meeting almost in a straight line across his forehead, "who tells you that Ireland is going to have her independence; that the shackles of the Saxon shall be shaken off once and for ever, even if all Europe blazes up with war in the doing of it. I have the power and I will use it. Spaniard or Irishman, what does it matter? I hate England and everything English."

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"Hate England, John!" said the girl. "Are you quite sure that it isn't an Englishman that you hate?"

"Well, and what if I do? I hate all Englishmen, and I'm the first Irishman who has ever had the power to put his hatred into acts instead of words—and you, an Irish girl, with six generations of Irish blood in your veins, you, to talk to me like this. What are you thinking about, Norah? Is that what you call patriotism?"

"Patriotism!" she echoed, unclasping her hands, and holding her right hand out towards him. "I'm as Irish as you are, and as Spanish, too, for the matter of that, for the same blood is in the veins of both of us. You're a scholar and a genius, and all the rest of it, I grant you; but haven't you learned history enough to know that Ireland never was independent, and never could be? What brought the English here first? Four miserable provinces that called themselves kingdoms, and all fighting against each other, and the king of one of them stole the wife of the king of another of them, and that's how the English came.

"I love Ireland as well as you do, John, but Ireland is not worth setting the world swimming in blood for. You're lighting a match-box to set the world ablaze with. It isn't Ireland only, remember. There are Irish all over the world, millions of them, and remember how the Irish fought in the African War. I don't mean Lynch and his traitors, but the Dublin boys. Who were the first in and the last out—Irishmen, but they had the

sense to know that they were British first and Irish afterwards. I tell you, you shall be shot for what you've done, and if I wasn't the daughter of your father and mother, I'd inform against you now."

"And if you did, Norah, you would do very little good to the Saxon cause," replied her brother, pointing with his thumb out of one of the windows. "You see that yacht in the bay there. Everything is on board of her. If you went out into the street now, gave me in charge of the constabulary, to those two men in front of the hotel there, it would make no difference. There's nothing to [Pg 19] be proved, no, not even if my own sister tried to swear my life and liberty away. It would only be that the Germans and the Russians, and the Austrians, and the rest of them would work out my ideas instead of me working them out, and it might be that they would make a worse use of them. You've half an hour to give me up, if you like."

And then he began to collect the papers that were scattered about the big drawing-table, sorting them out and folding them up and then taking other papers and plans from the drawers and packing them into a little black dispatch box.

"But, John, John," she said, crossing the room, and putting her hand on his shoulder. "Don't tell me that you're going to plunge the world in war just for this. Think of what it means—the tens of thousands of lives that will be lost, the thousands of homes that will be made desolate, the women who will be crying for their husbands, and the children for their fathers, the dead men buried in graves that will never have a name on them, and the wounded, broken men coming back to their homes that they will never be able to keep up again, not only here and in England, but all over Europe and perhaps in America as well! Genius you may be; but what are you that you should bring calamity like this upon humanity?"

"I'm an Irishman, and I hate England, and that's enough," he replied sullenly, as he went on packing his papers.

"You hate that Englishman worse than you hate England, John."

"And I wouldn't wonder if you loved that Englishman more than you loved Ireland, Norah," he replied, with a snarl in his voice.

"And if I did," she said, with blazing eyes and flaming cheeks, "isn't England nearer to Ireland than America?"

"Geographically, perhaps, but in sentiment—"

"Sentiment! Yes, when you have finished with this bloody business of yours that you have begun on, go you [Pg 20] through Ireland and England and Europe, and ask the

widows and the fatherless, and the girls who kissed their lovers 'good-bye,' and never saw them again, what they think of that sentiment! But it's no use arguing with you now; there's your German yacht. You're no brother of mine. You've made me sorry that we had the same father and mother."

As she spoke, she went to the door, opened it and, before he could reply, slammed it behind her, and went to her room to seek and find a woman's usual relief from extreme mental tension.

John Castellan went on packing his papers, his face grey, and his features hard-set. He loved his beautiful sister, but he thought that he loved his country more. When he had finished he went and knocked at her door, and said:

"Norah, I'm going. Won't you say 'good-bye?'"

The door was swung open, and she faced him, her face wet with tears, her eyes glistening, and her lips twitching.

"Yes, good-bye, John," she said. "Go to your German friends; but, when all the horrors that you are going to bring upon this country through their help come to pass, remember you have no sister left in Ireland. You've sold yourself, and I have no brother who is a traitor. Good-bye!"

The door swung to and she locked it. John Castellan hesitated for a moment or two, and then with a slow shake of his head he went away down the stairs out into the street, and along to the little jetty where the German yacht's boat was waiting to take him on board.

Norah had thrown herself on her bed in her locked room shedding the first but not the last tear that John Castellan's decision was destined to draw from women's eyes.

About half an hour later the encircling hills of the bay echoed the shriek of a siren. She got up, looked out of the window, and saw the white shape of the German yacht moving out towards the fringe of islands which guard the outward bay.

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"And there he goes!" she said in a voice that was almost choked with sobs, "there he goes, my own brother, it may be taking the fate of the world with him—yes, and on a German ship, too. He that knows every island and creek and cove and harbour from Cape Wrath to Cape Clear—he that's got all those inventions in his head, too, and the son of my own father and mother, sold his country to the foreigner, thinking those dirty Germans will keep their word with him.

"Not they, John, not they. The saints forgive me for thinking it, but for Ireland's sake I hope that ship will never reach Germany. If it does, we'll see the German Eagle floating over Dublin Castle before you'll be able to haul up the Green Flag. Well, well, there it is; it's done now, I suppose, and there's no help for it. God forgive you, John, I don't think man ever will!"

As she said this the white yacht turned the southern point of the inner bay, and disappeared to the southward. Norah bathed her face, brushed out her hair, and coiled it up again; then she put on her hat and jacket, and went out to do a little shopping.

It is perhaps a merciful provision of Providence that in this human life of ours the course of the greatest events shall be interrupted by the most trivial necessities of existence. Were it not for that the inevitable might become the unendurable.

The plain fact was that Norah Castellan had some friends and acquaintances coming to supper that evening. Her brother had left at a few hours' notice from his foreign masters, as she called them, and there would have to be some explanation of his absence, especially as a friend of his, Arthur Lismore, the owner of the finest salmon streams for twenty miles round, and a man who was quite hopelessly in love with herself, was coming to brew the punch after the fashion of his ancestors, and so, of course, it was necessary that there should be nothing wanting.

Moreover, she was beginning to feel the want of some hard physical exercise, and an hour or so in that lovely[Pg 22] air of Connemara, which, as those who know, say, is as soft as silk and as bright as champagne. So she went out, and as she turned the corner round the head of the harbour to the left towards the waterfall, almost the first person she met was Arthur Lismore himself—a brown-faced, chestnut-haired, blue-eyed, young giant of twenty-eight or so; as goodly a man as God ever put His own seal upon.

His cap came off, his head bowed with that peculiar grace of deference which no one has ever yet been able to copy from an Irishman, and he said in the strong, and yet curiously mellow tone which you only hear in the west of Ireland:

"Good afternoon, Miss Norah. I've heard that you're to be left alone for a time, and that we won't see John to-night."

"Yes," she said, her eyes meeting his, "that is true. He went away in that German yacht that left the bay less than an hour ago."

"A German yacht!" he echoed. "Well now, how stupid of me, I've been trying to think all the afternoon what that flag was she carried when she came in."

"The German Imperial Yacht Club," she said, "that was the ensign she was flying, and John has gone to Germany in her."

"To Germany! John gone to Germany! But what for? Surely now—"

"Yes, to Germany, to help the Emperor to set the world on fire."

"You're not saying that, Miss Norah?"

"I am," she said, more gravely than he had ever heard her speak. "Mr Lismore, it's a sick and sorry girl I am this afternoon. You were the first Irishman on the top of Waggon Hill, and you'll understand what I mean. If you have nothing better to do, perhaps you'll walk down to the Fall with me, and I'll tell you."

"I could have nothing better to do, Norah, and it's yourself that knows that as well as I do," he replied.[Pg 23] "I only wish the road was longer. And it's yourself that's sick and sorry, is it? If it wasn't John, I'd like to get the reason out of any other man. That's Irish, but it's true."

He turned, and they walked down the steeply sloping street for several minutes in silence.

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CHAPTER III

SEEN UNDER THE MOON

It was a few minutes after four bells on a grey morning in November 1909 that Lieutenant-Commander Francis Erskine, in command of his Majesty's Fishery Cruiser, the *Cormorant*, got up on to the navigating bridge, and, as usual, took a general squint about him, and buttoned the top button of his oil-skin coat.

The *Cormorant* was just a few yards inside the three-mile limit on Flamborough Head, and, officially, she was looking for trespassers, who either did not fly the British flag, or flew it fraudulently. There were plenty of foreign poachers on the rich fishing grounds to the north and east away to the Dogger, and there were also plenty of floating grog shops from Bremen and Hamburg, and Rotterdam and Flushing, and a good many other places, loaded up to their decks with liquor, whose mission was not only to sell their poison at about four hundred per cent. profit to the British fishers on the Dogger,

but also to persuade them, at a price, to smuggle more of the said poison into the British Islands to be made into Scotch and Irish whisky, brandy, Hollands, gin, rum, and even green and yellow Chartreuse, or any other alcoholic potion which simply wanted the help of the chemist to transform potato and beet spirit into anything that would taste like what it was called.

"Beast of a morning, Castellán," he said to his first officer, whom he was relieving, "dirty sea, dirty sky, and not a thing to be seen. You don't have worse weather than this even off Connemara, do you?"

"No," said Castellán, "and I've seen better; but look you, there's the sky clearing to the east; yes, and there's[Pg 25] Venus, herald of the sun: and faith, she's bright, too, like a little moon, now isn't she? I suppose it'll be a bit too early for Norah to be looking at her, won't it?"

"Don't talk rot, man," replied the Lieutenant-Commander. "I hope your sister hasn't finished her beauty sleep by this time."

The clouds parted still wider, making a great gap of blue-grey sky to the eastward, as the westward bank drifted downward. The moon sent a sudden flood of white light over their heads, which silvered the edges of the clouds, and then turned the leaden waters into silver as it had done to the grey of the cloud.

"She'd wake fast enough if she had a nightmare or a morning mare, or something of that sort, and could see a thing like that," exclaimed Castellán, gripping the Lieutenant-Commander by the shoulder with his right hand, and pointing to the east with his left. "Look, man, look! By all the Holy Powers, what is it? See there! Thanks for the blessed moonlight that has shown it to us, for I'm thinking it doesn't mean any good to old England or Ireland."

Erskine was an Englishman, and a naval officer at that, and therefore his reply consisted of only a few words hardly fitted for publication. The last words were, "What is it?"

"What is it?" said Castellán with a stamp of his feet on the bridge, "what is it? Now wouldn't I like to know just as well as you would, and don't you think the Lords of the British Admiralty would like to know a lot better? But there's one thing I think I can tell you, it's one of those new inventions that the British Admiralty never buy, and let go to other countries, and what's more, as you've seen with your eyes, as I have with mine, it came out of the water on the edge of that moon-lit piece, it flew across it, it sighted us, I suppose, it found it had made a mistake, and it went down again. Now what do you make of that?"

"Combination of submarine and airship it looks like," said Erskine, seriously, "and if that doesn't belong to us,[Pg 26] it's going to be fairly dangerous. Good Lord! a thing like that might do anything with a fleet, and whatever Power owns it may just as well have a hundred as one. Look here, Castellan, I'm going straight into Scarborough. This is a lot more important than the Dogger Fleet. There's the *Seagull* at Hull. She can relieve us, and Franklin can take this old coffee-grinder round. You and I are going to London as soon as we can get there. Take the latitude, longitude, and exact time, and also the evidence of the watch if any one of them saw it."

"You think it's as serious as that?"

"Certainly. It's one of two things. Either that thing belongs to us or it belongs to a possible enemy. The Fleet, even to a humble fishery cruiser, means the eyes and ears of the British Empire. If that belongs to the Admiralty, well and good; we shall get censured for leaving the ship; that's the risk we take. If it doesn't, the Naval Board may possibly have the civility to thank us for telling them about it; but in either case we are going to do our duty. Send Franklin up to the bridge, make the course for Scarborough, get the evidence of any of the watch who saw what we have seen, and I'll go and make the report. Then you can countersign it, and the men can make theirs. I think that's the best we can do."

"I think so, sir," said the Lieutenant, saluting.

The Lieutenant-Commander walked from port to starboard and starboard to port thinking pretty hard until the navigating lieutenant came to take charge of the bridge. Of submarines he knew a good deal. He knew that the British navy possessed the very best type of this craft which navigated the under-waters. He had also, of course, read the aërial experiments which had been made by inventors of what the newspapers called airships, and which he, with his hard naval common-sense, called gas-bags with motor engines slung under them. He knew the deadly possibilities of the submarine; the flying gas-bag he looked upon as gas and not much more. The real[Pg 27] flying machine he had considered up till a few moments ago as a dream of the future; but a combination of submarine and flying ship such as he and Castellan, if they had not both been drunk or dreaming, had seen a few moments ago, was quite another matter. The possibilities of a thing like that were absolutely limitless, limitless for good or evil, and if it did belong to a possible enemy of Britain, there was only one conclusion to be arrived at—The Isle Inviolable would be inviolate no more.

Lieutenant Franklin came on to the bridge and saluted; he returned the salute, gave the orders for changing the course, and went down to his cabin, muttering:

"Good Lord, if that's only so. Why, half a dozen things like that could fight a fleet, then go on gaily to tackle the forts. I wonder whether my Lords of the Naval Council will see me to-morrow, and believe me if they do see me."

By great good luck it happened that the Commander of the North-eastern District had come up from Hull to Scarborough for a few days' holiday. When he saw the *Cormorant* steam into the bay, he very naturally wanted to know what was the matter, and so he went down to the pier-head, and met the *Cormorant's* cutter. As Erskine came up the steps he recognised him and saluted.

"Good-morning, sir."

"Good-morning, Erskine. What's the matter? You're a little off your ground, aren't you? Of course, there must be a reason for it. Anything serious?" replied the District Commander, as he held out his hand. "Ah, good morning, Castellan. So you've both come ashore. Well, now, what is it?"

Erskine took a rapid glance round at the promenaders who were coming down to have a look at the cruiser, and said in a low tone:

"Yes, sir. I am afraid it is rather serious; but it is hardly the sort of thing one could discuss here. In fact, I was taking the responsibility of going straight to [Pg 28]London with Castellan, to present a report which we have drawn up to the Board of Admiralty."

The District Commander's iron-grey eyebrows lifted for the fraction of a minute, and he said:

"H'm. Well, Erskine, I know you're not the sort of man to do that sort of thing without pretty good reason. Come up to the hotel, both of you, and let us go into it."

"Thank you, sir," replied Erskine. "It is really quite fortunate that we met you here, because I think when you've seen the report you will feel justified in giving us formal leave instead of French leave."

"I hope so," he replied, somewhat grimly, for a rule of the Service had been broken all to pieces, and his own sense of discipline was sorely outraged by the knowledge that two responsible officers had left their ship with the intention of going to London without leave.

But when he had locked the door of his sitting-room at the hotel, and heard the amazing story which Erskine and Castellan had to tell, and had read their report, and the evidence of the men who had also seen the strange apparition which had leapt

from the sea into the air, and then returned to the waters, he put in a few moments of silent thinking, and then he looked up, and said gravely:

"Well, gentlemen, I know that British naval officers and British seamen don't see things that are not there, as the Russians did a few years ago on the Dogger Bank. I am of course bound to believe you, and I think they will do the same in London. You have taken a very irregular course; but a man who is not prepared to do that at a pinch seldom does anything else. I have seen and heard enough to convince me for the present; and so I shall have great pleasure, in fact I shall only be doing my duty, in giving you both leave for a week.

"I will order the *Seagull* up from Hull, she's about ready, and I think I can put an Acting-Commander on board the *Cormorant* for the present. Now, you will just have time for an early lunch with me, and catch the [Pg 29] 1.17, which will get you to town at 5.15, and you will probably find somebody at the Admiralty then, because I know they're working overtime. Anyhow, if you don't find Sir John Fisher there, I should go straight to his house, if I were you; and even if you don't see him, you'll be able to get an early appointment for to-morrow."

"That was a pretty good slice of luck meeting the noble Crocker, wasn't it?" said Castellan, as the train began to move out of the station, about three hours later. They had reserved a compartment in the corridor express, and were able to talk State secrets at their ease.

"We're inside the law now, at any rate."

"Law or no law, it was good enough to risk a court-martial for," said Erskine, biting off the end of a cigar. "There's no doubt about the existence of the thing, and if it doesn't belong to us, which is a fact that only my Lords of the Naval Council can know, it simply means, as you must see for yourself, that the invasion of England, which has been a naval and military impossibility for the last seven hundred years or so, will not only become possible but comparatively easy. There's nothing upon the waters or under them that could stand against a thing like that."

"Oh, you're right enough there," said Castellan, speaking with his soft West of Ireland brogue. "There's no doubt of that, and it's the very devil. A dozen of those things would play havoc with a whole fleet, and when the fleet's gone, or even badly hurt, what's to stop our good friends over yonder landing two or three million men just anywhere they choose, and doing pretty well what they like afterwards? By the Saints, that would be a horrible thing. We've nothing on land that could stand against them, though, of course, the boys would stand till they fell down; but fall they would."

"Yes," said Erskine, seriously. "It wouldn't exactly be a walk over for them, but I'm afraid there couldn't be very much doubt at the end, if the fleet once went."

"I'm afraid not," replied Castellan, "and we can only hope that our Lords of the Council will be of the same[Pg 30] opinion, or, better still, that the infernal thing we saw belongs to us."

"I hope so," said Erskine, gravely. "If it doesn't—well, I wouldn't give half-a-crown for the biggest battleship in the British Navy."

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CHAPTER IV

THE SHADOW OF THE TERROR

By a curious coincidence which, as events proved, was to have some serious consequences, almost at the same moment that Commander Erskine began to write his report on the strange vision which he and his Lieutenant had seen, Gilbert Lennard came out of the Observatory which Mr Ratliffe Parmenter had built on the south of the Whernside Hills in Yorkshire.

Mr Ratliffe Parmenter had two ambitions in life, one of which he had fulfilled. This was to pile millions upon millions by any possible means. As he used to say to his associates in his poorer days, "You've got to get there somehow, so get there"—and he had "got there." It is not necessary for the purpose of the present narrative to say how he did it. He had done it, and that is why he bought the Hill of Whernside and about a thousand acres around it and built an Observatory on the top with which, to use his own words, he meant to lick Creation by seeing further into Creation than anyone else had done, and that is just what his great reflector had enabled his astronomer to do.

When he had locked the door Lennard looked up to the eastward where the morning star hung flashing like a huge diamond in splendid solitude against the brightening background of the sky. His face was the face of a man who had seen something that he would not like to describe to any other man. His features were hard set, and there were lines in his face which time might have drawn twenty or thirty years later. His lips made a straight line, and his eyes, although he had hardly slept[Pg 32] three hours a night for as many nights, had a look in them that was not to be accounted for by ordinary insomnia.

His work was over for the night, and, if he chose, he could go down to the house three-quarters of a mile away and sleep for the rest of the day, or, at any rate, until lunch time; and yet he looked another long look at the morning star, thrust his hands down into his trousers pockets and turned up a side path that led through the heather, and spent the rest of the morning walking and thinking—walking slowly, and thinking very quickly.

When he came in to breakfast at nine the next morning, after he had had a shave and a bath, Mr Parmenter said to him:

"Look here, young man, I'm old enough to be your father, and so you'll excuse me putting it that way; if you're going along like this I reckon I'll have to shut that Observatory down for the time being and take you on a trip to the States to see how they're getting on with their telescopes in the Alleghanies and the Rockies, and maybe down South too in Peru, to that Harvard Observatory above Arequipa on the Misti, as a sort of holiday. I asked you to come here to work, not to wear yourself out. As I've told you before, we've got plenty of men in the States who can sign their cheques for millions of dollars and can't eat a dinner, to say nothing of a breakfast, and you're too young for that.

"What's the matter? More trouble about that new comet of yours. You've been up all night looking at it, haven't you? Of course it's all right that you got hold of it before anybody else, but all the same I don't want you to be worrying yourself for nothing and get laid up before the time comes to take the glory of the discovery."

While he was speaking the door of the breakfast-room opened and Auriole came in. She looked with a just perceptible admiration at the man who, as it seemed to her, was beginning to show a slight stoop in the broad shoulders and a little falling forward of the head which she had first seen driving through the water to her rescue[Pg 33] in the Bay of Connemara. Her eyelids lifted a shade as she looked at him, and she said with a half smile:

"Good morning, Mr Lennard; I am afraid you've been sacrificing yourself a little bit too much to science. You don't seem to have had a sleep for the last two or three nights. You've been blinding your eyes over those tangles of figures and equations, parallaxes and cube roots and that sort of thing. I know something about them because I had some struggles with them myself at Vassar."

"That's about it, Auriole," said her father. "Just what I've been saying; and I hope our friend is not going on with this kind of business too long. Now, really, Mr Lennard, you know you must not, and that's all there is to it."

"Oh, no, I don't think you need be frightened of anything of that sort," said Lennard, who had considerably brightened up as Auriole entered the room; "perhaps I may have been going a little too long without sleep; but, you see, a man who has the great luck to discover a new comet is something like one of the old navigators who discovered new islands and continents. Of course you remember the story of Columbus. When he thought he was going to find what is now the country which has had the honour—"

"I know you're going to say something nice, Mr Lennard," interrupted Auriole, "but breakfast is ready; here it comes. If you take my advice you will have your coffee and something to eat and tell us the rest of it while you're getting something that will do you good. What do you think, Poppa?"

"Hard sense, Auriole, hard sense. Your mother used to talk just like that, and I reckon you've got it from her. Well now, here's the food, let's begin. I've got a hunger on me that I'd have wanted five dollars to stop at the time when I couldn't buy a breakfast."

