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FLASHLIGHTS ON THE BRITISH FLEET

4.—NAVAL SUPREMACY.

JUST over a hundred years ago Pitt, speaking on the Navy, said "It is the natural defence of this kingdom against invasion." Naturally this is so, for in an Island Empire a fleet—and a very powerful one—is absolutely necessary. For in time of war the functions of our fleet will be, firstly, to bring the enemy to action, and, if possible, destroy them, or, at least, drive him back to his war ports and there set up a blockade. For this work we must have a fleet of overwhelming power.

Learning from Other People's Wars
During the two naval wars of modern times, namely, between Spain and the United States and Russia and Japan, in each case the last-mentioned nations had a vastly superior fleet. In the case of Spain and America, the fifty American ships were easily able to blockade the sixteen Spaniards. But the case of Japan was different, for with her one hundred ships, compared with the Russian seventy-seven, the balance was closer. Yet, with the marked Japanese preponderance, she was only able to effectively blockade Port Arthur, and leave the Vladivostock cruisers free to come and go, with consequences which still remain in the minds of all. We must not lose sight of the fact that those lumping big black steamers that are constantly passing in one continuous stream into our ports are pouring in the very necessities of life to keep the 43,000,000 men, women and children of the United Kingdom from starvation. £400 worth of food must enter our water-gates day and night every minute throughout the year. Therefore the British policy is, immediately upon the opening of hostilities, to seek out the enemy and smash him by superior numbers, and then strictly blockade the rest of his fleet within his war ports.

Never Fired in Anger
Many of our legislators, who about a month or so ago saw our vast Armada assembled at Spithead prior to the commencement of this year's naval manoeuvres, must have had the idea that in this vast assembly of ships we were secure; but there is nothing more deceptive than exhibitions of this kind. Neither Members of Parliament nor the general public are able to compare the force available with the danger which is imminent. Many of those who looked upon the sight of forty miles of steel-clad fighting ships did not do so with pride and with the determination that at all costs British sea supremacy must be maintained, but in the narrow spirit of the economist, who will run the greatest risks to reduce the expenditure upon these huge death-dealing machines that must be built, live their brief and costly life, and then retire to the ship-breaker without ever firing a gun in anger. But the mere fact that there has been no gun fired in anger in home waters for so many years is simply because our insurance policy premiums (that is, the cost of our fleet) are regularly paid.

The Great Race
As most of us know, the great race for naval supremacy is between Germany and ourselves. From the table recently published by Mr. Alan H. Burgoyne, M.P., we find that by January, we shall have thirty-six Dreadnoughts complete; Germany by that time means to have at least twenty-three ships ready, giving us a majority of thirteen. Next on the table we find that France hopes to have thirteen ships completed, which means that our keenest rival is ten ahead of anyone else, which gives an idea how Germany and ourselves are plying right away ahead of all the others. Hence our vast expenditure upon the Navy, and the danger we have to guard against, write against, speak against and depict by graphic diagram drawings in our press is—Germany.

In view of the recent new German Naval Act we are forced into even greater expenditure upon our fleet. Let us take their Navy Act of 1898 and compare it with the Act of 1912. In the former there were to be two squadrons of eight battleships, the largest battleship displacing 10,614 tons; in the latter Act there are to be five squadrons each of eight ships, the biggest vessel displacing 24,100 tons. By the Act of 1898 six large cruisers were provided, the largest being 10,650 tons. This year there are to be twelve large cruisers-of-the-line, the biggest displacing 22,600 tons, whilst against the sixteen small cruisers of 1898 to-day thirty vessels are provided for. In 1898 she had seventy-two destroyers, to-day she has just twice that number; in 1898 she did not possess a single submarine, whilst by the law of the present Act she is to have seventy-two of these under-water fighters; and from the 30,000 men of 1898 the

personnel has jumped to 80,000 at the present day.

The Creek of Economy
During the last four years of 1905-9 a decline was shown in our ship construction, compared with 1904, of roughly £21,000,000, and in the same period the German expenditure increased by over £23,000,000. This year Germany is spending on her fleet over £22,000,000, whilst our expenditure will be something over £44,600,000. This sum, double that of the German disbursement on her fleet, does not really represent so large a margin, for we must take into consideration that our Navy is organised on the basis of voluntary service, and Germany that of conscription, which is, of course, considerably cheaper. It is computed that if Germany had the same system as ourselves her estimates would be no less than £10,000,000 higher.

Furthermore, we are spending money now to make up for lost time dropped a few years ago. Take, for example, the question of torpedo-boat destroyers, and we find that from 1906 to 1909, inclusive, we completed fourteen boats to Germany's forty, so that we now have to spend lavishly to add to our flotillas the necessary new craft. So great has been the pressure upon our resources that the fleet has been removed from the Mediterranean and brought into home waters; and though the strategic centre of Europe has shifted from the Southern to the Northern seas, the Mediterranean remains the key to the Empire and the base upon which British prestige in the councils of Europe rests.

Italy's Great Strides
The removal of the fleet from the Middle Sea undoubtedly weakens the hands of our diplomats in the discussion of all those problems which the present Turco-Italian war has set in motion. Thus the defence of our Mediterranean interests is left to our friends across the Channel. It seems clear by the rapid growth