They sat down, Miss Auriole at the head of the table and her father and Lennard facing each other, and for the next few minutes there was a semi-silence which was very[Pg 34] well employed in the commencement of one of the most important functions of the human day.

When Mr Parmenter had got through his first cup of coffee, his two poached eggs on toast, and was beginning on the fish, he looked across the table and said:

"Well now, Mr Lennard, I guess you're feeling a bit better, as I do, and so, maybe, you can tell us something new about comets."

"I certainly am feeling better," said Lennard with a glance at Auriole, "but, you see, I've got into a state of mind which is not unlike the physical state of the Red Indian who starves for a few days and then takes his meals, I mean the arrears of meals, all at once. When I have had a good long sleep, as I am going to have until to-night, I might—in fact, I hope I shall be able to tell you something definite about the question of the comet."

"What—the question?" echoed Mr Parmenter. "About the comet? I didn't understand that there was any question. You have discovered it, haven't you?"

"I have made a certain discovery, Mr Parmenter," said Lennard, with a gravity which made Auriole raise her eyelids quickly, "but whether I have found a comet so far unknown to astronomy or not, is quite another matter. Thanks to that splendid instrument of yours, I have found a something in a part of the heavens where no

comet, not even a star, has even been seen yet, and, speaking in all seriousness, I may say that this discovery contradicts all calculations as to the orbits and velocities of any known comet. That is what I have been thinking about all night."

"What?" said Auriole, looking up again. "Really something quite unknown?"

"Unknown except to the three people sitting at this table, unless another miracle has happened—I mean such a one as happened in the case of the discovery of Neptune which, as of course you know, Adams at Cambridge and Le Verrier at Paris—"

"Yes, yes," said Auriole, "two men who didn't know[Pg 35] each other; both looked for something that couldn't be seen, and found it. If you've done anything like that, Mr Lennard, I reckon Poppa will have good cause to be proud of his reflector—"

"And of the man behind it," added her father. "A telescope's like a gun; no use without a good man behind it. Well, if that's so, Mr Lennard, this discovery of yours ought to shake the world up a bit."

"From what I have seen so far," replied Lennard, "I have not the slightest doubt that it will."

"And when may I see this wonderful discovery of yours, Mr Lennard," said Auriole, "this something which is going to be so important, this something that no one else's eyes have seen except yours. Really, you know, you've made me quite longing to get a sight of this stranger from the outer wilderness of space."

"If the night is clear enough, I may hope to be able to introduce you to the new celestial visitor about a quarter-past eleven to-night, or to be quite accurate eleven hours, sixteen minutes and thirty-nine seconds p.m."

"I think that's good enough, Auriole," said her father. "If the heavens are only kind enough, we'll go up to the observatory and, as Mr Lennard says, see something that no one else has ever seen."

"And then," laughed Auriole, "I suppose you will have achieved the second ambition of your life. You have already piled up a bigger heap of dollars than anybody else in the world, and by midnight you will have seen farther into Creation than anybody else. But you will let me have the first look, won't you?"

"Why, certainly," he replied. "As soon as Mr Lennard has got the telescope fixed, you go first, and I reckon that won't take very long."

"No," replied Lennard, "I've worked out the position for to-night, and it's only a matter of winding up the clockwork and setting the telescope. And now," he continued, rising,

"if you will allow me, I will say—well, I was going to say good-night, but of course it's good-morning—I'm going to bed."

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"Will you come down to lunch, or shall I have some sent up to you?" said Auriol.

"No, thanks. I don't think there will be any need to trouble you about that. When I once get to sleep, I hope I shall forget all things earthly, and heavenly too for the matter of that, until about six o'clock, and if you will have me called then, I will be ready for dinner."

"Certainly," replied Auriol, "and I hope you will sleep as well as you deserve to do, after all these nights of watching."

He did sleep. He slept the sleep of a man physically and mentally tired, in spite of the load of unspeakable anxiety which was weighing upon his mind. For during his last night's work, he had learnt what no other man in the world knew. He had learnt that, unless a miracle happened, or some almost superhuman feat of ingenuity and daring was accomplished, that day thirteen months hence would see the annihilation of every living thing on earth, and the planet Terra converted into a dark and lifeless orb, a wilderness drifting through space, the blackened and desolated sepulchre of the countless millions of living beings which now inhabited it.

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CHAPTER V

A GLIMPSE OF THE DOOM

After dinner Lennard excused himself, saying that he wanted to make a few more calculations; and then he got outside and lit his pipe, and walked up the winding path towards the observatory.

"What am I to do?" he said between his teeth. "It's a ghastly position for a man to be placed in. Fancy—just a poor, ordinary, human being like myself having the power of losing or saving the world in his hands! And then, of course, there's a woman in the question—the Eternal Feminine—even in such a colossal problem as this!

"It's mean, and I know it; but, after all, I saved her life—though, if I hadn't reached her first, that other chap might have got her. I love her and he loves her; there's no doubt about that, and Papa Parmenter wants to marry her to a coronet. There's one thing

certain, Castellan shall not have her, and I love her a lot too much to see her made My Lady This, or the Marchioness of So-and-so, just because she's beautiful and has millions, and the other fellow, whoever he may be, may have a coronet that probably wants re-gilding; and yet, after all, it's only the same old story in a rather more serious form—a woman against the world. I suppose Papa Parmenter would show me the door to-morrow morning if I, a poor explorer of the realm of Space, dared to tell him that I want to marry his daughter.

"And yet how miserable and trivial all these wretched distinctions of wealth and position look now; or would look if the world only knew and believed what I could tell it—and that reminds me—shall I tell her, or them? Of[Pg 38] course, I must before long; simply because in a month or so those American fellows will be on it, and they won't have any scruples when it comes to a matter of scare head-lines. Yes, I think it may as well be to-night as any other time. Still, it's a pretty awful thing for a humble individual like myself to say, especially to a girl one happens to be very much in love with—nothing less than the death-sentence of Humanity. Ah, well, she's got to hear it some time and from some one, and why shouldn't she hear it now and from me?"

When he got back to the house, there was a carriage at the door, and Mr Parmenter was just coming down the avenue, followed by a man with a small portmanteau in his hand.

"Sorry, Mr Lennard," he said, holding out his hand, "I've just had a wire about a company tangle in London that I've got to go and shake out at once, so I'll have to see what you have to show me later on. Still, that needn't trouble anyone. It looks as if it were going to be a splendid night for star-gazing, and I don't want Auriole disappointed, so she can go up to the observatory with you at the proper time and see what there is to be seen. See you later, I have only just about time to get the connection for London."

Lennard was not altogether sorry that this accident had happened. Naturally, the prospect of an hour or so with Auriole alone in his temple of Science was very pleasant, and moreover, he felt that, as the momentous tidings had to be told, he would prefer to tell them to her first. And so it came about.

A little after half-past eleven that night Miss Auriole was looking wonderingly into the eye-piece of the great Reflector, watching a tiny little patch of mist, somewhat brighter towards one end than the other; like a little wisp of white smoke rising from a very faint spark that was apparently floating across an unfathomable sea of darkness.

She seemed to see this through black darkness, and behind it a swarm of stars of all sizes and colours. They[Pg 39] appeared very much more wonderful and glorious and important than the little spray of white smoke, because she hadn't yet the faintest conception of its true import to her and every other human being on earth: but she was very soon to know now.

While she was watching it in breathless silence, in which the clicking of the mechanism which kept the great telescope moving so as to exactly counteract the motion of the machinery of the Universe, sounded like the blows of a sledge-hammer on an anvil, Gilbert Lennard stood beside her, wondering if he should begin to tell her, and what he should say.

At last she turned away from the eye-piece, and looked at him with something like a scared expression in her eyes, and said:

"It's very wonderful, isn't it, that one should be able to see all that just by looking into a little bit of a hole in a telescope? And you tell me that all those great big bright stars around your comet are so far away that if you look at them just with your own eyes you don't even see them—and there they look almost as if you could put out your hand and touch them. It's just a little bit awful, too!" she added, with a little shiver.

"Yes," he said, speaking slowly and even more gravely than she thought the subject warranted, "yes, it is both wonderful and, in a way, awful. Do you know that some of those stars you have seen in there are so far away that the light which you see them by may have left them when Solomon was king in Jerusalem? They may be quite dead and dark now, or reduced into fire-mist by collision with some other star. And then, perhaps, there are others behind them again so far away that their light has not even reached us yet, and may never do while there are human eyes on earth to see it."

"Yes, I know," she said, smiling. "You don't forget that I have been to college—and light travels about a hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a second, doesn't it? But come, Mr Lennard, aren't you what they call stretching the probabilities a little when you[Pg 40] say that the light of some of them will never get here, as far as we're concerned? I always thought we had a few million years of life to look forward to before this old world of ours gets worn out."

"There are other ends possible for this world besides wearing out, Miss Parmenter," he answered, this time almost solemnly. "Other worlds have, as I say, been reduced to fire-mist. Some have been shattered to tiny fragments to make asteroids and meteorites—stars and worlds, in comparison with which this bit of a planet of ours is nothing more than a speck of sand, a mere atom of matter drifting over the wilderness

of immensity. In fact, such a trifle is it in the organism of the Universe, that if some celestial body collided with it—say a comet with a sufficiently solid nucleus—and the heat developed by the impact turned it into a mass of blazing gas, an astronomer on Neptune, one of our own planets, wouldn't even notice the accident, unless he happened to be watching the earth through a powerful telescope at the time."

"And is such an accident, as you call it, possible, Mr Lennard?" she asked, jumping womanlike, by a sort of unconscious intuition, to the very point to which he was so clumsily trying to lead up.

"I thought you spoke rather queerly about this comet of yours at breakfast this morning. I hope there isn't any chance of its getting on to the same track as this terrestrial locomotive of ours. That would be just awful, wouldn't it? Why, what's the matter? You are going to be ill, I know. You had better get down to the house, and go to bed. It's want of sleep, isn't it? You'll be driving yourself mad that way."

A sudden and terrible change had come over him while she was speaking. It was only for the moment, and yet to him it was an eternity. It might, as she said, have been the want of sleep, for insomnia plays strange tricks sometimes with the strongest of intellects.

More probably, it might have been the horror of his secret working on the great love that he had for this girl[Pg 41] who was sitting there alone with him in the silence of that dim room and in the midst of the glories and the mysteries of the Universe.

His eyes had grown fixed and staring, and looked sightlessly at her, and his face shone ghastly pale in the dim light of the solitary shaded lamp. Certainly, one of those mysterious crises which are among the unsolved secrets of psychology had come upon him like some swift access of delirium.

He no longer saw her sitting there by the telescope, calm, gracious, and beautiful. He saw her as, by his pitiless calculations, he must do that day thirteen months to come—with her soft grey eyes, starting, horror-driven from their orbits, staring blank and wide and hideous at the overwhelming hell that would be falling down from heaven upon the devoted earth. He saw her fresh young face withered and horror-lined and old, and the bright-brown hair grown grey with the years that would pass in those few final moments. He saw the sweet red lips which had tempted him so often to wild thoughts parched and black, wide open and gasping vainly for the breath of life in a hot, burnt-out atmosphere.

Then he saw—no, it was only a glimpse; and with that the strange trance-vision ended. What must have come after that would in all certainty have driven him mad there and

then, before his work had even begun; but at that moment, swiftly severing the darkness that was falling over his soul, there came to him an idea, bright, luminous, and lovely as an inspiration from Heaven itself, and with it came back the calm sanity of the sternly-disciplined intellect, prepared to contemplate, not only the destruction of the world he lived in, but even the loss of the woman he loved—the only human being who could make the world beautiful or even tolerable for him.

The vision was blotted out from the sight of his soul; the darkness cleared away from his eyes, and he saw her again as she still was. It had all passed in a few moments and yet in them he had been down into hell—and he had come back to earth, and into her presence.

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Almost by the time she had uttered her last word, he had regained command of his voice, and he began clearly and quietly to answer the question which was still echoing through the chambers of his brain.

"It was only a little passing faintness, thank you; and something else which you will understand when I have done, if you have patience to hear me to the end," he said, looking straight at her for a moment, and then beginning to walk slowly up and down the room past her chair.

"I am going to surprise you, perhaps to frighten you, and very probably to offend you deeply," he began again in a quiet, dry sort of tone, which somehow impressed her against all her convictions that he didn't much care whether or not he did any or all of these things: but there was something else in his tone and manner which held her to her seat, silent and attentive, although she was conscious of a distinct desire to get up and run away.

"Your guess about the comet, or whatever it may prove to be, is quite correct. I don't think it is a new one. From what I have seen of it so far, I have every reason to believe that it is Gambert's comet, which was discovered in 1826, and became visible to the naked eye in the autumn of 1833. It then crossed the orbit of the earth one month after the earth had passed the point of intersection. After that, some force divided it, and in '46 and '52 it reappeared as twin comets constantly separating. Now it would seem that the two masses have come together again: and as they are both larger in bulk and greater in density it would appear that, somewhere in the distant fields of Space, they have united with some other and denser body. The result is, that what is practically a new comet, with a much denser nucleus than any so far seen, is approaching our system. Unless a miracle happens, or there is a practically impossible error in my

calculations, it will cross the orbit of the earth thirteen months from to-day, at the moment that the earth itself arrives at the point of intersection."

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So far Auriole had listened to the stiff scientific phraseology with more interest than alarm; but now she took advantage of a little pause, and said:

"And the consequences, Mr Lennard? I mean the consequences to us as living beings. You may as well tell me everything now that you've gone so far."

"I am going to," he said, stopping for a moment in his walk, "and I am going to tell you something more than that. Granted that what I have said happens, one of two things must follow. If the nucleus of the comet is solid enough to pass through our atmosphere without being dissipated, it will strike the surface with so much force that both it and the earth will probably be transformed into fiery vapour by the conversion of the motion of the two bodies into heat. If not, its contact with the oxygen of the earth's atmosphere will produce an aërial conflagration which, if it does not roast alive every living thing on earth, will convert the oxygen, by combustion, into an irrespirable and poisonous gas, and so kill us by a slower, but no less fatal, process."

"Horrible!" she said, shivering this time. "You speak like a judge pronouncing sentence of death on the whole human race! I suppose there is no possibility of reprieve? Well, go on!"

"Yes," he said, "there is something else. Those are the scientific facts, as far as they go. I am going to tell you the chances now—and something more. There is just one chance—one possible way of averting universal ruin from the earth, and substituting for it nothing more serious than an unparalleled display of celestial fireworks. All that will be necessary is perfect calculation and illimitable expenditure of money."

"Well," she said, "can't you do the calculations, Mr Lennard, and hasn't dad got millions enough? How could he spend them better than in saving the human race from being burnt alive? There isn't anything else, is there?"

"There was something else," he said, stopping in front of her again. She had risen to her feet as she said the [Pg 44] last words, and the two stood facing each other in the dim light, while the mechanism of the telescope kept on clicking away in its heedless, mechanical fashion.

"Yes, there was something else, and I may as well tell you after all; for, even if you never see or speak to me again, it won't stop the work being done now. I could have kept this discovery to myself till it would have been too late to do anything: for no

other telescope without my help would even find the comet for four months to come, and even now there is hardly a day to be lost if the work is to be done in time. And then—well, I suppose I must have gone mad for the time being, for I thought—you will hardly believe me, I suppose—that I could make you the price of the world's safety.

"From that, you will see how much I have loved you, however mad I may have been. Losing you, I would have lost the world with you. If my love lives, I thought, the world shall live: if not, if you die, the world shall die. But just now, when you thought I was taken ill, I had a sort of vision, and I saw you,—yes, you, Auriole as, if my one chance fails, you must infallibly be this night thirteen months hence. I didn't see any of the other millions who would be choking and gasping for breath and writhing in the torture of the universal fire—I only saw you and my own baseness in thinking, even for a moment, that such a bargain would be possible.

"And then," he went on, more slowly, and with a different ring in his voice, "there are the other men."

"Which other men?" she asked, looking up at him with a flush on her cheeks and a gleam in her eyes.

"To be quite frank, and in such a situation as this, I don't see that anything but complete candour is of any use," he replied slowly. "I need hardly tell you that they are John Castellan and the Marquis of Westerham. Castellan, I know, has loved you just as I have done, from the moment we had the good luck to pick you out of the bay at Clifden. Lord Westerham also wants you,[Pg 45] so do I. That, put plainly, brutally, if you like, is the situation. Of your own feelings, of course, I do not pretend to have the remotest idea; but I confess that when this knowledge came to me, the first thought that crossed my mind was the thought of you as another man's wife—and then came the vision of the world in flames. At first I chose the world in flames. I see that I was wrong. That is all."

She had not interrupted even by a gesture, but as she listened, a thousand signs and trifles which alone had meant nothing to her, now seemed to come together and make one clear and definite revelation. This strong, reserved, silent man had all the time loved her so desperately that he was going mad about her—so mad that, as he had said, he had even dreamed of weighing the possession of her single, insignificant self against the safety of the whole world, with all its innumerable millions of people—mostly as good in their way as she was.

Well—it might be that the love of such a man was a thing worth to weigh even against a coronet—not in her eyes, for there was no question of that now, but in her father's.

But that was a matter for future consideration. She drew herself up a little stiffly, and said, in just such a tone as she might have used if what he had just been saying had had no personal interest for her—had, in fact, been about some other girl:

"I think it's about time to be going down to the house, Mr Lennard, isn't it? I am quite sure a night's rest won't do you any harm. No, I'm not offended, and I don't think I'm even frightened yet. It somehow seems too big and too awful a thing to be only frightened at—too much like the Day of Judgment, you know. I am glad you've told me—yes, everything—and I'm glad that what you call your madness is over. You will be able to do your work in saving the world all the better. Only don't tell dad anything except—well—just the scientific and necessary part of it. You know, saving a world is a very much greater matter than winning a woman—at[Pg 46] least it is in one particular woman's eyes—and I've learnt somewhere in mathematics something about the greater including the less. And now, don't you think we had better be going down into the house? It's getting quite late."

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CHAPTER VI

THE NOTE OF WAR

The *Official Gazette*, published November the 25th, 1909, contained the following announcement:—

"Naval Promotions. Lieutenant-Commander Francis Erskine, of H.M. Fishery Cruiser *Cormorant*, to be Captain of H.M. Cruiser *Ithurriel*. Lieutenant Denis Castellan, also of the *Cormorant*, to be First Lieutenant of the *Ithurriel*."

On the evening of the same day, Mr Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, rose amidst the tense silence of a crowded House to make another announcement, which was not altogether unconnected with the notice in the *Gazette*.

"Sir," he said in a low, but vibrant and penetrating voice, which many years before had helped to make his fame as an orator, "it is my painful duty to inform this honourable House that a state of war exists between His Majesty and a Confederation of European countries, including Germany, Russia, France, Spain, Holland and Belgium."

He paused for a moment, and looked round at the hundreds of faces, most of them pale and fixed, that were turned toward the front Treasury Bench. Since Mr Balfour, now Lord Whittinghame, and Leader of the Conservative Party in the House of Lords,

had made his memorable speech on the 12th of October 1899, informing the House of Commons and the world that the Ultimatum of the South African Republic had been rejected, and that the struggle for the mastery of South Africa was inevitable, no such momentous announcement had been made in the House of Commons.

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Mr Chamberlain referred to that bygone crisis in the following terms:

"It will be within the memory of many Members of this House that, almost exactly ten years ago to-day, the British Empire was challenged to fight for the supremacy of South Africa. That challenge was accepted not because there was any desire on the part of the Government or the people of this country to destroy the self-government of what were then the South African Republic and the Orange Free State, but because the Government of her late Majesty, Queen Victoria, knew that the fate of an empire, however great, depends upon its supremacy throughout its dominions.

"To lose one of these, however small and apparently insignificant, is to take a stone out of an arch with the result of inevitable collapse of the whole structure. It is not necessary for me, sir, to make any further allusion to that struggle, save than to say that the policy of Her Majesty's Ministers has been completely justified by the consequences which have followed from it.

"The Transvaal and Orange River Colonies have taken their place among the other self-governing Colonies of the Empire. They are prosperous, contented and loyal, and they will not be the last, I think, to come to the help of the Mother Country in such a crisis as this. But, sir, I do not think that I should be fulfilling the duties of the responsible position which I have the honour to occupy if I did not remind this House, and through this House the citizens of the British Empire, that the present crisis is infinitely more serious than that with which we were faced in 1899. Then we were waging a war in another hemisphere, six thousand miles away. Our unconquered, and, as I hope it will prove, unconquerable Navy, kept the peace of the world, and policed the ocean highways along which it was necessary for our ships to travel. It is true that there were menaces and threats heard in many quarters, but they never passed beyond the region of insult and calumny.

"Our possible enemies then, our actual enemies now,[Pg 49] were in those days willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike. To-day, they have lost their fear in the confidence of combination. To-day the war cloud is not six thousand miles away in the southern hemisphere; it is here, in Europe, and a strip of water, twenty-one miles broad, separates us from the enemy, which, even as I am speaking, may already be

knocking at our gates. Even now, the thunder of the guns may be echoing along the shores of the English Channel.

"This, sir, is a war in which I might venture to say the most ardent member of the Peace Society would not hesitate to engage. For it involves the most sacred duty of humanity, the defence of our country, and our homes.

"We remember, sir, the words which Francis Drake wrote, and which have remained true from his day until now: 'The frontiers of an island country are the coasts of its possible enemies.' We remember also that when the great Napoleon had massed nearly half a million men on the heights above Boulogne, and more than a thousand pontoons were waiting to carry that force to the Kentish shore, there was only one old English frigate cruising up and down the Straits of Dover.

"Sir, there is on the heights of Boulogne a monument, built to commemorate the assembly of the Grand Army, and collectors of coins still cherish those productions of the Paris Mint, which bear the legend, 'Napoleon, Emperor, London, 1804.' But, sir, the statue of Napoleon which stands on the summit of that monument faces not westward but eastward. The Grand Army could have crossed that narrow strip of water. It could, no doubt, have made a landing on British soil, but Napoleon, possibly the greatest military genius the world has ever seen, anticipated Field-Marshal von Moltke, who said that he had found eight ways of getting into England, but he had not found one of getting out again, unless it were possible to pump the North Sea dry, and march the men over. In other words, sir, the British Navy was then, as now, paramount on seas; the oceans were our territories, and the coasts of Europe our frontiers.

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"Again, sir, we must not forget that those were the days of sails, and that these are the days of steam. What was then a matter of days is now only a matter of hours. It is two hundred and forty-two years since the sound of hostile guns was heard in the city of London. To-morrow morning their thunder may awaken us.

"It has been said, sir, that Great Britain plays the game of Diplomacy with her cards face upwards on the table. That, in a sense, is true, and His Majesty's Government propose to play the same game now. The demands which have been presented by the Federation of European Powers, at the head of which stands the German Emperor—demands which, it is hardly necessary for me to say, were instantly rejected—are these: That Gibraltar shall be given back to Spain; that Malta shall be dismantled, and cease to be a British naval base; that the British occupation of Egypt and the Soudan shall cease, and that the Suez Canal and the Trans-Continental Railway from Cairo to

the Cape shall be handed over to the control of an International Board, upon which the British Empire will be graciously allowed one representative.

"It is further demanded that Singapore, the Gate of the East, shall be placed under the control of the same International Board, and that the fortifications of Hong Kong shall be demolished. That, sir, would amount to the surrender of the British Empire, an empire which can only exist as long as the ocean paths between its various portions are kept inviolate.

"Those proposals, sir, in plain English are threats, and His Majesty's Government has returned the only possible answer to them, and that answer is war—war, let us remember, which may within a few weeks, or even days, be brought to our own doors. Whatever our enemies may have said of us it is still true that Britain stands for peace, security, and prosperity. We have used the force of arms to conquer the forces of barbarism and semi-civilisation, but the most hostile of our critics may be safely challenged to point to any country or [Pg 51] province upon which we have imposed the Pax Britannica, which is not now the better for it. It is no idle boast, sir, to say that all the world over, the rule of His Majesty means the rule of peace and prosperity. There are only two causes in which a nation or an empire may justly go to war. One, is to make peace where strife was before, and the other is to defend that which has been won, and made secure by patient toil and endeavour, no less than by blood and suffering. It is that which the challenge of Europe calls upon us now to defend. Our answer to the leagued nations is this: What we have fought for and worked for and won is ours. Take it from us if you can.

"And, sir, I believe that I can say with perfect confidence, that what His Majesty's Government has done His Majesty's subjects will enforce to a man, and, if necessary, countersign the declaration of war in their own blood.

"Let us remember, too, those weighty words of warning which the Laureate of the Empire wrote nearly twenty years ago, of this Imperial inheritance of ours:

"It is not made with the mountains, it is not one with the deep,

Men, not gods, devised it, men, not gods, must keep.

Men not children, servants, or kinsfolk called from afar,

But each man born in the island broke to the matter of war.

'So ye shall bide, sure-guarded, when the restless lightnings wake,

In the boom of the blotting war-cloud, and the pallid nations quake.

So, at the haggard trumpets, instant your soul shall leap,
Forthright, accoutred, accepting—alert from the walls of sleep.
So at the threat ye shall summon—so at the need ye shall send,
Men, not children, or servants, tempered and taught to the end.'

"Sir, it has been said that poets are prophets. The hour of the fulfilment of that prophecy has now come, and I shall be much mistaken in my estimate of the temper of my countrymen and fellow-subjects of His Majesty here in Britain, and in the greater Britains over sea, if, granted the possibility of an armed invasion of [Pg 52] the Motherland, every man, soldier or civilian, who is able to use a rifle, will not, if necessary, use it in the defence of his country and his home."

The Prime Minister sat down amid absolute silence. The tremendous possibilities which he had summed up in his brief speech seemed to have stunned his hearers for the time being. Some members said afterwards that they could hear their own watches ticking. Then Mr John Redmond, the Leader of the Irish Nationalist Party, rose and said, in a slow, and deliberate voice, which contrasted strikingly with his usual style of oratory:

"Sir, this is not a time for what has been with a certain amount of double-meaning described as Parliamentary speeches. Still less is it a time for party or for racial differences. The silence in which this House has received the speech of the Prime Minister is the most eloquent tribute that could be paid to the solemnity of his utterances. But, sir, I have a reason for calling attention to one omission in that speech, an omission which may have been made purposely. The last time that a foeman's foot trod British soil was not eight hundred years ago. It was in December 1796 that French soldiers and sailors landed on the shores of Bantry Bay. Sir, the Ireland of those days was discontented, and, if you please to call it so, disloyal. There are those who say she is so now, but, sir, whatever our domestic difficulties and quarrels may be, and however much I and the party which I have the honour to lead may differ from the home policy of the Right Honourable gentleman who has made this momentous pronouncement, it shall not be said that any of those difficulties or differences will be taken advantage of by any man who is worth the name of Irishman.

"As the Prime Minister has told us, the thunder of the enemy's guns may even now be echoing along our southern coasts. We have, I hope, learnt a little wisdom on both sides of the Irish Sea during the last twenty years, and this time, sir, I think I can promise that, while the guns are talking, there shall be no sound of dispute on

party[Pg 53] matters in this House as far as we are concerned. From this moment, the Irish Nationalist Party, as such, ceases to exist, at any rate until the war's over.

"In 1796, the French fleet carrying the invading force was scattered over the seas by one of the worst storms that ever was known on the west coast of Ireland. As Queen Elizabeth's medal said of the Spanish Armada, 'God blew, and they were scattered.' With God's help, sir, we will scatter these new enemies who threaten us with invasion and conquest. Henceforth, there must be no more Englishmen, Irishmen, Scotchmen, or Welshmen. We are just subjects of the King, and inhabitants of the British Islands; and the man who does not believe that, and act upon his belief, should get out of these islands as soon as he can, for he isn't fit to live in them.

"I remember, sir, a car-driver in Galway, who was taking an English tourist—and he was a politician as well—around the country about that half-ruined city. The English tourist was inquiring into the troubles of Ireland, and he asked him what was the greatest affliction that Ireland suffered from, and when he answered him he described just the sort of Irishman who won't be wanted in Ireland now. He said, 'It's the absentee landlords, your honour. This unfortunate country is absolutely swarming with them.'"

It was an anti-climax such as only an Irishman could have achieved. The tension which had held every nerve of every member on the stretch while the Prime Minister was speaking was broken. The Irish members, almost to a man, jumped to their feet, as Mr Redmond picked up his hat, waved it round his head, and said, in a tone which rang clear and true through the crowded Chamber:

"God save the King!"

And then for the first time in its history, the House of Commons rose and sang the National Anthem.

There was no division that night. The Prime Minister formally put the motion for the voting of such credit as[Pg 54] might be necessary to meet the expenses of the war, and when the Speaker put the question, Ay or Nay, every member stood up bareheaded, and a deep-voiced, thunderous "Ay" told the leagued nations of Europe that Britain had accepted their challenge.

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CHAPTER VII

CAUGHT!

The events of that memorable night formed a most emphatic contradiction to the prophecy in Macaulay's "Armada":

"Such night in England ne'er had been, nor e'er again shall be."

The speeches in the House of Commons and in the House of Peers were being printed even as they were spoken; hundreds of printing-presses were grinding out millions of copies of newspapers. Thousands of newsboys were running along the pavements, or with great bags of new editions slung on their shoulders tearing through the traffic on bicycles; but all the speeches in the two Houses of Parliament, all the reports and hurriedly-written leaders in the papers just represented to the popular mind one word, and that word was war.

It was true that for over a hundred years no year had passed in which the British Empire had not been engaged in a war of some kind, but they were wars waged somewhere in the outlands of the earth. To the stop-at-home man in the street they were rather more matters of latitude and longitude than battle, murder, and sudden death. The South African War, and even the terrible struggle between Russia and Japan, were already memories drifting out of sight in the rush of the headlong current of twentieth-century life.

But this was quite another matter; here was war—not war that was being waged thousands of miles away in another hemisphere or on another side of the globe—but war within twenty-one miles of English land—within[Pg 56] two or three hours, as it were, of every Englishman's front door.

This went home to every man who had a home, or who possessed anything worth living for. It was not now a case of sending soldiers, militia and yeomanry away in transports, and cheering them as they went. Not now, as Kipling too truly had said of the fight for South Africa:

"When your strong men cheered in their millions, while your striplings went to the war."

Now it was the turn of the strong men; the turn of every man who had the strength and courage to fight in defence of all that was nearest and dearest to him.

As yet there was no excitement. At every theatre and every music-hall in London and the great provincial cities and towns, the performances were stopped as soon as the news was received by telegraph. The managers read the news from the stage, the orchestras played the first bar of the National Anthem, the audiences rose to their

feet, and all over the British Islands millions of voices sang "God save the King," and then, obeying some impulse, which seemed to have inspired the whole land, burst into the triumphant psalm of "Rule Britannia."

And when the theatres and music-halls closed, men and women went on their way home quietly discussing the tremendous tidings which had been officially announced. There was no attempt at demonstration, there was very little cheering. It was too serious a matter for that. The men and women of Britain were thinking, not about what they should say, but about what they should do. There was no time for shouting, for tomorrow, perhaps even to-night, the guns would be talking—"The drumming guns which have no doubts."

The House rose at half-past eleven, and at ten minutes to twelve Lieutenant Denis Castellán, came into the smoking-room of the Keppel's Head Hotel, Portsmouth, with a copy of the last edition of the *Southern Evening News* in his hand, and said to Captain Erskine:

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"It's all right, my boy. It's war, and you've got the *Ithuriel*. Your own ship, too. Designer, creator, captain; and I'm your First Luff."

"I think that's about good enough for a bottle of the best, Castellán," said Erskine, in the quiet tone in which the officer of the finest Service in the world always speaks. "Touch the button, will you?"

As Denis Castellán put his finger on the button of the electric bell, a man got up from an armchair on the opposite side of the room, and said, as he came towards the table at which Erskine was sitting:

"You will pardon me, I hope, if I introduce myself without the usual formalities. My name is Gilbert Lennard."

"Then, I take it, you're the man who swam that race with my brother John, in Clifden Bay, when Miss Parmenter was thrown out of her skiff. But he's no brother of mine now. He's sold himself to the Germans, and," he continued, suddenly lowering his voice almost to a whisper, "come up to my room, we'll have the bottle there, and Mr Lennard will join us. Yes, waiter, you can take it up to No. 24, we can't talk here," he went on in a louder tone. "There's a German spy in the room, and by the piper that was supposed to play before Moses, if he's here when I come back, I'll throw him out."

Everyone in the smoking-room looked up. Castellán walked out, looking at a fair-haired, clean-shaven little man, sitting at a table in the right-hand corner of the room

from the door. He also looked up, and glanced vacantly about the room; then as the three went out, he took a sip of the whisky and soda beside him, and looked back on to the paper that he was reading.

"Who's that chap?" asked Erskine, as they went upstairs.

"I'll tell you when we're a bit more to ourselves," replied Castellan; and when they had got into his sitting-room, and the waiter had brought the wine, he locked the door, and said:

"That is Staff-Captain Count Karl von Eckstein, of [Pg 58] the German Imperial Navy, and also of His Majesty, the Kaiser's, Secret Service. He knows a little more than we do about every dockyard and fort on the South Coast, to say nothing of the ships. That's his district, and thanks to the most obliging kindness of the British authorities he has made very good use of it."

"But, surely," exclaimed Lennard, "now that there is a state of war, such a man as that could be arrested."

"Faith," said Denis Castellan, as he filled the glasses. "Law or no law, he will be arrested to-night if he stops here long enough for me to lay hands upon him. Now then, what's the news, Mr Lennard? I'm told that you've just come back from the United States, what's the opinion of things over there?"

Such news that Lennard had was, of course, even more terrible than the news of war and invasion, which was now thrilling through England like an electric shock, and he kept it to himself, thinking quite rightly that the people of England had quite enough to occupy their attention for the immediate present, and so he replied as he raised the glass which Denis had filled for him:

"I am afraid that I have no news except this: that from all I have heard in the States, if it does come to death-grips, the States will be with us. But you see, of course, that I have only just got back, and this thing has been sprung on us so suddenly. In fact, it was only this morning that we got an aerogram from the Lizard as we came up Channel to say that war was almost a certainty, and advising us to get into Southampton as soon as we could."

"Well," said Erskine, taking up his glass, "that's all right, as far as it goes. I've always believed that it's all rot saying that blood isn't thicker than water. It is. Of course, relations quarrel more than other people do, but it's only over domestic matters. Let an outsider start a row, and he very soon sees what happens, and that's what I believe our friends on the other side of the Channel are going to find out if it comes to

extremities. Well, Mr Lennard, I am very pleased that you have introduced yourself to us to-night. Of course, we have[Pg 59] both known you publicly, and therefore we have all the more pleasure in knowing you privately."

"Thanks," replied Lennard, putting his hand into the inside pocket of his coat and taking out an envelope. "But to be quite candid with you, although of course I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, I did not introduce myself to you and Mr Castellan only for personal reasons. I have devoted some attention to the higher chemistry as well as the higher mathematics and astronomy, and I have also had the pleasure of going through the designs of the cruiser which you have invented, and which you are now to command. I have been greatly interested in them, and for that reason I think that this may interest you. I brought it here in the hope of meeting you, as I knew that your ship was lying here."

Erskine opened the envelope, and took out a sheet of notepaper, on which were written just a few chemical formulæ and about forty words.

Castellan, who was watching him keenly, for the first time since they had sailed together through stress and storm under the White Ensign, saw him start. The pupils of his eyes suddenly dilated; his eyelids and eyebrows went up for an instant and came down again, and the rigid calm of the British Naval Officer came back. He put the letter into his hip pocket, buttoned it up, and said, very quietly:

"Thank you, Mr Lennard. You have done me a very great personal service, and your country a greater one still. I shall, of course, make use of this. I am afraid if you had sent it to the Ordnance Department you wouldn't have heard anything about it for the next three months or more; perhaps not till the war was over."

"And that is just why I brought it to you," laughed Lennard. "Well, here's good luck to you and the *Ithuriel*, and all honour, and God save the King!"

"God save the King!" repeated Erskine and Castellan, with that note of seriousness in their tone which you can hear in the voice of no man who has not fought, or is not going to fight; in short, to put his words into action.

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They emptied their glasses, and as they put them down on the table again there came a knock at the door, sharp, almost imperative.

"Come in," said Erskine.

The head waiter threw the door open, and a Naval messenger walked in, saluted, handed Erskine an official envelope, and said:

"Immediately, sir. The steam pinnace is down at the end of the Railway Quay."

Erskine tore open the envelope and read the brief order that it contained, and said:

"Very good. We shall be on board in ten minutes."

The messenger, who was a very useful-looking specimen of the handy man, saluted and left the room. Castellan ran out after him, and they went downstairs together. At the door of the hotel the messenger put two fingers into his mouth, and gave three soft whistles, not unlike the sounds of a boatswain's pipe. In two minutes a dozen bluejackets had appeared from nowhere, and just as a matter of formality were asked to have a drink at the bar. Meanwhile Denis Castellan had gone into the smoking-room, where he found the sandy-haired, blue-eyed man still sitting at his table in the corner, smoking his cigar, and looking over the paper. He touched him on the shoulder and whispered, in perfectly idiomatic German:

"I thought you were a cleverer man than that, Count. Didn't I give you a warning? God's thunder, man. You ought to have been miles away by this time; haven't you a motor that would take you to Southampton in an hour, and put you on the last of the German liners that's leaving? You know it will be a shooting or a hanging matter if you're caught here. Come on now. My name's Castellan, and that should be good enough for you. Come on, now, and I'll see you safe."

The name of Castellan was already well known to every German confidential agent, though it was not known that John Castellan had a brother who was a Lieutenant in the British Navy.

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Captain Count Karl von Eckstein got up, and took his hat down from the pegs, pulled on his gloves, and said deliberately:

"I am very much obliged to you, Mr Castellan, for your warning, which I ought to have taken at first, but I hope there is still time. I will go and telephone for my motor at once."

"Yes, come along and do it," said Castellan, catching him by the arm. "You haven't much time to lose, I can tell you."

They went out of the smoking-room, turned to the left, and went into the hall. Then Castellan snatched his hand away from Eckstein's arm, took him by the shoulders,

and pitched him forward into the middle of the semicircle of bluejackets, who were waiting for him, saying:

"That's your man, boys. Take him down to the pinnace, and put him on board. I'll take the consequences, and I think the owners will, too, when they know the facts."

Von Eckstein tried to shout, but a hand about half the size of a shoulder of mutton came down hard over his mouth and nose. Other hands, with grips like vices, picked him off his feet, and out he went, half stifled, along the yard, and up to the Railway Pier.

"Rather summary proceedings, weren't they, Castellan?"

Denis drew himself up, formally saluted his superior officer, and said, with a curious mixture of fun and seriousness in his voice:

"That man's the most dangerous German spy in the South of England, sir, and all's fair in war and the other thing. We've got him. In half an hour he'd have been aboard a fast yacht he's got here in the harbour, and across to Dieppe, with a portmanteau full of plans and photographs of our forts that would be worth millions in men and money to the people we've got to fight. I can't say it here, but you know why I know."

Captain Erskine nodded, and did his best to conceal an unofficial smile.

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"That's right, Castellan," he said. "I'll take your word for it. Get that chap on board, lads, as quick as you can. We'll follow at once."

Ship's Corporal Sandy M'Grath, the huge Scotsman, whose great fist had stifled Count von Eckstein's attempt to cry out, touched his cap and said: "Awa' wi' him, boys," and out they went at a run. Then Erskine turned to Lennard, and said:

"We can do all this that you've given me on board the *Ithuriel*. It isn't quite regular, but in consideration of this, if you like to take a cruise, and see your own work done, I'll take the responsibility of inviting you, only mind, there will probably be some fighting."

Even as he spoke two deep dull bangs shook the atmosphere and the windows of the hotel shivered in their frames.

"I'll come," said Lennard. "They seem to have begun already."

"Begorra they have," said Denis Castellan, making a dash to the door. "Come on. If that's so, there'll be blood for supper to-night, and the sooner we're aboard the better."

The next moment the three were outside, and sprinting for the end of the Railway Pier for all they were worth.

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CHAPTER VIII

FIRST BLOOD

When they got to the end of the Railway Pier where the pinnacle was lying panting and puffing, a Flag-Lieutenant touched his cap to Erskine, took him by the arm and led him aside. He took an envelope out of his pocket and said, in a low tone:

"Here are your instructions, Erskine. They've jumped on us a bit more quickly than we thought they would, but the Commander-in-Chief trusts to you and your ship to do the needful. The position is this: one division of the Russian, German and Dutch fleets is making a combined attack on Hull and Newcastle. Two other divisions are going for the mouth of the Thames, and the North Sea Squadron is going to look after them. The French North Sea Squadron is making a rush on Dover, and will get very considerably pounded in the process. Two French fleets from Cherbourg and Brest are coming up Channel, and each of them has a screen of torpedo boats and destroyers. The Southern Fleet Reserve is concentrated here and at Portland. The Channel Fleet is outside, and we hope to get it in their rear, so that we'll have them between the ships and the forts. If we do, they'll have just about as hot a time of it as anybody wants.

"As far as we've been able to learn, the French are going to try Togo's tactics at Port Arthur, and rush Portsmouth with the small craft. You'll find that it's your business to look after them. Sink, smash and generally destroy. Go for everything you see. There isn't a craft of ours within twenty miles outside. Good-bye, and good luck to you!"

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"Good-bye!" said Erskine, as they shook hands, "and if we don't come back, give my love to the Lords of the Admiralty and thank them for giving me the chance with the *Ithuriel*. Bye-bye!"

Their hands gripped again and the captain of the *Ithuriel* ran down the steps like a boy going to a picnic.

The pinnacle gave a little squeak from its siren and sped away down the harbour between the two forts, in which the gunners were standing by the new fourteen-inch wire-wound guns, whose long chases were prevented from drooping after continuous

discharge by an ingenious application of the principle of the cantilever bridge, invented by the creator of the *Ithuriel*. In the breech-chamber of each of them was a thousand-pound shell, carrying a bursting charge of five hundred pounds of an explosive which was an improvement on blasting gelatine, and the guns were capable of throwing these to a distance of twelve miles with precision. They were the most formidable weapons either ashore or afloat.

Just outside the harbour the pinnacle swung round to the westward and in a few minutes stopped alongside the *Ithuriel*.

As far as Lennard could see she was neither cruiser nor destroyer nor submarine, but a sort of compound of all three. She did not appear to be a steamer because she had no funnels. She was not exactly a submarine because she had a signal-mast forward and carried five long, ugly-looking guns, three ahead and two astern, of a type that he had never seen before. Forward of the mast there was a conning-tower of oval shape, with the lesser curves fore and aft. The breech-ends of the guns were covered by a long hood of steel, apparently of great thickness, and that was all.

As soon as they got on board Erskine said to Lennard:

"Come into the conning-tower with me. I believe we can make use of this invention of yours at once. I've got a pretty well-fitted laboratory down below and we might have a try. But you must excuse me a moment, I will just run through this."

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He opened the envelope containing his instructions, put them down on the little desk in front of him and then read a note that was enclosed with them.

"By Jove," he said, "they're pretty quick up at headquarters. You'll have to excuse me a minute or two, Mr Lennard. Just stand on that side, will you, please? Close up, we haven't too much room here. Good-bye for the present."

In front of the desk and above the little steering-wheel there was a mahogany board studded with two sets of ivory buttons, disposed in two lines of six each. He touched one of these, and Lennard saw him disappear through the floor of the conning-tower. Within a few moments the portion of the floor upon which he had stood returned to its place, and Lennard said to himself:

"If the rest of her works like that, she ought to be a lovely study in engineering."

While Captain Erskine is communicating his instructions to his second in command, and arranging the details of the coming fight, there will be time to give a brief

description of the craft on board of which Lennard so unexpectedly found himself, and which an invention of his own was destined to make even more formidable than it was.

To put it as briefly as possible, the *Ithuriel* was a combination of destroyer, cruiser, submarine and ram, and she had cost Erskine three years of hard work to think out. She was three hundred feet long, fifty feet broad, and thirty feet from her upper keel to her deck. This was of course an abnormal depth for a vessel of her length, but then the *Ithuriel* was quite an abnormal warship. One-third of her depth consisted of a sinking-chamber, protected by twelve-inch armour, and this chamber could be filled in a few minutes with four thousand tons of water. This is of course the same thing as saying she had two waterlines. The normal cruising line gave her a freeboard of ten feet. Above the sinking-tanks her vitals were protected by ten-inch armour. In short, as regards armour, she was an entire reversal of [Pg 66] the ordinary type of warship, and she had the advantage of being impervious to torpedo attack. Loaded torpedoes had been fired at her and had burst like eggs against a wall, with no more effect than to make her heel over a few degrees to the other side. Submarines had attacked her and got their noses badly bruised in the process. It was, indeed, admitted by the experts of the Admiralty that under water she was impregnable.

Her propelling power consisted of four sets of engines, all well below the waterline. Three of these drove three propellers astern: the fourth drove a suction screw which revolved just underneath the ram. This was a mass of steel weighing fifty tons and curved upwards like the inverted beak of an eagle. Erskine had taken this idea from the Russian ice-breakers which had been designed by the Russian Admiral Makaroff and built at Elswick. The screw was protected by a steel grating of which the forward protecting girder completed the curve of the stem. Aft, there was a similar ram, weighing thirty tons and a like protection to the after-screws.

The driving power was derived from a combination of petrol and pulverised smokeless coal, treated with liquid oxygen, which made combustion practically perfect. There was no boilers or furnaces, only combustion chambers, and this fact made the carrying of the great weight of armour under the waterline possible. The speed of the *Ithuriel* was forty-five knots ahead when all four screws were driving and pulling, and thirty knots astern when they were reversed. Her total capacity was five thousand two hundred tons.

Behind the three forward guns was a dome-shaped conning-tower of nine-inch steel, hardened like the rest of the armour by an improvement on the Harvey process. Above

the conning-tower were two searchlight projectors, both capable of throwing a clear ray to a distance of four miles and controlled from within the conning-tower.

"Well, I am afraid I have kept you waiting, Mr Lennard," said Erskine, as the platform brought him up[Pg 67] again into the conning-tower, in much shorter time than was necessary to make this needful description of what was probably the most formidable craft in the British Navy. "We're off now. I've fitted up half a dozen shells with that diabolical invention of yours. If we run across a battleship or a cruiser, we'll try them. I think our friends the enemy will find them somewhat of a paralysing, and there's nothing like beginning pretty strong."

"Nothing like hitting them hard at first, and I hope that those things of mine will be what I think they are, and unless all my theories are quite wrong, I fancy you'll find them all right."

"They would be the first theories of yours that have gone wrong, Mr Lennard," replied Erskine, "but anyhow, we shall soon see. I have put three of your shells in the forward guns. We'll try them there first, and if they're all right we'll use the other three. I've got the after guns loaded with my own shell, so if we come across anything big, we shall be able to try them against each other. At present, my instructions are to deal with the lighter craft only: destroyers and that sort of thing, you know."

"But don't you fire on them?" said Lennard. "What would happen if they got a torpedo under you?"

"Well," said Erskine, "as a matter of fact I don't think destroyers are worth shooting at. Our guns are meant for bigger game. But it's no good trying to explain things now. You'll see, pretty soon, and you'll learn more in half an hour than I could tell you in four hours."

They were clear of the harbour by this time and running out at about ten knots between the two old North and South Spithead forts on the top of each of which one of the new fourteen-inch thousand-pounders had been mounted on disappearing carriages.

"Now," he continued, "if we're going to find them anywhere, we shall find them here, or hereabouts. My orders are to smash everything that I can get at."

"Fairly comprehensive," said Lennard.

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"Yes, Lennard, and it's an order that I'm going to fill. We may as well quicken up a bit now. You understand, Castellan is looking after the guns, and his sub., Mackenzie is communicating orders to my Chief Engineer, who looks after the speed."

"And the speed?" asked Lennard.

"I'll leave you to judge that when we get to business," said Erskine, putting his forefinger on one of the buttons on the left-hand side of the board as he spoke.

The next moment Lennard felt the rubber-covered floor of the conning-tower jump under his feet. All the coast lights were extinguished but there was a half-moon and he saw the outlines of the shore slip away faster behind them. The eastern heights of the Isle of Wight loomed up like a cloud and dropped away astern.

"Pretty fast, that," he said.

"Only twenty-five knots," replied Erskine, as he gave the steering-wheel a very gentle movement and swung the *Ithuriel's* head round to the eastward. "If these chaps are going to make a rush in the way Togo did at Port Arthur, they've got to do it between Selsey Bill and Nettlestone Point. If they're mad enough to try the other way between Round Tower Point and Hurst Castle, they'll get blown out of the water in very small pieces, so we needn't worry about them there. Our business is to keep them out of this side. Ah, look now, there are two or three of them there. See, ahead of the port bow. We'll tackle these gentlemen first."

Lennard looked out through the narrow semicircular window of six-inch crystal glass running across the front of the conning-tower, which was almost as strong as steel, and saw three little dark, moving spots on the half-moonlit water, about two miles ahead, stealing up in line abreast.

"Those chaps are trying to get in between the Spithead forts," said Erskine. "They're slowed down to almost nothing, waiting for the clouds to come over the moon, and then they'll make a dash for it. At least, they think they will. I don't."

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As he spoke he gave another turn to the steering-wheel and touched another button. The *Ithuriel* leapt forward again and swung about three points to the eastward. In three minutes she was off Black Point, and this movement brought her into a straight line with the three destroyers. He gave the steering-wheel another half turn and her head swung round in a short quarter circle. He put his finger on to the bottom button on the right-hand side of the signal board and said to Lennard:

"Hold tight now, she's going."

Lennard held tight, for he felt the floor jump harder under him this time.

In the dim light he saw the nearest of the destroyers, as it seemed to him, rush towards them sideways. Erskine touched another button. A shudder ran through the fabric of the *Ithuriel* and her bow rose above five feet from the water. A couple of minutes later it hit the destroyer amidships, rolled her over, broke her in two like a log of wood, amidst a roar of crackling guns and a scream of escaping steam, went over her and headed for the next one.

Lennard clenched his teeth and said nothing. He was thinking too hard to say anything just then.

The second destroyer opened fire with her twelve-and six-pounders and dropped a couple of torpedoes as the *Ithuriel* rushed at her. The *Ithuriel* was now travelling at forty knots an hour. The torpedoes at thirty. The combined speed was therefore nearly a hundred statute miles an hour. Erskine saw the two white shapes drop into the water, their courses converging towards him. A half turn of the wheel to port swung the *Ithuriel* out and just cleared them. It was a fairly narrow shave, for one of them grated along her side, but the *Ithuriel* had no angles. The actual result was that one of the torpedoes deflected from its course, hit the other one and both exploded. A mountain of foam-crowned water rose up and the commander of the French destroyer congratulated himself on the annihilation of at least one of the English warships, but the next moment the grey-blue,[Pg 70] almost invisible shape of the *Ithuriel* leapt up out of the semi-darkness, and her long pointed ram struck amidships, cut him down to the waterline, and almost before the two halves of his vessel had sunk the same fate had befallen the third destroyer.

"Well, what do you think of that?" said Erskine, as he touched a couple more buttons and the *Ithuriel* swung round to the eastward again.

"Well," said Lennard, slowly, "of course it's war, and those fellows were coming in to do all the damage they could. But it is just a bit terrible, for all that. It's just seven minutes since you rammed the first boat: you haven't fired a shot and there are three big destroyers and I suppose three hundred and fifty men at the bottom of the sea. Pretty awful, you know."

"My dear sir," replied Erskine, without looking round, "all war is awful and entirely horrible, and naval war is of course the most horrible of all. There is no chance for the defeated: my orders do not even allow me to pick up a man from one of those vessels. On the other hand, one must remember that if one of those destroyers had got in, they

could have let go half a dozen torpedoes apiece among the ships of the Fleet Reserve, and perhaps half a dozen ships and five or six thousand men might have been at the bottom of the Solent by this time, and those torpedoes wouldn't have had any sentiment in them. Hallo, there's another!"

A long, black shape surmounted by a signal-mast and four funnels slid up and out of the darkness into a patch of moonlight lying on the water. Erskine gave a quarter turn to the wheel and touched the two buttons again. The *Ithuriel* swung round and ran down on her prey. The two fifteen-and the six twelve-pounder guns ahead and astern and on the broadside of the destroyer crackled out and a hail of shells came whistling across the water. A few of them struck the *Ithuriel*, glanced off and exploded.

"There," said Erskine, "they've knocked some of our nice new paint off. Now they're going to pay for it."

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"Couldn't you give them a shot back?" said Lennard.

"Not worth it, my dear sir," said Erskine. "We keep our guns for bigger game. We haven't an angle that a shell would hit. You might just as well fire boiled peas at a hippopotamus as those little things at us. Of course a big shell square amidships would hurt us, but then she's so handy that I think I could stop it hitting her straight."

While he was speaking the *Ithuriel* got up to full speed again. Lennard shut his eyes. He felt a slight shock, and then a dull grinding. A crash of guns and a roar of escaping steam, and when he looked out again, the destroyer had disappeared. The next moment a blinding glare of light streamed across the water from the direction of Selsey.

"A big cruiser, or battleship," said Erskine. "French or German. Now we'll see what those shells of yours are made of."

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CHAPTER IX

THE "FLYING FISH" APPEARS

A huge, black shape loomed up into the moonlight. As she came nearer Lennard could see that the vessel carried a big mast forward with a fighting-top, two funnels a little aft of it, and two other funnels a few feet forward of the after mast.

Erskine put his glasses up to his eyes and said:

"That's the *Dupleix*, one of the improved *Desaix* class. Steams twenty-four knots. I suppose she's been shepherding those destroyers that we've just finished with. I hope she hasn't seen what happened. If she thinks that they've got in all right, we've got her. She has a heavy fore and aft and broadside gunfire, two 6.4 guns ahead and astern and amidships, in pairs, and as I suppose they'll be using melinite shells, we shall get fits unless we take them unawares."

"And what does that mean?" asked Lennard.

"Show you in a minute," answered Erskine, touching three or four of the buttons on the right-hand side as he spoke.

Another shudder ran through the frame of the *Ithuriel* and Lennard felt the deck sink under his feet. If he hadn't had as good a head on him as he had, he would have said something, for the *Ithuriel* sank until her decks were almost awash. She jumped forward again now almost invisible, and circled round to the south eastward. A big cloud drifted across the moon and Erskine said:

"Thank God for that! We shall get her now."

Another quarter turn of the wheel brought the *Ithuriel's* [Pg 73] head at right angles to the French cruiser's broadside. He took the transmitter of the telephone down from the hooks and said:

"Are you there, Castellan?"

"Yes. What's that big thing ahead there?"

"It's the *Dupleix*. Ready with your forward guns. I'm going to fire first, then ram. Stand by, centre first, then starboard and port, and keep your eye on them. These are Mr Lennard's shells and we want to see what they'll do. Are you ready?"

"Yes. When you like."

"Half speed, then, and tell Mackenzie to stand by and order full speed when I give the word. We shall want it in a jump."

"Very good, sir. Is that all?"

"Yes, that's all."

Erskine put the receiver back on the hooks.

"That's it. Now we'll try your shells. If they're what I think they are, we'll smash that fellow's top works into scrap-iron, and then we'll go for him."

"I think I see," said Lennard, "that's why you've half submerged her."

"Yes. The *Ithuriel* is designed to deal with both light and heavy craft. With the light ones, as you have seen, she just walked over them. Now, we've got something bigger to tackle, and if everything goes right that ship will be at the bottom of the sea in five minutes."

"Horrible," replied Lennard, "but I suppose it's necessary."

"Absolutely," said Erskine, taking the receiver down from the hooks. "If we didn't do it with them, they'd do it with us. That's war."

Lennard made no reply. He was looking hard at the now rapidly approaching shape of the big French cruiser, and when men are thinking hard, they don't usually say much.

The *Ithuriel* completed her quarter-circle and dead[Pg 74] head on to the *Dupleix*, Erskine said, "Centre gun ready, forward—fire. Port and starboard concentrate—fire."

There was no report—only a low, hissing sound—and then Lennard saw three flashes of bluish-green blaze out over the French cruiser.

"Hit her! I think those shells of yours got home," said Erskine between his clenched teeth. And then he added through the telephone, "Well aimed, Castellan! They all got there. Load up again—three more shots and I'm going to ram—quick now, and full speed ahead when you've fired."

"All ready!" came back over the telephone, "I've told Mackenzie that you'll want it."

"Good man," replied Erskine. "When I touch the button, you do the rest. Now—are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Let her have it—then full speed. Ah," Erskine continued, turning to Lennard, "he's shooting back."

The cruiser burst into a thunderstorm of smoke and flame and shell, but there was nothing to shoot at. Only three feet of freeboard would have been visible even in broad daylight. The signal mast had been telescoped. There was nothing but the deck, the guns and the conning-tower to be seen. The shells screamed through the air a good ten feet over her and incidentally wrecked the Marine Hotel on Selsey Bill.

Erskine pressed the top button on the right-hand side three times. The smokeless, nameless guns spoke again, and again the three flashes of blue-green flame broke out on the Frenchman's decks.

"Good enough," said Erskine, taking the transmitter down from the hooks again. "Now, Mr Lennard, just come for'ard and watch."

Lennard crept up beside him and took the glasses.

"Down guns—full speed ahead—going to ram," said Erskine, quietly, into the telephone.

To his utter astonishment, Lennard saw the three big[Pg 75] guns sink down under the deck and the steel hoods move forward and cover the emplacements. The floor of the conning-tower jumped under his feet again and the huge shape of the French cruiser seemed to rush towards him. There was a roar of artillery, a thunder of 6.4 guns, a crash of bursting shells, a shudder and a shock, and the fifty-ton ram of the *Ithuriel* hit her forward of the conning-tower and went through the two-inch armour belt as a knife would go through a piece of paper. The big cruiser stopped as an animal on land does, struck by a bullet in its vitals, or a whale when the lance is driven home. Half her officers and men were lying about the decks asphyxiated by Lennard's shells. The after barrette swung round, and at the same moment, or perhaps half a minute before, Erskine touched two other buttons in rapid succession. The *Dupleix* lurched down on the starboard side, the two big guns went off and hit the water. Erskine touched another button, and the *Ithuriel* ran back from her victim. A minute later the French cruiser heeled over and sank.

"Good God, how did you do that?" said Lennard, looking round at him with eyes rather more wide open than usual.

"That's the effect of the suction screw," replied Erskine. "I got the idea from the Russian ice-breaker, the *Yermack*. The old idea was just main strength and stupidity, charge the ice and break through if you could. The better idea was to suck the water away from under the ice and go over it—that's what we've done. I rammed that chap, pulled the water away from under him, and, of course, he's gone down."

He gave the wheel a quarter-turn to starboard, took down the transmitter and said: "Full speed again—in two minutes, three quarters and then half."

"But surely," exclaimed Lennard, "you can do something to help those poor fellows. Are you going to leave them all to drown?"

"I have no orders, except to sink and destroy," replied [Pg 76] Erskine between his teeth. "You must remember that this is a war of one country against a continent, and of one fleet against four. Ah, there's another! A third-class cruiser—I think I know her, she's the old *Leger*—they must have thought they had an easy job of it if they sent her here. Low free board, not worth shooting at. We'll go over her. No armour—what idiots they are to put a thing like that into the fighting line!"

He took the transmitter down and said:

"Stand by there, Castellan! Get your pumps to work, and I shall want full speed ahead—I'm going to run that old croak down—hurry up."

He put the transmitter back on the hooks and presently Lennard saw the bows of the *Ithuriel* rise quickly out of the water. The doomed vessel in front of them was a long, low-lying French torpedo-catcher, with one big funnel between two signal-masts, hopelessly out of date, and evidently intended only to go in and take her share of the spoils. Erskine switched off the searchlight, called for full speed ahead and then with clenched teeth and set eyes, he sent the *Ithuriel* flying at her victim.

Within five minutes it was all over. The fifty-ton ram rose over the *Leger's* side, crushed it down into the water, ground its way through her, cut her in half and went on.

"That ship ought to have been on the scrap-heap ten years ago," said Erskine as he signalled for half-speed and swung the *Ithuriel* round to the westward.

"She's got a scrap-heap all to herself now, I suppose," said Lennard, with a bit of a check in his voice. "I've no doubt, as you say, this sort of thing may be necessary, but my personal opinion of it is that it's damnable."

"Exactly my opinion too," said Erskine, "but it has to be done."

The next instant, Lennard heard a sound such as he had never heard before. It was a smothered rumble [Pg 77] which seemed to come out of the depths, then there came a shock which flung him off his feet, and shot him against the opposite wall of the conning-tower. The *Ithuriel* heeled over to port, a huge volume of water rose on her starboard side and burst into a torrent over her decks, then she righted.

Erskine, holding on hard to the iron table to which the signalling board was bolted, saved himself from a fall.

"I hope you're not hurt, Mr Lennard," said he, looking round, "that was a submarine. Let a torpedo go at us, I suppose, and didn't know they were hitting twelve-inch armour."

"It's all right," said Lennard, picking himself up. "Only a bruise or two; nothing broken. It seems to me that this new naval warfare of yours is going to get a bit exciting."

"Yes," said Erskine, "I think it is. Halloo, Great Cæsar! That must be that infernal invention of Castellan's brother's; the thing he sold to the Germans—the sweep!"

As he spoke a grey shape leapt up out of the water and began to circle over the *Ithuriel*. He snatched the transmitter from the hooks, and said, in quick, clear tones:

"Castellan—sink—quick, quick as you can."

The pumps of the *Ithuriel* worked furiously the next moment. Lennard held his breath as he saw the waves rise up over the decks.

"Full speed ahead again, and dive," said Erskine into the transmitter. "Hold tight, Lennard."

The floor of the conning-tower took an angle of about sixty degrees, and Lennard gripped the holdfasts, of which there were two on each wall of the tower. He heard a rush of overwhelming waters—then came darkness. The *Ithuriel* rushed forward at her highest speed. Then something hit the sea, and a quick succession of shocks sent a shudder through the vessel.

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"I thought so," said Erskine. "That's John Castellan's combined airship and submarine right enough, and that was an aerial torpedo. If it had hit us when we were above water, we should have been where those French chaps are now. You're quite right, this sort of naval warfare is getting rather exciting."

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CHAPTER X

FIRST BLOWS FROM THE AIR

The *Flying Fish*, the prototype of the extraordinary craft which played such a terrible part in the invasion of England, was a magnified reproduction, with improvements which suggested themselves during construction, of the model whose performances had so astonished the Kaiser at Potsdam. She was shaped exactly like her namesake of the deep, upon which, indeed, her inventor had modelled her. She was one hundred

and fifty feet long and twenty feet broad by twenty-five feet deep in her widest part, which, as she was fish-shaped, was considerably forward of her centre.

She was built of a newly-discovered compound, something like papier-maché, as hard and rigid as steel, with only about one-tenth the weight. Her engines were of the simplest description in spite of the fact that they developed enormous power. They consisted merely of cylinders into which, by an automatic mechanism, two drops of liquid were brought every second. These liquids when joined produced a gas of enormously expansive power, more than a hundred times that of steam, which actuated the pistons. There were sixteen of these cylinders, and the pistons all connected with a small engine invented by Castellan, which he called an accelerator. By means of this device he could regulate the speed of the propellers which drove the vessel under water and in the air from sixty up to two thousand revolutions a minute.

The *Flying Fish* was driven by nine propellers, three[Pg 80] of these, four-bladed and six feet diameter, revolved a little forward amidships on either side under what might be called the fins. These fins collapsed close against the sides of the vessel when under water and expanded to a spread of twenty feet when she took the air. They worked on a pivot and could be inclined either way from the horizontal to an angle of thirty degrees. Midway between the end of these and the stern was a smaller pair with one driving screw. The eighth screw was an ordinary propeller at the stern, but the outside portion of the shaft worked on a ball and socket joint so that it could be used for both steering and driving purposes. It was in fact the tail of the *Flying Fish*. Steering in the air was effected by means of a vertical fin placed right aft.

She was submerged as the *Ithuriel* was, by pumping water into the lower part of her hull. When these chambers were empty she floated like a cork. The difference between swimming and flying was merely the difference between the revolutions of the screws and the inclination of the fins. A thousand raised her from the water: twelve hundred gave her twenty-five or thirty miles an hour through the air: fifteen hundred gave her fifty, and two thousand gave her eighty to a hundred, according to the state of the atmosphere.

Her armament consisted of four torpedo tubes which swung at any angle from the horizontal to the vertical and so were capable of use both under water and in the air. They discharged a small, insignificant-looking torpedo containing twenty pounds of an explosive, discovered almost accidentally by Castellan and known only to himself, the German Emperor, the Chancellor, and the Commander-in-Chief. It was this which he had used in tiny quantities in the experiment at Potsdam. Its action was so terrific that

it did not rend or crack metal or stone which it struck. It overcame the chemical forces by which the substance was held together and reduced them to gas and powder.

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And now, after this somewhat formal but necessary description of the most destructive fighting-machine ever created we can proceed with the story.

There were twenty *Flying Fishes* attached to the Allied Forces, all of them under the command of German engineers, with the exception of the original *Flying Fish*. Two of these were attached to the three squadrons which were attacking Hull, Newcastle and Dover: three had been detailed for the attack on Portsmouth: two more to Plymouth, two to Bristol and Liverpool respectively, on which combined cruiser and torpedo attacks were to be made, and two supported by a small swift cruiser and torpedo flotilla for an assault on Cardiff, in order if possible to terrorise that city into submission and so obtain what may be called the life-blood of a modern navy. The rest, in case of accidents to any of these, were reserved for the final attack on London.

When the *Ithurriel* disappeared and his torpedo struck a piece of floating wreckage and exploded with a terrific shock, John Castellan, standing in the conning-tower directing the movements of the *Flying Fish*, naturally concluded that he had destroyed a British submarine scout. He knew of the existence, but nothing of the real powers of the *Ithurriel*. The only foreigner who knew that was Captain Count Karl von Eckstein, and he was locked safely in a cabin on board her.

He had been searching the under-waters between Nettlestone Point and Hayling Island for hours on the look-out for British submarines and torpedo scouts, and had found nothing, therefore he was ignorant of the destruction which the *Ithurriel* had already wrought, and as, of course, he had heard no firing under the water, he believed that the three destroyers supported by the *Dupleix* and *Leger* had succeeded in slipping through the entrance to Spithead.

He knew that a second flotilla of six destroyers with three swift second-class cruisers were following in to complete the work, which by this time should have begun,[Pg 82] and that after them came the main French squadron, consisting of six first-class battleships with a screen of ten first and five second-class cruisers, the work of which would be to maintain a blockade against any relieving force, after the submarines and destroyers had sunk and crippled the ships of the Fleet Reserve and cut the connections of the contact mines.

He knew also that the *See Adler*, which was *Flying Fish II.*, was waiting about the Needles to attack Hurst Castle and the forts on the Isle of Wight side, preparatory to a

rush of two battleships and three cruisers through the narrows, while another was lurking under Hayling Island ready to take the air and rain destruction on the forts of Portsmouth before the fight became general.

What thoroughly surprised him, however, was the absolute silence and inaction of the British. True, two shots had been fired, but whether from fort or warship, and with what intent, he hadn't the remotest notion. The hour arranged upon for the general assault was fast approaching. The British must be aware that an attack would be made, and yet there was not so much as a second-class torpedo boat to be seen outside Spithead. This puzzled him, so he decided to go and investigate for himself. He took up a speaking-tube and said to his Lieutenant, M'Carthy—one of too many renegade Irishmen who in the terrible times that were to come joined their country's enemies as Lynch and his traitors had done in the Boer War:

"I don't quite make it out, M'Carthy. We'll go down and get under—it's about time the fun began—and I haven't heard a shot fired or seen an English ship except that submarine we smashed. My orders are for twelve o'clock, and I'm going to obey them."

There was one more device on board the *Flying Fish* which should be described in order that her wonderful manœuvering under water may be understood. Just in front of the steering-wheel in the conning-tower was a square glass box measuring a foot in the side, and in the[Pg 83] centre of this, attached to top and bottom by slender films of asbestos, was a needle ten inches long, so hung that it could turn and dip in any direction. The forward half of this needle was made of highly magnetised steel, and the other of aluminium which exactly counter-balanced it. The glass case was completely insulated and therefore the extremely sensitive needle was unaffected by any of the steel parts used in the construction of the vessel. But let any other vessel, save of course a wooden ship, come within a thousand yards, the needle began to tremble and sway, and the nearer the *Flying Fish* approached it, the steadier it became and the more directly it pointed towards the object. If the vessel was on the surface, it of course pointed upward: if it was a submarine, it pointed either level or downwards with unerring precision. This needle was, in fact, the eyes of the *Flying Fish* when she was under water.

Castellan swung her head round to the north-west and dropped gently on to the water about midway between Selsey Bill and the Isle of Wight. Then the *Flying Fish* folded her wings and sank to a depth of twenty feet. Then, at a speed of ten knots, she worked her way in a zigzag course back and forth across the narrowing waters, up the channel towards Portsmouth.

To his surprise, the needle remained steady, showing that there was neither submarine nor torpedo boat near. This meant, as far as he could see, that the main approach to the greatest naval fortress in England had been left unguarded, a fact so extraordinary as to be exceedingly suspicious. His water-ray apparatus, a recent development of the X-rays which enabled him to see under water for a distance of fifty yards, had detected no contact mines, and yet Spithead ought to be enstrewn with them, just as it ought to have been swarming with submarines and destroyers. There must be some deep meaning to such apparently incomprehensible neglect, but what was it?

If his brother Denis had not happened to recognise [Pg 84] Captain Count Karl von Eckstein and hailed him so unceremoniously on board the *Ithuriel*, and if his portmanteau full of papers had been got on board a French warship, instead of being left for the inspection of the British Admiralty, that reason would have been made very plain to him.

Completely mystified, and fearing that either he was going into some trap or that some unforeseen disaster had happened, he swung round, ran out past the forts and rose into the air again. When he had reached the height of about a thousand feet, three rockets rose into the air and burst into three showers of stars, one red, one white, and the other blue. It was the Tricolour in the air, and the signal from the French Admiral to commence the attack. Castellan's orders were to cripple or sink the battleships of the Reserve Fleet which was moored in two divisions in Spithead and the Solent.

The Spithead Division lay in column of line abreast between Gilkicker Point and Ryde Pier. It consisted of the *Formidable*, *Irresistible*, *Implacable*, *Majestic* and *Magnificent*, and the cruisers *Hogue*, *Sutlej*, *Ariadne*, *Argonaut*, *Diadem* and *Hawke*. The western Division consisted of the battleships *Prince George*, *Victoria*, *Jupiter*, *Mars* and *Hannibal*, and the cruisers *Amphitrite*, *Spartiate*, *Andromeda*, *Europa*, *Niobe*, *Blenheim* and *Blake*.

It had of course been perfectly easy for Castellan to mark the position of the two squadrons from the air, and he knew that though they were comparatively old vessels they were quite powerful enough, with the assistance of the shore batteries, to hold even Admiral Durenne's splendid fleet until the Channel Fleet, which for the time being seemed to have vanished from the face of the waters, came up and took the French in the rear.

In such a case, the finest fleet of France would be like a nut in a vice, and that was the reason for the remorseless orders which had been given to him, orders which he was

prepared to carry out to the letter, in spite of the [Pg 85] appalling loss of life which they entailed; for, as the *Flying Fish* sank down into the water, he thought of that swimming race in Clifden Bay and of the girl whose marriage with himself, willing or unwilling, was to be one of the terms of peace when the British Navy lay shattered round her shores, and the millions of the League of Nations had trampled the land forces of Britain into submission.

Just as she touched the water a brilliant flash of pink flame leapt up from the eastern fort on the Hillsea Lines, followed by a sharp crash which shook the atmosphere. A thin ray of light fell from the clouds, then came a quick succession of flashes moving in the direction of the great fort on Portsdown, until two rose in quick succession from Portsdown itself, and almost at the same moment another from Hurst Castle, and yet another from the direction of Fort Victoria.

"God bless my soul, what's that?" exclaimed the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir Compton Domville, who had just completed his final inspection of the defences of Portsmouth Harbour, and was standing on the roof of Southsea Castle, taking a general look round before going back to headquarters. "Here, Markham," he said, turning to the Commander of the Fort, "just telephone up to Portsdown at once and ask them what they're up to."

An orderly instantly dived below to the telephone room. The Fort Commander took Sir Compton aside and said in a low voice:

"I am afraid, sir, that the forts are being attacked from the air."

"What's that?" replied Sir Compton, with a start. "Do you mean that infernal thing that Erskine and Castellan and the watch of the *Cormorant* saw in the North Sea?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "There is no reason why the enemy should not possess a whole fleet of these craft by this time, and naturally they would act in concert with [Pg 86] the attack of the French Fleet. I've heard rumours of a terrible new explosive they've got, too, which shatters steel into splinters and poisons everyone within a dozen yards of it. If that's true and they're dropping it on the forts, they'll probably smash the guns as well. For heaven's sake, sir, let me beg of you to go back at once to headquarters! It will probably be our turn next. You will be safe there, for they're not likely to waste their shells on Government buildings."

"Well, I suppose I shall be of more use there," growled Sir Compton.

At this moment the orderly returned, looking rather scared. He saluted and said:

"If you please, sir, they've tried Portsdown and all the Hillsea forts and can't get an answer."

"Good heavens!" said the Commander-in-Chief, "that looks almost as if you were right, Markham. Signal to Squadron A to up-anchor at once and telephone to Squadron B to do the same. Telephone Gilkicker to turn all searchlights on. Now I must be off and have a talk with General Hamilton."

He ran down to his pinnacle and went away full speed for the harbour, but before he reached the pier another flash burst out from the direction of Fort Gilkicker, followed by a terrific roar. To those standing on the top of Southsea Castle the fort seemed turned into a volcano, spouting flame and clouds of smoke, in the midst of which they could see for an instant whirling shapes, most of which would probably be the remains of the gallant defenders, hurled into eternity before they had a chance of firing a shot at the invaders. The huge guns roared for the first and last time in the war, and the great projectiles plunged aimlessly among the ships of the squadron, carrying wreck and ruin along the line.

"Our turn now, I suppose," said the Fort Commander, quietly, as he looked up and by a chance gleam of moonlight through the breaking clouds saw a dim grey, winged shape drift across the harbour entrance.

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They were the last words he ever spoke, for the next moment the roof crumbled under his feet, and his body was scattered in fragments through the air, and in that moment Portsmouth had ceased to be a fortified stronghold.

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CHAPTER XI

THE TRAGEDY OF THE TWO SQUADRONS

It takes a good deal to shake the nerves of British naval officer or seaman, but those on board the ships of the Spithead Squadron would have been something more than human if they could have viewed the appalling happenings of the last few terrible minutes with their accustomed coolness. They were ready to fight anything on the face of the waters or under them, but an enemy in the air who could rain down shells, a couple of which were sufficient to destroy the most powerful forts in the world, and who could not be hit back, was another matter. It was a bitter truth, but there was no

denying it. The events of the last ten years had clearly proved that a day must come when the flying machine would be used as an engine of war, and now that day had come—and the fighting flying machine was in the hands of the enemy.

The anchors were torn from the ground, signals were flashed from the flagship, the *Prince George*, and within four minutes the squadron was under way to the south-eastward. After what had happened the Admiral in command promptly and rightly decided that to keep his ships cramped up in the narrow waters was only to court further disaster. His place was now the open sea, and a general fleet action offered the only means of preventing an occupation of almost defenceless Portsmouth, and the landing of hostile troops in the very heart of England's southern defences.

Fifteen first-class torpedo boats and ten destroyers ran out from the Hampshire and Isle of Wight coasts, ran[Pg 89] through the ships, and spread themselves out in a wide curve ahead, and at the same time twenty submarines crept out from the harbour and set to work laying contact mines in the appointed fields across the harbour mouth and from shore to shore behind the Spithead forts.

But the squadron had not steamed a mile beyond the forts before a series of frightful disasters overtook them. First, a huge column of water rose under the stern of the *Jupiter*. The great ship stopped and shuddered like a stricken animal, and began to settle down stern first. Instantly the *Mars* and *Victorious* which were on either side of her slowed down, their boats splashed into the water and set to work to rescue those who managed to get clear of the sinking ship.

But even while this was being done, the *Banshee*, the *Flying Fish* which had destroyed the forts, had taken up her position a thousand feet above the doomed squadron. A shell dropped upon the deck of the *Spartiate*, almost amidships. The pink flash blazed out between her two midship funnels. They crumpled up as if they had been made of brown paper. The six-inch armoured casemates on either side seemed to crumble away. The four-inch steel deck gaped and split as though it had been made of matchboard. Then the *Banshee* dropped to within five hundred feet and let go another shell almost in the same place. A terrific explosion burst out in the very vitals of the stricken ship, and the great cruiser seemed to split asunder. A vast volume of mingled smoke and flame and steam rose up, and when it rolled away, the *Spartiate* had almost vanished.

But that was the last act of destruction that the *Banshee* was destined to accomplish. That moment the moon sailed out into a patch of clear sky. Every eye in the squadron was turned upward. There was the airship plainly visible. Her captain instantly saw his danger and quickened up his engines, but it was too late. He was followed by a

hurricane of shells from the three-pound[Pg 90] quick-firers in the upper tops of the battleships. Then came an explosion in mid-air which seemed to shake the very firmament itself. She had fifty or sixty of the terrible shells which had wrought so much havoc on board, and as a dozen shells pierced her hull and burst, they too exploded with the shock. A vast blaze of pink flame shone out.

"Talk about going to glory in a blue flame," said Seaman Gunner Tompkins, who had aimed one of the guns in the fore-top of the *Hannibal*, and of course, like everybody else, piously believed that his was one of the shells that got there. "That chap's gone to t'other place in a red'un. War's war, but I don't hold with that sort of fighting; it doesn't give a man a chance. Torpedoes is bad enough, Gawd knows—"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a shock and a shudder ran through the mighty fabric of the battleship. The water rose in a foam-clad mountain under her starboard quarter. She heeled over to port, and then rolled back to starboard and began to settle.

"Torpedoed, by George! What did I tell you?" gasped Gunner Tompkins. The next moment a lurch of the ship hurled him and his mates far out into the water.

Even as his ship went down, Captain Barclay managed to signal to the other ships, "Don't wait—get out." And when her shattered hull rested on the bottom, the gallant signal was still flying from the upper yard.

It was obvious that the one chance of escaping their terrible unseen foe was to obey the signal. By this time crowds of small craft of every description had come off from both shores to the rescue of those who had gone down with the ships, so the Admiral did what was the most practical thing to do under the circumstances—he dropped his own boats, each with a crew, and ordered the *Victorious* and *Mars* to do the same, and then gave[Pg 91] the signal for full speed ahead. The great engines panted and throbbed, and the squadron moved forward with ever-increasing speed, the cruisers and destroyers, according to signal, running ahead of the battleships; but before full speed was reached, the *Mars* was struck under the stern, stopped, shuddered, and went down with a mighty lurch.

This last misfortune convinced the Admiral that the destruction of his battleships could not be the work of any ordinary submarine, for at the time the *Mars* was struck she was steaming fifteen knots and the underwater speed of the best submarine was only twelve, saving only the *Ithuriel*, and she did not use torpedoes. The two remaining battleships had now reached seventeen knots, which was their best speed. The cruisers and their consorts were already disappearing round Foreland.

There was some hope that they might escape the assaults of the mysterious and invisible enemy now that the airship had been destroyed, but unless the submarine had exhausted her torpedoes, or some accident had happened to her, there was very little for the *Prince George* and the *Victorious*, and so it turned out. Castellan's strict orders had been to confine his attentions to the battleships, and he obeyed his pitiless instructions to the letter. First the *Victorious* and then the flagship, smitten by an unseen and irresistible bolt in their weakest parts, succumbed to the great gaping wounds torn in the thin under-plating, reeled once or twice to and fro like leviathans struggling for life, and went down. And so for the time being, at least, ended the awful work of the *Flying Fish*.

Leaving the cruisers and smaller craft to continue their dash for the open Channel, we must now look westward.

When Vice-Admiral Codrington, who was flying his flag on the *Irresistible*, saw the flashes along the Hillsea ridge and Portsdown height and heard the roar of the [Pg 92] explosions, he at once up-anchor and got his squadron under way. Then came the appallingly swift destruction of Hurst Castle and Fort Victoria. Like all good sailors, he was a man of instant decision. His orders were to guard the entrance to the Solent, and the destruction of the forts made it impossible for him to do this inside. How that destruction had been wrought, he had of course no idea, beyond a guess that the destroying agent must have come from the air, since it could not have come from sea or land without provoking a very vigorous reply from the forts. Instead of that they had simply blown up without firing a shot.

He therefore decided to steam out through the narrow channel between Hurst Castle and the Isle of Wight as quickly as possible.

It was a risky thing to do at night and at full speed, for the Channel and the entrance to it was strewn with contact mines, but one of the principal businesses of the British Navy is to take risks where necessary, so he put his own ship at the head of the long line, and with a mine chart in front of him went ahead at eighteen knots.

When Captain Adolph Frenkel, who was in command of the *See Adler*, saw the column of warships twining and wriggling its way out through the Channel, each ship handled with consummate skill and keeping its position exactly, he could not repress an admiring "Ach!" Still it was not his business to admire, but destroy.

He rose to a thousand feet, swung round to the north-eastward until the whole line had passed beneath him, and then quickened up and dropped to seven hundred feet, swung round again and crept up over the *Hogue*, which was bringing up the rear. When

he was just over her fore part, he let go a shell, which dropped between the conning-tower and the forward barbette.

The navigating bridge vanished; the twelve-inch armoured conning-tower cracked like an eggshell; the barbette collapsed like the crust of a loaf, and the big[Pg 93] 9.2 gun lurched backwards and lay with its muzzle staring helplessly at the clouds. The deck crumpled up as though it had been burnt parchment, and the ammunition for the 9.2 and the forward six-inch guns which had been placed ready for action exploded, blowing the whole of the upper forepart of the vessel into scrap-iron.

But an even worse disaster than this was to befall the great twelve-thousand-ton cruiser. Her steering gear was, of course, shattered. Uncontrolled and uncontrollable, she swung swiftly round to starboard, struck a mine, and inside three minutes she was lying on the mud.

Almost at the moment of the first explosion, the beams of twenty searchlights leapt up into the air, and in the midst of the broad white glare hundreds of keen angry eyes saw a winged shape darting up into the air, heading southward as though it would cross the Isle of Wight over Yarmouth. Almost simultaneously, every gun from the tops of the battleships spoke, and a storm of shells rent the air.

But Captain Frenkel had already seen his mistake. The *See Adler's* wings were inclined at an angle of twenty degrees, her propellers were revolving at their utmost velocity, and at a speed of nearly a hundred miles an hour, she took the Isle of Wight in a leap. She slowed down rapidly over Freshwater Bay. Captain Frenkel took a careful observation of the position and course of the squadron, dropped into the water, folded his wings and crept round the Needles with his conning-tower just awash, and lay in wait for his prey about two miles off the Needles.

The huge black hull of the *Irresistible* was only a couple of hundred yards away. He instantly sank and turned on his water-ray. As the flagship passed within forty yards he let go his first torpedo. It hit her sternpost, smashed her rudder and propellers, and tore a great hole in her run. The steel monster stopped, shuddered, and[Pg 94] slid sternward with her mighty ram high in the air into the depths of the smooth grey sea.

There is no need to repeat the ghastly story which has already been told—the story of the swift and pitiless destruction of these miracles of human skill, huge in size and mighty in armament and manned by the bravest men on land or sea, by a foe puny in size but of awful potentiality. It was a fight, if fight it could be called, between the visible and the invisible, and it could only have one end. Battleship after battleship received her death-wound, and went down without being able to fire a shot in

defence, until the *Magnificent*, smitten in the side under her boilers, blew up and sank amidst a cloud of steam and foam, and the Western Squadron had met the fate of the Eastern.

While this tragedy was being enacted, the cruisers scattered in all directions and headed for the open at their highest speed. It was a bitter necessity, and it was bitterly felt by every man and boy on board them; but the captains knew that to stop and attempt the rescue of even some of their comrades meant losing the ships which it was their duty at all costs to preserve, and so they took the only possible chance to escape from this terrible unseen foe which struck out of the silence and the darkness with such awful effect.

But despite the tremendous disaster which had befallen the Reserve Fleet, the work of death and destruction was by no means all on one side. When he sank the *Leger*, Erskine had done a great deal more damage to the enemy than he knew, for she had been sent not for fighting purposes, but as a *dépôt* ship for the *Flying Fishes*, from which they could renew their torpedoes and the gas cylinders which furnished their driving power. Being a light craft, she was to take up an agreed position off Bracklesham Bay three miles to the north-west of Selsey Bill, the loneliest and shallowest part of the coast, with all lights out, ready to supply all that was wanted or to make any repairs that might be necessary. Her sinking,[Pg 95] therefore, deprived John Castellan's craft of their base.

After the *Dupleix* had gone down, the *Ithuriel* rose again, and Erskine said to Lennard:

"There must be more of them outside, they wouldn't be such fools as to rush Portsmouth with three destroyers and a couple of cruisers. We'd better go on and reconnoitre."

The *Ithuriel* ran out south-eastward at twenty knots in a series of broad curves, and she was just beginning to make the fourth of these when six black shapes crowned with wreaths of smoke loomed up out of the semi-darkness.

"Thought so—destroyers," said Erskine. "Yes, and look there, behind them—cruiser supports, three of them—these are for the second rush. Coming up pretty fast, too; they'll be there in half an hour. We shall have something to say about that. Hold on, Lennard."

"Same tactics, I suppose," said Lennard.

"Yes," replied Erskine, taking down the receiver. "Are you there, Castellan? All right. We've six more destroyers to get rid of. Full speed ahead, as soon as you like—guns all ready, I suppose? Good—go ahead."

The *Ithuriel* was now about two miles to the westward and about a mile in front of the line of destroyers, which just gave her room to get up full speed. As she gathered way, Lennard saw the nose of the great ram rise slowly out of the water. The destroyer's guns crackled, but it is not easy to hit a low-lying object moving at fifty miles an hour, end on, when you are yourself moving nearly twenty-five. Just the same thing happened as before. The point of the ram passed over the destroyer's bows, crumpled them up and crushed them down, and the *Ithuriel* rushed on over the sinking wreck, swerved a quarter turn, and bore down on her next victim. It was all over in ten minutes. The *Ithuriel* rushed hither and thither among the destroyers like some leviathan of the deep. A crash, a swift grinding scrape, and a mass of [Pg 96] crumpled steel was dropping to the bottom of the Channel.

While the attack on the destroyers was taking place, the cruisers were only half a mile away. Their captains had found themselves in curiously difficult positions. The destroyers were so close together, and the movements of this strange monster which was running them down so rapidly, that if they opened fire they were more likely to hit their own vessels than it, but when the last had gone down, every available gun spoke, and a hurricane of shells, large and small, ploughed up the sea where the *Ithuriel* had been. After the first volley, the captains looked at their officers and the officers looked at the captains, and said things which strained the capabilities of the French language to the utmost. The monster had vanished.

The fact was that Erskine had foreseen that storm of shell, and the pumps had been working hard while the ramming was going on. The result was that the *Ithuriel* sank almost as soon as her last victim, and in thirty seconds there was nothing to shoot at.

"I shall ram those chaps from underneath," he said. "They've too many guns for a shooting match."

He reduced the speed to thirty knots, rose for a moment till the conning-tower was just above the water, took his bearings, sank, called for full speed, and in four minutes the ram crashed into the *Alger's* stern, carried away her sternpost and rudder, and smashed her propellers. The *Ithuriel* passed on as if she had hit a log of wood and knocked it aside. A slight turn of the steering-wheel, and within four minutes the ram was buried in the vitals of the *Suchet*. Then the *Ithuriel* reversed engines, the fore screw sucked the water away, and the cruiser slid off the ram as she might have done off a rock. As she went down, the *Ithuriel* rose to the surface. The third cruiser,

the *Davout*, was half a mile away. She had changed her course and was evidently making frantic efforts to get back to sea.

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"Going to warn the fleet, are you, my friend?" said Erskine, between his teeth. "Not if I know it!"

He asked for full speed again and the terror-stricken Frenchmen saw the monster, just visible on the surface of the water, flying towards them in the midst of a cloud of spray. A sheep might as well have tried to escape from a tiger. Many of the crew flung themselves overboard in the madness of despair. There was a shock and a grinding crash, and the ram bored its way twenty feet into the unarmoured quarter. Then the *Ithuriel's* screws dragged her free, and the *Davout* followed her sisters to the bottom of the Channel.

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CHAPTER XII

HOW LONDON TOOK THE NEWS

The awaking of England on the morning of the twenty-sixth of November was like the awaking of a man from a nightmare. Everyone who slept had gone to sleep with one word humming in his brain—war—and war at home, that was the terrible thought which robbed so many millions of eyes of sleep. But even those who slept did not do so for long.

At a quarter to one a sub-editor ran into the room of the chief News Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, without even the ceremony of a knock.

"What on earth's the matter, Johnson?" exclaimed the editor. "Seen a ghost?"

"Worse than that, sir. Read this!" said the sub-editor, in a shaking voice, throwing the slip down on the desk.

"My God, what's this?" said the editor, as he ran his eye along the slip. "'Portsmouth bombarded from the air. Hillsea, Portsmouth, Gilkicker and Southsea Castle destroyed. Practically defenceless. Fleet Reserve Squadrons sailing.'"

The words were hardly out of his mouth before another man came running in with a slip. "'*Jupiter* and *Hannibal* torpedoed by submarine. *Spartiate* blown up by aërial torpedo.'" Then there came a gap, as though the men at the other end had heard of

more news, then followed—"Mars, Prince George, Victorious, all torpedoed. Cruisers escaped to sea. No news of *Ithuriel*, no torpedo attack up to present."

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"Oh, that's awful," gasped the editor, and then the professional instinct reasserted itself, for he continued, handing the slip back: "Rush out an edition straight away, Johnson. Anything, if it's only a half-sheet—get it on the streets as quick as you can—there'll be plenty of people about still. If anything else comes bring it up."

In less than a quarter of an hour a crowd of newsboys were fighting in the passage for copies of the single sheet which contained the momentous news, just as it had come over the wire. The *Daily Telegraph* was just five minutes ahead, but within half an hour every London paper, morning and evening, and all the great provincial journals had rushed out their midnight specials, and from end to end of England and Scotland, and away to South Wales, and over the narrow seas to Dublin and Cork, the shrill screams of the newsboys, and the hoarse, raucous howls of the newsmen were spreading the terrible tidings over the land. What the beacon fires were in the days of the Armada, these humble heralds of Fate were in the twentieth century.

"War begun—Portsmouth destroyed—Fleet sunk."

The six terrible words were not quite exact, of course, but they were near enough to the truth to sound like the voice of Fate in the ears of the millions whose fathers and fathers' fathers back through six generations had never had their midnight rest so rudely broken.

Lights gleamed out of darkened windows, and front doors were flung open in street after street, as the war-cry echoed down it. Any coin that came first to hand, from a penny to a sovereign, was eagerly offered for the single, hurriedly-printed sheets, but the business instincts of the newsboys rose superior to the crisis, and nothing less than a shilling was accepted. Streams of men and boys on bicycles with great bags of specials slung on their backs went tearing away, head down and pedals whirling, north, south, east and west into the suburbs. Newsagents flung their shops open, and in a few minutes were [Pg 100] besieged by eager, anxious crowds, fighting for the first copies. There was no more sleep for man or woman in London that night, though the children slept on in happy unconsciousness of what the morrow was to bring forth.

What happened in London was happening almost simultaneously all over the kingdom. For more than a hundred years the British people had worked and played and slept in serene security, first behind its wooden walls, and then behind the mighty iron ramparts of its invincible Fleets, and now, like a thunderbolt from a summer sky,

came the paralysing tidings that the first line of defence had been pierced by a single blow, and the greatest sea stronghold of England rendered defenceless—and all this between sunset and midnight of a November day.

Was it any wonder that men looked blankly into each other's eyes, and asked themselves and each other how such an unheard-of catastrophe had come about, and what was going to happen next? The first and universal feeling was one of amazement, which amounted almost to mental paralysis, and then came a sickening sense of insecurity. For two generations the Fleet had been trusted implicitly, and invasion had been looked upon merely as the fad of alarmists, and the theme of sensational story-writers. No intelligent person really trusted the army, although its ranks, such as they were, were filled with as gallant soldiers as ever carried a rifle, but it had been afflicted ever since men could remember with the bane and blight of politics and social influence. It had never been really a serious profession, and its upper ranks had been little better than the playground of the sons of the wealthy and well-born.

Politician after politician on both sides had tried his hand at scheme after scheme to improve the army. What one had done, the next had undone, and the permanent War Office Officials had given more attention to buttons and braids and caps than to business-like[Pg 101] organisations of fighting efficiency. The administration was, as it always had been, a chaos of muddle. The higher ranks were rotten with inefficiency, and the lower, aggravated and bewildered by change after change, had come to look upon soldiering as a sort of game, the rules of which were being constantly altered.

The Militia, the Yeomanry, and the Volunteers had been constantly snubbed and worried by the authorities of Pall Mall. Private citizens, willing to give time and money in order to learn the use of the rifle, even if they could not join the Yeomanry or Volunteers, had been just ignored. The War Office could see no use for a million able-bodied men who had learned to shoot straight, besides they were only "damned civilians," whose proper place was in their offices and shops. What right had they with rifles? If they wanted exercise, let them go and play golf, or cricket, or football. What had they to do with the defence of their country and their homes?

But that million of irregular sharpshooters were badly wanted now. They could have turned every hedgerow into a trench and cover against the foe which would soon be marching over the fields and orchards and hop-gardens of southern England. They would have known every yard of the ground, and the turn of every path and road, and while the regular army was doing its work they could have prevented many a turning

movement of the superior forces, shot down the horses of convoys and ammunition trains, and made themselves generally objectionable to the enemy.

Now the men were there, full of fight and enthusiasm, but they had neither ammunition nor rifles, and if they had had them, ninety per cent. would not have known how to use them. Wherefore, those who were responsible for the land defences of the country found themselves with less than three hundred thousand trained and half-trained men, of all arms, to face invading forces which would certainly not number less than a million, every man[Pg 102] of which had served his apprenticeship to the grim trade of war, commanded by officers who had taken that same trade seriously, studied it as a science, thinking it of considerably more importance than golf or cricket or football.

It had been said that the British Nation would never tolerate conscription, which might or might not have been true; but now, when the next hour or so might hear the foreign drums thrumming and the foreign bugles blaring, conscription looked a very different thing. There wasn't a loyal man in the kingdom who didn't bitterly regret that he had not been taken in the prime of his young manhood, and taught how to defend the hearth and home which were his, and the wife and children which were so dear to him.

But it was too late now. Neither soldiers nor sharpshooters are made in a few hours or days, and within a week the first battles that had been fought on English ground for nearly eight hundred years would have been lost and won, and nine-tenths of the male population of England would be looking on in helpless fury.

There had been plenty of theorists, who had said that the British Islands needed no army of home defence, simply because if she once lost command of the sea it would not be necessary for an enemy to invade her, since a blockade of her ports would starve her into submission in a month—which, thanks to the decay of agriculture and the depopulation of the country districts, was true enough. But it was not all the truth. Those who preached these theories left out one very important factor, and that was human nature.

For over a century the Continental nations had envied and hated Britain, the land-grabber; Britain who had founded nations while they had failed to make colonies; Britain, who had made the Seven Seas her territories, and the coasts of other lands her frontiers. Surely the leaders of the leagued nations would have been more or less than human had they resisted, even if their people[Pg 103] had allowed them to do it, the temptation of trampling these proud Islanders into the mud and mire of their own fields and highways, and dictating terms of peace in the ancient halls of Windsor.

These were the bitter thoughts which were rankling in the breast of every loyal British man during the remainder of that night of horrible suspense. Many still had reason to remember the ghastly blunders and the muddling which had cost so many gallant lives and so many millions of treasure during the Boer War, when it took three hundred thousand British troops to reduce eighty thousand undrilled farmers to submission. What if the same blundering and muddling happened now? And it was just as likely now as then.

Men ground their teeth, and looked at their strong, useless hands, and cursed theorist and politician alike. And meanwhile the Cabinet was sitting, deliberating, as best it might, over the tidings of disaster. The House of Commons, after voting full powers to the Cabinet and the Council of Defence, had been united at last by the common and immediate danger, and members of all parties were hurrying away to their constituencies to do what they could to help in organising the defence of their homeland.

There was one fact which stood out before all others, as clearly as an electric light among a lot of candles, and, now that it was too late, no one recognised it with more bitter conviction than those who had made it the consistent policy of both Conservative and Liberal Governments, and of the Executive Departments, to discourage invention outside the charmed circle of the Services, and to drive the civilian inventor abroad.

Again and again, designs of practical airships—not gas-bags which could only be dragged slowly against a moderate wind, but flying machines which conquered the wind and used it as a bird does—had been submitted to the War Office during the last six or seven years, and had been pooh-poohed or pigeon-holed by some sapient[Pg 104] permanent official—and now the penalty of stupidity and neglect had to be paid.

The complete descriptions of the tragedy that had been and was being enacted at Portsmouth that were constantly arriving in Downing Street left no possibility of doubt that the forts had been destroyed and the *Spartiate* blown up by torpedoes from the air—from which fact it was necessary to draw the terrible inference that the enemy had possessed themselves of the command of the air.

What was the command of the sea worth after that? What was the fighting value of the mightiest battleship that floated when pitted against a practically unassailable enemy, which had nothing to do but drop torpedoes, loaded with high explosives, on her decks and down her funnels until her very vitals were torn to pieces, her ammunition exploded, and her crew stunned by concussion or suffocated by poisonous gas?

It was horrible, but it was true. Inside an hour the strongest fortifications in England had been destroyed, and ten first-class battleships and a cruiser had been sent to the bottom of the sea, and so at last her ancient sceptre was falling from the hand of the Sea Queen, and her long inviolate domain was threatened by the armed legions of those whose forefathers she had vanquished on many a stricken field by land and sea.

"Well, gentlemen," said the Prime Minister to the other members of the Cabinet Council, who were sitting round that historic oval table in the Council Chamber in Downing Street, "we may as well confess that this is a great deal more serious than we expected it to be, and that is to my mind all the better reason why we should strain every nerve to hold intact the splendid heritage which our fathers have left to us—"

Boom! A shudder ran through the atmosphere as he spoke the last words, and the double windows in Downing Street shook with the vibration. The members of the Cabinet started in their seats and looked at each other.[Pg 105] Was this the fulfilment of the half prophecy which the Prime Minister had spoken so slowly and so clearly in the silent, crowded House of Commons?

Almost at the same moment the electric bell at the outer of the double doors rang. The doors were opened, and a messenger came in with a telegram which he handed to the Prime Minister, and then retired. He opened the envelope, and for nearly five minutes of intense suspense he mentally translated the familiar cypher, and then he said, as he handed the telegram to the Secretary for War:

"Gentlemen, I deeply regret to say that the possible prospect which I outlined in the House to-night has become an accomplished fact. Two hundred and forty-three years ago London heard the sound of hostile guns. We have heard them to-night. This telegram is from Sheerness, and it tells, I most deeply regret to say, the same story, or something like it, as the messages from Portsmouth. A Russo-German-French fleet of battleships, cruisers and destroyers, assisted by four airships and an unknown number of submarines, has defeated the Southern portion of the North Sea Squadron, and is now proceeding in two divisions, one up the Medway towards Chatham, and the other up the Thames towards Tilbury. Garrison Fort is now being bombarded from the sea and the air, and will probably be in ruins within an hour."

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CHAPTER XIII

A CRIME AND A MISTAKE

When the destruction of the forts and the sinking of the battleships at Portsmouth had been accomplished, John Castellan made about the greatest mistake in his life, a mistake which had very serious consequences for those to whom he had sold himself and his terrible invention.

He and his brother Denis formed a very curious contrast, which is nevertheless not uncommon in Irish families. The British army and navy can boast no finer soldiers or sailors, and the Empire no more devoted servants than those who claim Ireland as the land of their birth, and Denis Castellan was one of these. As the reader may have guessed already, he and Erskine had only been on the *Cormorant* because it was the policy of the Naval Council to keep two of the ablest men in the service out of sight for a while. Denis, who had a remarkable gift of tongues, was really one of the most skilful naval *attachés* in service, and what he didn't know about the naval affairs of Europe was hardly worth learning. Erskine had been recognised by the Naval Council which, under Sir John Fisher, had raised the British Navy to a pitch of efficiency that was the envy of every nation in the world, except Japan, as an engineer and inventor of quite extraordinary ability, and while the *Ithuriel* was building, they had given him the command of the *Cormorant*, chiefly because there was hardly anything to do, and therefore he had ample leisure to do his thinking.

On the other hand John Castellan was an unhappily [Pg 107] brilliant example of that type of Keltic intellect which is incapable of believing the world-wide truism that the day of small states is passed. He had two articles of political faith. One was an unshakable belief in the possibility of Irish independence, and the other, which naturally followed from the first, was implacable hatred of the Saxon oppressor whose power and wealth had saved Ireland from invasion for centuries. He was utterly unable to grasp the Imperial idea, while his brother was as enthusiastic an Imperialist as ever sailed the seas.

Had it not been for this blind hatred, the disaster which had befallen the Reserve Fleet would have been repeated at sea on a much vaster scale; but he allowed his passions to overcome his judgment, and so saved the Channel Fleet. There lay beneath him defenceless the greatest naval port of England, with its docks and dockyards, its barracks and arsenals, its garrisons of soldiers and sailors, and its crowds of workmen. The temptation was too strong for him, and he yielded to it.

When the *Prince George* had gone down he rose into the air, and ran over the Isle of Wight, signalling to the *See Adler*. The signals were answered, and the two airships met about two miles south-west of the Needles, and Castellan informed Captain Frenkel of his intention to destroy Portsmouth and Gosport. The German demurred

strongly. He had no personal hatred to satisfy, and he suggested that it would be much better to go out to sea and discover the whereabouts of the Channel Fleet; but Castellan was Commander-in-Chief of the Aërial Squadrons of the Allies, and so his word was law, and within the next two hours one of the greatest crimes in the history of civilised warfare was committed.

The two airships circled slowly over Gosport and Portsmouth, dropping their torpedoes wherever a worthy mark presented itself. The first one discharged from the *Flying Fish* fell on the deck of the old *Victory*. The deck burst up, as though all the powder she had carried at [Pg 108] Trafalgar had exploded beneath it, and the next moment she broke out in inextinguishable flames. The old *Resolution* met the same fate from the *See Adler*, and then the pitiless hail of destruction fell on the docks and jetties. In a few minutes the harbour was ringed with flame. Portsmouth Station, built almost entirely of wood, blazed up like matchwood; then came the turn of the dockyards at Portsea, which were soon ablaze from end to end.

Then the two airships spread their wings like destroying angels over Portsmouth town. Half a dozen torpedoes wrecked the Town Hall and set the ruins on fire. This was the work of the *See Adler*. The *Flying Fish* devoted her attention to the naval and military barracks, the Naval College and the Gunnery School on Whale Island. As soon as these were reduced to burning ruins, the two airships scattered their torpedoes indiscriminately over churches, shops and houses, and in the streets crowded by terrified mobs of soldiers, sailors and civilians.

The effect of the torpedoes in the streets was too appalling for description. Everyone within ten or a dozen yards of the focus of the explosion was literally blown to atoms, and for fifty yards round every living creature dropped dead, killed either by the force of the concussion or the poisonous gases which were liberated by the explosion. Hundreds fell thus without the mark of a wound, and when some of their bodies were examined afterwards, it was found that their hearts were split open as cleanly as though they had been divided with a razor, just as are the hearts of fishes which have been killed with dynamite.

John Castellan and his lieutenant, M'Carthy, for the time being gloried in the work of destruction. Captain Frenkel was a soldier and a gentleman, and he saw nothing in it save wanton killing of defenceless people and a wicked waste of ammunition; but the terrible War Lord of Germany had given Castellan supreme command, and to disobey meant degradation, and [Pg 109] possibly death, and so the *See Adler* perforce took her share in the tragedy.

In a couple of hours Portsmouth, Gosport and Portsea had ceased to be towns. They were only areas of flaming ruins; but at last the ammunition gave out, and Castellan was compelled to signal the *See Adler* to shape her course for Bracklesham Bay in order to replenish the magazines. They reached the bay, and descended at the spot where the *Leger* ought to have been at anchor. She was not there, for the sufficient reason that the *Ithuriel's* ram had sent her to the bottom of the Channel.

For half an hour the *Flying Fish* and the *See Adler* hunted over the narrow waters, but neither was the *Leger* nor any other craft to be seen between the Selsey coast and the Isle of Wight. When they came together again in Bracklesham Bay, John Castellan's rage against the hated Saxon had very considerably cooled. Evidently something serious had happened, and something that he knew nothing about, and now that the excitement of destruction had died away, he remembered more than one thing which he ought to have thought of before.

The two rushes of the torpedo boats, supported by the swift cruisers, had not taken place. Not a hostile vessel had entered either Spithead or the Solent, and the British cruisers, which he had been ordered to spare, had got away untouched. It was perfectly evident that some disaster had befallen the expedition, and that the *Leger* had been involved in it. In spite of the terrible destruction that the *Flying Fish*, the *See Adler* and the *Banshee* had wrought on sea and land, it was plain that the first part of the invader's programme had been brought to nothing by some unknown agency.

He was, of course, aware of the general plan of attack. He had destroyed the battleships of the Fleet Reserve. While he was doing that the destroyers should have been busy among the cruisers, and then the main force, under Admiral Durenne, would follow, and take possession of Southampton, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight. A[Pg 110] detachment of cruisers and destroyers was then to be despatched to Littlehampton, and land a sufficient force to seize and hold the railway at Ford and Arundel, so that the coast line of the L.B.S.C.R., as well as the main line to Horsham and London, should be at the command of the invaders.

Littlehampton was also particularly valuable on account of its tidal river and harbour, which would give shelter and protection to a couple of hundred torpedo boats and destroyers, and its wharves from which transports could easily coal. It is hardly worth while to add that it had been left entirely undefended. It had been proposed to mount a couple of 9.2 guns on the old fort on the west side of the river mouth, with half a dozen twelve-pound quick-firers at the Coast-Guard station on the east side to repel torpedo attack, but the War Office had laughed at the idea of an enemy getting within

gunshot of the inviolate English shore, and so one of the most vulnerable points on the south coast had been left undefended.

What would Castellan have given now for the torpedoes which the two ships had wasted in the wanton destruction of Portsmouth, and the murder of its helpless citizens. The main French Fleet by this time could not be very far off. Behind it, somewhere, was the British Channel Fleet, the most powerful sea force that had ever ridden the subject waves, and here he was without a torpedo on either of his ships, and no supplies nearer than Kiel. The *Leger* had carried two thousand torpedoes and five hundred cylinders of the gases which supplied the motive power. She was gone, and for all offensive purposes the *Flying Fish* and *See Adler* were as harmless as a couple of balloons.

When it was too late, John Castellan remembered in the bitterness of his soul that the torpedoes which had destroyed Portsmouth would have been sufficient to have wrecked the Channel Fleet, and now there was nothing for it but to leave Admiral Durenne to fight his own[Pg 111] battle against the most powerful fleet in the world, and to use what was left of the motive power to get back to Kiel, and replenish their magazines.

Horrible as had been the fate which had fallen on the great arsenal of southern England, it had not been sacrificed in vain, and very sick at heart was John Castellan when he gave the order for the two vessels, which a few hours ago had been such terrible engines of destruction, to rise into the air and wing their harmless flight towards Kiel.

When the *Flying Fish* and the *See Adler* took the air, and shipped their course eastward, the position of the opposing fleets was somewhat as follows: The cruisers of the A Squadron, *Amphitrite*, *Andromeda*, *Europa*, *Niobe*, *Blenheim* and *Blake*, with fifteen first-class torpedo boats and ten destroyers, had got out to sea from Spithead unharmed. All these cruisers were good for twenty knots, the torpedo boats for twenty-five, and the destroyers for thirty.

The *Sutlej*, *Ariadne*, *Argonaut* and *Diadem* had got clear away from the Solent, with ten first-class torpedo boats and five destroyers. They met about four miles south-east of St Catherine's Point. Commodore Hoskins of the *Diadem* was the senior officer in command, and so he signalled for Captain Pennell, of the *Andromeda*, to come on board, and talk matters over with him, but before the conversation was half-way through, a black shape, with four funnels crowned with smoke and flame, came tearing up from the westward, made the private signal, and ran alongside the *Diadem*.

The news that her commander brought was this—Admiral Lord Beresford had succeeded in eluding the notice of the French Channel Fleet, and was on his way up the south-west with the intention of getting behind Admiral Durenne's fleet, and crushing it between his own force to seaward and the batteries and Reserve Fleet on the landward side. The Commander of the destroyer was, of course, quite ignorant of the disaster which had befallen the battleships of the Reserve Fleet and [Pg 112]Portsmouth, and when the captain of the cruiser told him the tidings, though he received the news with the almost fatalistic *sang froid* of the British naval officer, turned a shade or two paler under the bronze of his skin.

"That is terrible news, sir," he said, "and it will probably alter the Admiral's plans considerably. I must be off as soon as possible, and let him know: meanwhile, of course, you will use your own judgment."

"Yes," replied the Commodore, "but I think you had better take one of our destroyers, say the *Greyhound*, back with you. She's got her bunkers full, and she can manage thirty-two knots in a sea like this."

At this moment the sentry knocked at the door of the Commodore's room.

"Come in," said Commodore Hoskins. The door opened, a sentry came in and saluted, and said:

"The *Ithurriel's* alongside, sir, and Captain Erskine will be glad to speak to you."

"Ah!" exclaimed the Commodore, "the very thing. I wonder what that young devil has been up to. Send him in at once, sentry."

The sentry retired, and presently Erskine entered the room, saluted, and said:

"I've come to report, sir, I have sunk everything that tried to get in through Spithead. First division of three destroyers, the old *Leger*, the *Dupleix* cruiser, six destroyers of the second division, and three cruisers, the *Alger*, *Suchet* and *Davout*. They're all at the bottom."

The Commodore stared for a moment or two at the man who so quietly described the terrific destruction that he had wrought with a single ship, and then he said:

"Well, Erskine, we expected a good deal from that infernal craft of yours, but this is rather more than we could have hoped for. You've done splendidly. Now, what's your best speed?"

"Forty-five knots, sir."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the Commander of the *Greyhound*. "You don't say so."

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"Oh, yes," said Erskine with a smile. "You ought to have seen us walk over those destroyers. I hit them at full speed, and they crumpled up like paper boats."

By this time the Commodore had sat down, and was writing his report as fast as he could get his pencil over the paper. It was a short, terse, but quite comprehensive account of the happenings of the last three hours, and a clear statement of the strength and position of the torpedo and cruiser squadron under his command. When he had finished, he put the paper into an envelope, and said to the Commander of the *Greyhound*:

"I am afraid you are no good here, Hawkins. I shall have to give the message to Captain Erskine, he'll be there and back before you're there. Just give him the bearings of the Fleet and he'll be off at once. There you are, Erskine, give that to the Admiral, and bring me instructions back as soon as you can. You've just time for a whisky-and-soda, and then you must be off."

Erskine took the letter, and they drank their whisky-and-soda. Then they went on deck. The *Ithuriel* was lying outside the *Greyhound*, half submerged—that is to say, with three feet of freeboard showing. Commander Hawkins looked at her with envious eyes. It is an article of faith with all good commanders of destroyers that their own craft is the fastest and most efficient of her class. At a pinch he could get thirty-two knots out of the *Greyhound*, and here was this quiet, determined-looking young man, who had created a vessel of his own, and had reached the rank of captain by sheer genius over the heads of men ten years older than himself, talking calmly of forty-five knots, and of the sinking of destroyers and cruisers, as though it was a mere matter of cracking egg-shells. Wherefore there was wrath in his soul when he went on board and gave the order to cast loose. Erskine went with him. They shook hands on the deck of the *Greyhound*, and Erskine went aboard of the *Ithuriel*, saying:

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"Well, Hawkins, I expect I shall meet you coming back."

"I'm damned if I believe in your forty-five knots," replied Captain Hawkins, shortly.

"Cast off, and come with me then," laughed Erskine, "you soon will."

Inside three minutes the two craft were clear of the *Diadem*. Erskine gave the *Greyhound* right of way until they had cleared the squadron. The sea was smooth,

and there was scarcely any wind, for it had been a wonderfully fine November. The *Greyhound* got on her thirty-two knots as soon as there was no danger of hitting anything.

"That chap thinks he can race us," said Erskine to Lennard, as he got into the conning-tower, "and I'm just going to make him the maddest man in the British navy. He's doing thirty-two—we're doing twenty-five. Now that we're clear I'll wake him up." He took down the receiver and said:

"Pump her out, Castellan, and give her full speed as soon as you can."

The *Ithuriel* rose in the water, and began to shudder from stem to stern with the vibrations of the engines, as they gradually worked up to their highest capacity. Commander Hawkins saw something coming up astern, half hidden by a cloud of spray and foam. It went past him as though he had been standing still instead of steaming at thirty-two knots. A few moments more and it was lost in the darkness.

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CHAPTER XIV

THE EVE OF BATTLE

In twenty minutes the *Ithuriel* ran alongside the *Britain*, which was one of the five most formidable battleships in existence. For five years past a new policy had been pursued with regard to the navy. The flagships, which of course contained the controlling brains of the fleets, were the most powerful afloat. By the time war broke out five of them had been launched and armed, and the *Britain* was the newest and most powerful of them.

Her displacement was twenty-two thousand tons, and her speed twenty-four knots. She was armoured from end to end with twelve-inch plates against which ordinary projectiles smashed as harmlessly as egg-shells. Twelve fourteen-inch thousand-pounder guns composed her primary battery; her secondary consisted of ten 9.2 guns, and her tertiary of twelve-pounder Maxim-Nordenfeldts in the fighting tops.

It was the first time that Erskine had seen one of these giants of the ocean, and when they got alongside he said to Denis Castellan:

"There's a fighting machine for you, Denis. Great Scott, what wouldn't I give to see her at work in the middle of a lot of Frenchmen and Germans, as the *Revenge* was among the Spaniards in Grenville's time. Just look at those guns."

"Yes," replied Castellan, "she's a splendid ship, and those guns look as though they could talk French to the Frenchies and German to the Dutchmen and plain[Pg 116] English to the lot in a way that wouldn't want much translating. And what's more, they have the right men behind them, and the best gun in the world isn't much good without that."

At this moment they heard a shrill voice from the forecastle of the nearest destroyer.

"Hulloa there, what's the matter?" came from the deck of the *Britain*.

"Four French destroyers coming up pretty fast from the south'ard, sir. Seem to be making for the flagship," was the reply.

"That's a job for us," said Erskine, who was standing on the narrow deck of the *Ithuriel*, waiting to go on board the *Britain*. "Commander, will you be good enough to deliver this to the Admiral? I must be off and settle those fellows before they do any mischief."

The commander of the destroyer took the letter, Erskine dived below, a steel plate slid over the opening to the companion way, and when he got into the conning-tower he ordered full speed.

Four long black shapes were stealing slowly towards the British centre, and no one knew better than he did that a single torpedo well under waterline would send Admiral Beresford's floating fortress to the bottom inside ten minutes, and that was the last thing he wanted to see.

A quartermaster ran down the ladder and caught the letter from the commander just as the *Ithuriel* moved off.

"Tell the Admiral, with Captain Erskine's compliments, that he'll be back in a few minutes, when he's settled those fellows."

The quartermaster took the letter, and by the time he got to the top of the ladder, the *Ithuriel* was flying through a cloud of foam and spray towards the first of the destroyers. He heard a rattle of guns, and then the destroyer vanished.

The *Ithuriel* swung round, hit the next one in the bows, ground her under the water, turned[Pg 117] almost at right angles, smashed the stern of the third one into scrap iron, hit the fourth one abreast of the conning-tower, crushed her down and rolled her over, and then slowed down and ran back to the flagship at twenty knots.

"Well!" said Quartermaster Maginniss, who for the last few minutes had been held spellbound at the top of the ladder, in spite of the claims of discipline, "of all the sea-devils of crafts that I've ever heard of, I should say that was the worst. Four destroyers

gone in five minutes, and here he is coming back before I've delivered the letter. If we only have a good square fight now, I'll be sorry for the Frenchies."

The next moment he stiffened up and saluted. "A letter for you, Admiral, left by Captain Erskine before he went away to destroy those destroyers."

"And you've been watching the destruction instead of delivering the letter," laughed Lord Beresford, as he took it from him. "Well, I'll let you off this time. When Captain Erskine comes alongside, ask him to see me in my room at once."

The *Ithuriel* ran alongside even as he was speaking. The gangway was manned, and when he reached the deck, Admiral Beresford held out his hand, and said with a laugh:

"Well, Captain Erskine, I understood that you were bringing me a message from Commodore Hoskins, but you seem to have had better game to fly for."

"My fault, sir," said Erskine, "but I hope you won't court-martial me for it. You see, there were four French destroyers creeping round, and mine was the only ship that could tackle them, so I thought I'd better go and do it before they did any mischief. Anyhow, they're all at the bottom now."

"I don't think I should have much case if I court-martialled you for that, Captain Erskine," laughed the Admiral, "especially after what you've done already, according to Commodore Hoskins' note. That must be [Pg 118] a perfect devil of a craft of yours. Can you sink anything with her?"

"Anything, sir," replied Erskine. "This is the most powerful fighting ship in the world, but I could put you at the bottom of the Channel in ten minutes."

"The Lord save us! It's a good job you're on our side."

"And it's a very great pity," said Erskine, "that the airships are not with us too. I had a very narrow squeak in Spithead about three hours ago from one of their aerial torpedoes. It struck part of a destroyer that I'd just sunk, and although it was nearly fifty yards away, it shook me up considerably."

"Have you any idea of the whereabouts and formation of the French Fleet? I must confess that I haven't. These infernal airships have upset all the plans for catching Durenne between the Channel Fleet and the Reserve, backed up by the Portsmouth guns, so that we could jump out and catch him between the fleet and the forts. Now I suppose it will have to be a Fleet action at sea."

"If you care to leave your ship for an hour, sir," replied Erskine, "I will take you round the French fleet and you shall see everything for yourself. We may have to knock a few holes in something, if it gets in our way, but I think I can guarantee that you shall be back on the *Britain* by the time you want to begin the action."

"Absolutely irregular," said Lord Beresford, stroking his chin, and trying to look serious, while his eyes were dancing with anticipation. "An admiral to leave his flagship on the eve of an engagement! Well, never mind, Courtney's a very good fellow, and knows just as much about the ship as I do, and he's got all sailing orders. I'll come. He's on the bridge now, I'll go and tell him."

The Admiral ran up on to the bridge, gave Captain Courtney Commodore Hoskins' letter, added a few directions, one of which was to keep on a full head of steam on all the ships, and look out for signals, and five[Pg 119] minutes later he had been introduced to Lennard, and was standing beside him in the conning-tower of the *Ithuriel* listening to Erskine, as he said into the telephone receiver:

"Sink her to three feet, Castellan, and then ahead full speed."

The pumps worked furiously for a few minutes, and the *Ithuriel* sank until only three feet of her bulk appeared above the water. Then the Admiral felt the floor of the conning-tower shudder and tremble under his feet. He looked out of the side porthole on the starboard bow, and saw his own fleet dropping away into the distance and the darkness of the November night. The water ahead curled up into two huge swathes, which broke into foam and spray, which lashed hissing along the almost submerged decks.

"You have a pretty turn of speed on her, I must say, Captain Erskine," said the Admiral, after he had taken a long squint through the semicircular window. "I'm sorry we haven't got a score of craft like this."

"And we should have had, your lordship," replied Erskine, "if the Council had only taken the opinion that you gave after you saw the plans."

"I'd have a hundred like her," laughed the Admiral, "only you see there's the Treasury, and behind that the most noble House of Commons, elected mostly by the least educated and most short-sighted people in the nation, who scarcely know a torpedo from a common shell, and we should never have got them. We had hard enough work to get this one as an experiment."

"I quite agree with you, sir," said Erskine, "and I think Lennard will too. There has never been an instance in history in which democracy did not spell degeneration. It's a pity,

but I suppose it's inevitable. As far as my reading has taken me, it seems to be the dry-rot of nations. Halloo, what's that? Torpedo gunboat, I think! Ah, there's the moon. Now, sir, if you'll just come and stand to the right here, for'ard of [Pg 120] the wheel, I'll put the *Ithuriel* through her paces, and show you what she can do."

A long grey shape, with two masts and three funnels between them, loomed up out of the darkness into a bright patch of moonlight. Erskine took the receiver from the hooks and said:

"Stand by there, Castellan. Forward guns fire when I give the word—then I shall ram."

The Admiral saw the three strangely shaped guns rise from the deck, their muzzles converging on the gunboat. He expected a report, but none came; only a gentle hiss, scarcely audible in the conning-tower. Then three brilliant flashes of flame burst out just under the Frenchman's topworks. Erskine, with one hand on the steering-wheel, and the other holding the receiver, said:

"Well aimed—now full speed. I'm going over him."

"Over him!" echoed the Admiral. "Don't you ram under the waterline?"

"If it's the case of a big ship, sir," replied Erskine, "we sink and hit him where it hurts most, but it isn't worth while with these small craft. You will see what I mean in a minute."

As he spoke a shudder ran through the *Ithuriel*. The deck began to quiver under the Admiral's feet; the ram rose six feet out of the water. The shape of the gunboat seemed to rush towards them; the ram hit it squarely amidships; then came a shock, a grinding scrape, screams of fear from the terrified sailors, a final crunch, and the gunboat was sinking fifty yards astern.

"That's awful," said the Admiral, with a perceptible shake in his voice. "What speed did you hit her at?"

"Forty-five knots," replied Erskine, giving a quarter turn to the wheel, and almost immediately bringing a long line of battleships, armoured cruisers, protected cruisers and destroyers into view.

The French Channel Fleet was composed of the most powerful ships in the navy of the Republic. The two portions from Brest and Cherbourg had now united their [Pg 121] forces. The French authorities had at last learned the supreme value of homogeneity. The centre was composed of six ships of the *Republique* class, all identical in size, armour and armament, as well as speed. They were

the *Republique*, *Patrie* flagship, *Justice*, *Democratie*, *Liberte* and *Verite*. They were all of fifteen thousand tons and eighteen knots. To these was added the *Suffren*, also of eighteen knots, but only twelve thousand seven hundred tons: she had come from Brest with a flotilla of torpedo boats.

There were six armoured cruisers, *Jules Ferry*, *Leon Gambetta*, *Victor Hugo*, *Jeanne d'Arc*, *Aube* and *Marseillaise*. These were all heavily armed and armoured vessels, all of them capable of manœuvring at a speed of over twenty knots. A dozen smaller protected and unprotected cruisers hung on each flank, and a score of destroyers and torpedo boats lurked in between the big ships.

The *Ithuriel* ran quietly along the curving line of battleships and cruisers, turned and came back again without exciting the slightest suspicion.

Erskine would have dearly loved to sink a battleship or one or two cruisers, just to show his lordship how it was done, but the Admiral forbade this, as he wanted to get the Frenchmen, who still thought they were going to easy victory, entangled in the shallows of the narrow waters, and therefore with the exception of rolling over and sinking three submarines which happened to get in the way, no damage was done.

The British Channel Fleet, even not counting the assistance of the terrible *Ithuriel*, was the most powerful squadron that had ever put to sea under a single command. The main line of battle consisted of the flagship *Britain*, and seven ships of the *King Edward* class, *King Edward the Seventh*, *Dominion*, *Commonwealth*, *Hindustan*, *New Zealand*, *Canada* and *Newfoundland*; all over sixteen thousand tons, and of nineteen knots speed. With the exception of the giant flagships, of which there [Pg 122] were five in existence—the *Britain*, *England*, *Ireland*, *Scotland* and *Wales*—and two nineteen thousand ton monsters which had just been completed for Japan, these were the fastest and most heavily-armed battleships afloat.

The second line was composed of the armoured cruisers, *Duke of Edinburgh*, *Black Prince*, *Henry the Fourth*, *Warwick*, *Edward the Third*, *Cromwell*, all of over thirteen thousand tons, and twenty-two knots speed; the *Drake*, *King Alfred*, *Leviathan* and *Good Hope*, of over fourteen thousand tons and twenty-four knots speed; and the reconstructed *Powerful*, and *Terrible*, of fourteen thousand tons and twenty-two knots. There was, of course, the usual swarm of destroyers and torpedo boats; and in addition must be counted the ten cruisers, ten destroyers, and fifteen torpedo boats, which had escaped from Spithead and the Solent. These had already formed a junction with the left wing of the British force.

For nearly two hours the two great fleets slowly approached each other almost at a right angle. As the grey dawn of the November morning began to steal over the calm blue-grey water, they came in plain sight of each other, and at once the signal flew from the foreyard of the *Britain*, "Prepare for action—battleships will cross front column of line ahead—cruisers will engage cruisers individually at discretion of Commanders—destroyers will do their worst."

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CHAPTER XV

THE STRIFE OF GIANTS

As it happened, it was a fine, cold wintry day that dawned as the two great fleets drew towards each other. As Denis Castellan said, "It was a perfect jewel of a day for a holy fight," and so it was. The French fleet was advancing at twelve knots. Admiral Beresford made his fifteen, and led the line in the *Britain*. Erskine had been ordered to go to the rear of the French line and sink any destroyer or torpedo boat that he could get hold of, but to let the battleships and cruisers alone, unless he saw a British warship hard pressed, in which case he was to ram and sink the enemy if he could.

One division of cruisers, consisting of the fastest and most powerful armoured vessels, was to make a half-circle two miles in the rear of the French Fleet. The ships selected for this service were the *Duke of Edinburgh*, *Warwick*, *Edward III.*, *Cromwell* and *King Alfred*. Outside them, two miles again to the rear, the *Leviathan*, *Good Hope*, *Powerful* and *Terrible*, the fastest ships in the Fleet, were to take their station to keep off stragglers.

For the benefit of the non-nautical reader, it will be as well to explain here the two principal formations in which modern fleets go into action. As a matter of fact, they are identical with the tactics employed by the French and Spanish on the one side and Nelson on the other during the Napoleonic wars. Before Nelson's time, it was the custom for two hostile fleets to engage each other in column of line abreast, which means that both fleets[Pg 124] formed a double line which approached each other within gunshot, and then opened fire.

At Trafalgar, Nelson altered these tactics completely, with results that everybody knows. The allied French and Spanish fleets came up in a crescent, just in the same formation as Admiral Durenne was advancing on Portsmouth. Nelson took his ships

into action in column of line ahead, in other words, in single file, the head of the column aiming for the centre of the enemy's battle line.

The main advantage of this was, first, that it upset the enemy's combination, and, secondly, that each ship could engage two, since she could work both broadsides at once, whereas the enemy could only work one broadside against one ship. These were the tactics which, with certain modifications made necessary by the increased mobility on both sides, Lord Beresford adopted.

With one exception, no foreigner had ever seen the new class of British flagship, and that exception, as we know, was safely locked up on board the *Ithuriel*, and his reports were even now being carefully considered by the Naval Council.

There are no braver men on land and sea than the officers and crews of the French Navy, but when the giant bulk of the *Britain* loomed up out of the westward in the growing light, gradually gathering way with her stately train of nineteen-knot battleships behind her, and swept down in front of the French line, many a heart stood still for the moment, and many a man asked himself what the possibilities of such a Colossus of the ocean might be.

They had not long to wait. As the British battleships came on from the left with ever-increasing speed, the whole French line burst into a tornado of thunder and flame, but not a shot was fired from the English lines. Shells hurtled and screamed through the air, topworks were smashed into scrap-iron, funnels riddled, and[Pg 125] military masts demolished; but until the *Britain* reached the centre of the French line not a British gun spoke.

Then the giant swung suddenly to starboard, and headed for the space between the *Patrie* and the *Republique*. The *Canada*, *Newfoundland*, *New Zealand* and *Hindustan* put on speed, passed under her stern, and headed in between the *Suffren*, *Liberte*, *Verite* and *Patrie*, while the *Edward VII.*, *Dominion* and *Commonwealth* turned between the *Justice*, *Democratie*, the *Aube* and *Marseillaise*.

Within a thousand yards the British battleships opened fire. The first gun from the *Britain* was a signal which turned them all into so many floating volcanoes. The *Britain* herself ran between the *Patrie* and the *Republique*, vomiting storms of shell, first ahead, then on the broadside and then astern. Her topworks were of course crumpled out of all shape—that was expected, for the range was now only about five hundred yards—but the incessant storm of thousand-pound shells from the fourteen-inch guns, followed by an unceasing hail of three hundred and fifty pound projectiles

from the 9.2 quick-firers, reduced the two French battleships to little better than wrecks. The *Britain* steamed through and turned, and again the awful hurricane burst out from her sides and bow and stern. She swung round again, but now only a few dropping shots greeted her from the crippled Frenchmen.

"I don't think those chaps have much more fight left in them," said the Admiral to the Captain as they passed through the line for the third time. "We'll just give them one more dose, and then see how the other fellows are getting on."

Once more the monster swept in between the doomed ships; once more her terrible artillery roared. Two torpedo boats, five hundred yards ahead, were rushing towards her. A grey shape rose out of the water, flinging up clouds of spray and foam, and in a moment they were[Pg 126] ground down into the water and sunk. The hastily-fired torpedoes diverged and struck the two French battleships instead of the *Britain*. Two mountains of foam rose up under their sterns, their bows went down and rose again, and with a sternward lurch they slid down into the depths.

The *Britain* swung round to port, and poured a broadside into the *Liberte*, which had just crippled the *Hindustan*, and sunk her with a torpedo. The *New Zealand* was evidently in difficulties between the *Liberte* and the *Verite*. Her upper works were a mass of ruins, but she was still blazing away merrily with her primary battery. The Admiral slowed down to ten knots, and got between the two French battleships; then her big guns began to vomit destruction again, and in five minutes the two French battleships, caught in the triangular fire and terribly mauled, hauled their flags down, and so Lord Beresford's scheme was accomplished. The *Dominion* and *Edward VII.* had got between their ships at the expense of a severe handling, and were giving a very good account of them, and the *Canada* had sunk the *Suffren* with a lucky shell which exploded in her forward torpedo room and blew her side out.

It was broad daylight by this time, and it was perfectly plain, both to friend and foe, that the French centre could no longer be counted upon as a fighting force. One of the circumstances which came home hardest afterwards to the survivors of the French force was the fact that, as far as they knew, not a single British battleship or cruiser had been struck by a French destroyer or torpedo boat. The reason for this was the very simple fact that Erskine had taken these craft under his charge, and, while the big ships had been thundering away at each other, he had devoted himself to the congenial sport of smashing up the smaller fry. He sent the *Ithuriel* flying hither and thither at full speed, tearing them into scrap-iron and sending them to the bottom, as if they had been so many penny steamers. He could have sent the battleships to[Pg

127] the bottom with equal ease, but orders were orders, and he respected them until his chance came.

The *Verite* was now the least injured of the French battleships. To look at she was merely a floating mass of ruins, but her engines were intact, and her primary battery as good as ever. Her captain, like the hero that he was, determined to risk his ship and everything in her in the hope of destroying the monster which had wrought such frightful havoc along the line. She carried two twelve-inch guns ahead, a 6.4 on each side of the barbette, and four pairs of 6.4 guns behind these, and the fire of all of them was concentrated ahead.

As the *Britain* came round for the third time every one of the guns was laid upon her. He called to the engine-room for the utmost speed he could have, and at nineteen knots he bore down upon the leviathan. The huge guns on the *Britain* swung round, and a tempest of shells swept the *Verite* from end to end. Her armour was gashed and torn as though it had been cardboard instead of six-and eleven-inch steel; but still she held on her course. At five hundred yards her guns spoke, and the splinters began to fly on board the *Britain*. The Captain of the *Verite* signalled for the last ounce of steam he could have—he was going to appeal to the last resort in naval warfare—the ram. If he could once get that steel spur of his into the *Britain*'s hull under her armour, she would go down as certainly as though she had been a first-class cruiser.

When the approaching vessels were a little more than five hundred yards apart, the *Ithuriel*, who had settled up with all the destroyers and torpedo boats she could find, rose to the north of the now broken French line. Erskine took in the situation at a glance. He snatched the receiver from the hooks, shouted into it:

"Sink—full speed—ram!"

The *Ithuriel* dived and sprang forward, and when the ram of the *Verite* was within a hundred yards of the side of the *Britain* his own ram smashed through her stern, cracked both the propeller shafts, and tore away her[Pg 128] rudder as if it had been a piece of paper. She stopped and yawed, broadside on to the *Britain*. The chases of the great guns swung round in ominous threatening silence, but before they could be fired the Tricolor fluttered down from the flagstaff, and the *Verite*, helpless for all fighting purposes, had surrendered.

It was now the turn of the big armoured cruisers. They were practically untouched, for the heaviest of the fighting had fallen on the battleships. A green rocket went up from the deck of the *Britain*, and was followed in about ten seconds by a blue one. The inner line of cruisers made a quarter turn to port, and began hammering into the

crippled battleships and cruisers indiscriminately, while the *Leviathan*, *Good Hope*, *Powerful* and *Terrible* took stations between the Isle of Wight and the Sussex coast.

The *Ithuriel* rose to her three-foot freeboard, and put in some very pretty practice with her pneumatic guns on the topworks of the cruisers. The six-funnelled *Jeanne d'Arc* got tired of this, and made a rush at her at her full speed of twenty-three knots, with the result that the *Ithuriel* disappeared, and three minutes afterwards there came a shock under the great cruiser's stern which sent a shudder through her whole fabric. The engines whirled furiously until they stopped, and a couple of minutes later her captain recognised that she could neither steam nor steer. Meanwhile, the tide was setting strongly in towards Spithead, and the disabled ships were drifting with it, either to capture or destruction.

The French centre had now, to all intents and purposes, ceased to exist. Four out of six battleships were sunk, and one had surrendered, and the *Jeanne d'Arc* had gone down.

On the British side the *Hindustan* had been sunk, and the *Dominion*, *Commonwealth* and *Newfoundland* very badly mauled, so badly indeed that it was a matter of dry-dock as quickly as possible for them. All the other battleships, including even the *Britain* herself, were little[Pg 129] better than wrecks to look at, so terrible had been the firestorms through which they had passed.

But for the presence of the *Ithuriel*, the British loss would of course have been much greater. It is not too much to say that her achievements spread terror and panic among the French torpedo flotilla. Under ordinary circumstances they would have taken advantage of the confusion of the battleship action to attack the line of armoured cruisers behind, but between the two lines there was the ever-present destroying angel, as they came to call her, with her silent deadly guns, her unparalleled speed, and her terrible ram. No sooner did a destroyer or torpedo boat attempt to make for a cruiser, than a shell came hissing along the water, and blew the middle out of her, or the ram crashed through her sides, and sent her in two pieces to the bottom.

The result was that when the last French cruiser had hauled down her flag, Admiral Beresford found himself in command of a fleet which was still in being. Of the French battleships the *Justice* and the *Democratie* were still serviceable, and of the cruisers, the *Jules Ferry*, *Leon Gambetta*, *Victor Hugo*, *Aube* and *Marseillaise* were still in excellent fighting trim, although of course they were in no position to continue the struggle against the now overwhelming force of British battleships and armoured

cruisers. This was what Admiral Beresford had fought for: to break the centre and put as many battleships as possible out of action. His orders had been to spare the cruisers as much as possible, because, he said, with a somewhat grim laugh, they might be useful later on.

The idea of their escaping to sea through the double line of British cruisers, to say nothing of the *Ithuriel*, with her speed of over fifty miles an hour, and her ability to ram them in detail before they were halfway across the Channel, was entirely out of the question. To have attempted such a thing would have been simply a form of collective suicide, so the flags were hauled down, and all that was left of the fleet surrendered.

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Another circumstance which had placed the French fleet at a tremendous disadvantage was the absence of the three *Flying Fishes*, which were to have co-operated with the invading fleet, but of course neither Admiral Durenne, who had gone down with his ship, nor any other of his officers knew that the *Banshee* had been blown up in mid-air, or that the *Ithuriel* had destroyed the dépôt ship, and so forced Castellan, after his mad waste of ammunition in the destruction of Portsmouth, to wing his way to Kiel, with the *See Adler*, in order to replenish his magazines. Had those two amphibious craft been present at the battle, the issue might have been something very different.

The whole fight had only taken a couple of hours from the firing of the first shot to the hauling down of the last flag. Admiral Beresford made direct for Portsmouth to get his lame ducks into dock if possible, and to discover the amount of damage done. As they steamed in through the Spithead Forts, flags went up all along the northern shore of the Isle of Wight, and the guns on the Spithead Forts and Fort Monckton, which the *Banshee* had been commissioned to destroy, roared out a salute of welcome.

The signal masts of the sunk battleships showed where their shattered hulls were lying, and as the *Britain* led the way in between them, Lord Beresford rubbed his hands across his eyes, and said to his Commadore, who was standing on what was left of the navigating bridge:

"Poor fellows, it was hardly fair fighting. We might have had something very like those infernal craft if we'd had men of decent brains at the War Office. Same old story—anything new must be wrong in Pall Mall. Still we've got something of our own back this morning. I hope we shall be able to use some of the docks; if I'm not afraid our lame ducks will have to crawl round to Devonport as best they can. The man in command of those airships must have been a perfect devil to destroy a[Pg

131] defenceless town in this fashion. The worst of it is that if they can do this sort of thing here they can do it just as easily to London or Liverpool, or Manchester or any other city. I hope there won't be any more bad news when we get ashore."

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CHAPTER XVI

HOW THE FRENCH LANDED AT PORTSMOUTH

All the ships able to take their place in the fighting-line were left outside. The French prisoners were disembarked and their places taken by drafts from the British warships, who at once set about making such repairs as were possible at sea. Admiral Beresford boarded the *Ithuriel*, which, until the next fight, he proposed to use as a despatch-boat, and ran up the harbour.

He found every jetty, including the North and South Railway piers, mere masses of smoking ruins: but the Ordnance Dépôt on Priddy's Hard had somehow escaped, probably through the ignorance of the assailants. He landed at Sheer Jetty opposite Coaling Point, and before he was half-way up the steps a short, rather stout man, in the undress uniform of a General of Division, ran down and caught him by the hand. After him came a taller, slimmer man with eyes like gimlets and a skin wrinkled and tanned like Russian leather.

The first of the two men was General Sir John French, Commander-in-Chief at Aldershot, and the second was General Sir Ian Hamilton, Commander of the Southern Military District.

"Bravo, Beresford!" said General French, quietly. "Scooped the lot, didn't you?"

"All that aren't at the bottom of the Channel. Good-morning, Hamilton. I've heard that you're in a pretty bad way with your forts here," replied the Admiral. "By the way, how are the docks? I've got a few lame ducks that want looking after badly."

"We've just been having a look round," replied General [Pg 133] Hamilton. "The town's in an awful state, as you can see. The Naval and Military barracks, and the Naval School are wrecked, and we haven't been able to save very much from the yards, but I don't think the docks are hurt much. The sweeps went more for the buildings. We can find room for half a dozen, I think, comfortably."

"That's just about what I want," said the Admiral. "We've lost the *Hindustan* and *New Zealand*. The *Canada* and *Newfoundland* are pretty badly mauled, and I've got half a

dozen Frenchmen that would be all the better for a look over. The *Britain*, *Edward VII.*, *Dominion* and *Commonwealth* are quite seaworthy, although, as you see, they've had it pretty hot in their topworks. The cruiser squadron is practically untouched. We've got the *Verite*, *Justice* and *Democratie*, but the *Verite* has got her propellers and rudders smashed. By the way, that ship of Erskine's, the *Ithuriel*, has turned out a perfect demon. She smashed up the first attack, sank nine destroyers and two cruisers, one of them was that big chap the *Dupleix*, before we came on the scene. During the action she wiped out I don't know how many destroyers and torpedo boats, sank the *Jeanne d'Arc* and saved my ship from being rammed by crippling the *Verite* just in the nick of time. If we only had a squadron of those boats and made Erskine Commodore, we'd wipe the fleets of Europe out in a month. Now that's my news. What's yours?"

"Bad enough," replied General French. "A powerful combined fleet of Germans and French, helped by some of these infernal things that seem as much at home in the air as they are in the water, are making a combined attack on Dover, and we seem to be getting decidedly the worst of it. Dover Castle is in flames, and nearly all the forts are in a bad way; so are the harbour fortifications. The Russians and Dutch are approaching London with a string of transports behind them, and four airships above them. Their objectives are supposed to be Tilbury[Pg 134] and Woolwich on one hand, and Chatham on the other. By the way, weren't there any transports behind this French Fleet that you've settled up with?"

He had scarcely uttered the last word when a helio began to twinkle from the hill above Foreland.

"That's bad news," said the Admiral, "but wait now, there's something else. It's a good job the sun's come out, though it doesn't look very healthy."

The message that the helio twinkled out was as follows:

"Thirty large vessels, apparently transports, approaching from direction of Cherbourg and Brest about ten miles south-east by south."

"Very good," said the Admiral, rubbing his hands. "Of course they think we're beaten. I've got five French cruisers that they'll recognise. I'll get crews aboard them at once and convoy those transports in, and the Commanders will be about the most disgusted men in Europe when they get here."

Acting on the principle that all is fair in love and war, Admiral Beresford and the two Generals laid as pretty a trap for the French transports as the wit of man ever devised. Ten minutes' conversation among them sufficed to arrange matters. Then the Admiral,

taking a list of the serviceable docks with him, went back on board the *Ithuriel* and ran out to the Fleet. He handed over the work of taking care of the lame ducks to Commodore Courtney of the *Britain*; then from the damaged British ships he made up the crews of the French cruisers, the *Jules Ferry*, *Leon Gambetta*, *Victor Hugo*, *Aube* and *Marseillaise*. He took command of the squadron on board the *Victor Hugo*, and to the amazement of officers and men alike, he ordered the Tricolor to be hoisted. At the same time, the White Ensign fluttered down from all the British ships that were not being taken into the dockyard and was replaced by the Tricolor. A few minutes afterward the French flag rose over Fort [Pg 135] Monckton and upon a pole mast which had been put up amidst the ruins of Southsea Castle.

The French prisoners of course saw the ruse and knew that its very daring and impudence would command success. Some of them wrung their hands and danced in fury, others wept, and others cursed to the full capability of the French language, but there was no help for it. What was left of Portsmouth was already occupied by twenty thousand men of all arms from the Southern Division. The prisoners were disarmed and their ships were in the hands of the enemy to do what they pleased with, and so in helpless rage they watched the squadron of cruisers steam out to meet the transports, flying the French flag and manned by British crews. It meant either the most appalling carnage, or the capture of the First French Expeditionary Force consisting of fifty thousand men, ten thousand horses, and two hundred guns.

The daringly original stratagem was made all the easier of achievement by the fact that the Commanders of the French transports, counting upon the assistance of the airships and the enormous strength of the naval force which had been launched against Portsmouth, had taken victory for granted, and when the first line came in sight of land, and officers and men saw the smoke-cloud that was still hanging over what twenty-four hours before had been the greatest of British strongholds, cheer after cheer went up. Portsmouth was destroyed and therefore the French Fleet must have been victorious. All that they had to do, therefore, was to steam in and take possession of what was left. At last, after all these centuries, the invasion of England had been accomplished, and Waterloo and Trafalgar avenged!

Happily, in the turmoil of the fight and the suddenness in which the remains of the French Fleet had been forced to surrender, the captain of the *Victor Hugo* had forgotten to sink his Code Book. The result was that when the cruiser squadron steamed out in two divisions to meet the transports, the French private signal, "Complete victory [Pg 136]—welcome," was flying from the signalyard of the *Victor Hugo*. Again a mighty cheer thundered out from the deck of every transport. The

cruisers saluted the transports with seventeen guns, and then the two divisions swung out to right and left, and took their stations on either flank of the transports.

And so, all unsuspecting, they steamed into Spithead, and when they saw the British ships lying at anchor, flying the Tricolor and the same flag waving over Fort Monckton and Southsea Castle, as well as from half a dozen other flagstaffs about the dockyards, there could be no doubt as to the magnitude and completeness of the victory which the French Fleet had gained, and moreover, were not those masts showing above the waters of Spithead, the masts of sunken British battleships.

Field-Marshal Purdin de Trevillion, Commander of the Expeditionary Force, accompanied by his staff, was on board the Messageries liner *Australien*, and led the column of transports. In perfect confidence he led the way in between the Spithead Forts, which also flew the Tricolor and saluted him as he went past. As the other vessels of the great flotilla followed in close order, Fort Monckton and the rest of the warships saluted; and then as the last transport entered the narrow waters, a very strange thing happened. The cruisers that had dropped behind spread themselves out in a long line behind the forts; the British ships slipped their moorings and steamed out from Stokes Bay and made a line across to Ryde. Destroyers and torpedo boats suddenly dotted the water with their black shapes, appearing as though from nowhere; then came down every Tricolor on fort and ship, and the White Ensign ran up in its place, and the same moment, the menacing guns swung round and there was the French flotilla, unarmed and crowded with men, caught like a flock of sheep between two packs of wolves.

Every transport stopped as if by common instinct. The French Marshal turned white to the lips. His hands went up in a gesture of despair, and he gasped to his second-in-command, who was standing beside him:

"Mon Dieu! Nous sommes trahis! Ces sacrés perfides Anglais! We are helpless, like rats in a trap. With us it is finished, we can neither fight nor escape."

While he was speaking, the huge bulk of the *Britain* steamed slowly towards the *Australien*, flying the signal "Do you surrender?" Within five hundred yards, the huge guns in her forward barbette swung round and the muzzles sank until the long chases pointed at the *Australien*'s waterline. The Field-Marshal knew full well that it only needed the touch of a finger on a button to smash the *Australien* into fragments, and he knew too that the first shot from the flagship would be the signal for the whole Fleet to open fire, and that would mean massacre unspeakable. He was as brave a man as ever wore a uniform, but he knew that on the next words he should speak the lives of fifty thousand men depended. He took one more look round the ring of steel

which enclosed him on every side, and then with livid lips and grinding teeth gave the order for the flag to be hauled down. The next moment he unbuckled his sword and hurled it into the sea; then with a deep groan he dropped fainting to the deck.

It would be useless to attempt to describe the fury and mortification with which the officers and men of the French Force saw the flags one by one flutter down from end to end of the long line of transports, but it was plain even to the rawest conscript that there was no choice save between surrender and massacre. They cursed and stamped about the decks or sat down and cried, according to temperament, and that, under the circumstances, was about all they could do.

Meanwhile, a steam pinnace came puffing out from the harbour, and in a few minutes General French was standing on the promenade deck of the *Australien*. The Field Marshal had already been carried below. A [Pg 138]grey-haired officer in the uniform of a general came forward with his sword in his hand and said in excellent English, but with a shake in his voice:

"You are General French, I presume? Our Commander, Field-Marshal Purdin de Trevillion had such an access of anger when he found how we had been duped that he flung his sword into the sea. He then fainted, and is still unconscious. You will, therefore, perhaps accept my sword instead of his."

General French touched the hilt with his hand, and said:

"Keep it. General Devignes, and I hope your officers will do the same. I will accept your parole for all of them. You are the Field-Marshal's Chief-of-Staff, I believe, and therefore, of course, your word is his. I am very sorry to hear of his illness."

"You have my word," replied General Devignes, "for myself and those of my officers who may be willing to give their parole, but for those who prefer to remain prisoners I cannot, of course, answer."

"Of course not," replied General French, with a rather provoking genial smile. "Now I will trouble you to take your ships into the harbour. I will put a guard on each as she passes; meanwhile, your men will pile arms and get ready to disembark. We cannot offer you much of a welcome, I'm afraid, for those airships of yours have almost reduced Portsmouth to ruins, to say nothing of sending ten of our battleships and cruisers to the bottom. I can assure you, General, that the losses are not all on your side."

"No, General," replied the Frenchman, "but for the present, at least, the victory is on yours."

Then transport after transport filed into the harbour, and General Hamilton and his staff took charge of the disembarkation. Six of the British lame ducks had been got safely into dock, and every available man was slaving away in deadly earnest to repair the damage done in those terrible two hours. Repairs were also being[Pg 139] carried out as rapidly as possible on the cruisers and battleships lying in Spithead, and as shipload after shipload of the disarmed French soldiers were landed, they were set to work, first at clearing up the dockyards and getting them into something like working order, and then clearing up the ruins of the three towns.

The news of Admiral Beresford's magnificent coup had already reached London, and the reply had come back terse and to the point:

"Excellently well done. Congratulate Admiral Beresford and all concerned. We are hard pressed at Dover, and London is threatened. Send *Ithuriel* to Dover as soon as possible, and let her come on here when she has given any possible help. Land and sea defence of south and south-east at discretion of yourself, Domville and Beresford. Connaught."

By some miracle, the Keppel's Head, perhaps the most famous naval hostelry in the south of England, had escaped the shells from the airships, and so General French had made it his headquarters for the time being. Sir Compton Domville had received a rather serious injury from a splinter in the left arm during the destruction of the Naval Barracks, but he had had his wounds dressed and insisted, against the advice of the doctors, in driving down to the Hard and talking matters over with General French. They were discussing the disposition of the French prisoners and the huge amount of war material which had been captured, when the telegram was delivered. They had scarcely read it when there was a knock at the door and an orderly entered, and said:

"Captain Erskine, of the *Ithuriel*, would be pleased to see the General when he's at liberty."

"The very man!" said General French. "This is the young gentleman," he continued, turning to Admiral Domville, "who practically saved us from two [Pg 140]torpedo attacks, won the Fleet action for us, and saved Beresford from being rammed at the moment of victory."

The door opened again, and Erskine came in. He saluted and said:

"General, if I may suggest it, I shall not be much more use here, and my lieutenant, Denis Castellan, has just had a telegram from his aunt and sister, who are in London,

saying that things are pretty bad there. I fancy I might be of some use if you would let me go, sir."

"Let you go!" laughed the General. "Why, my dear sir, you've got to go. Here's a telegram that I've just had from His Royal Highness the Commander-in-Chief, saying that Dover and London are in a bad way, and telling me to send you round at once. When can you start?"

"Well, sir," replied Erskine, after a moment's thought, "we're not injured in any way, but it will take a couple of hours, I'm afraid, to replenish our motive power, and fill up with shell, and added to that, I should like to have a good overhaul of the machinery."

"Just listen to that, now!" exclaimed Admiral Beresford, who had entered the room while he was speaking. "Here's a man who has done nearly as much single-handed as the rest of us put together and fought through as stiff a Fleet action as the hungriest fire-eater in the navy wants to see, and tells you he isn't injured, while half of us are knocked to scrap-iron. I wish we had fifty *Ithuriels*, there'd be very little landing on English shores."

"I don't think you have very much to complain of in the French landing at Portsmouth, Beresford," laughed Sir Compton Domville. "I don't want to flatter you, but it was an absolute stroke of genius. We shall have to set those fellows to work on the forts and yards, and get some guns into position again. It isn't exactly what they came for but they'll come in very[Pg 141] useful. But that can wait. Here's the wire from the Commander-in-Chief. Captain Erskine, you are to get round to Dover and London as soon as possible, and, I presume, do all the damage you can on the way. General French is going to London as soon as a special can be got ready for him."

"May I ask a great favour, sir?" said Erskine.

"Anything, after what you've done," replied Sir Compton. "What is it?"

General French and Lord Beresford nodded in agreement, and Erskine continued, addressing Lord Beresford: "That Mr Lennard, whom your lordship met on board the *Ithuriel*, has given me the formula of a new high explosive. Absurdly simple, but simply terrific in its effect. I made up half a dozen shells with it and tried them. I gave the *Dupleix* three rounds. They seem to reduce steel to dust, and, as far as we could see every man on the decks dropped as if he had been struck by lightning. From what we have done with them I think they will be of enormous value. Now Mr Lennard is very anxious to get to London and the north of England, and if General French could find him a place in his special—"

"My dear sir," interrupted the General, "I shall be only too delighted to know your maker of thunderbolts. Is he here now?"

"Yes, sir, he's in the smoking-room with Lieutenant Castellan. And that reminds me, if I am to go to London, I hope you will allow me to hand over the German spy that we caught here as soon as convenient."

"Bring them both in," said General French. "Sir Compton and General Hamilton will court-martial your spy this morning, and, I hope, shoot him this evening."

Within an hour, Lennard, who had something more serious now to think about than even war, was flying away Londonwards in General French's special, with a letter of introduction from Denis Castellan to his aunt and [Pg 142] sister, and an hour after the special had started, the *Ithuriel* had cleared the narrow waters and was tearing up the Channel at fifty miles an hour, to see what havoc she could work on the assailants of London and Dover.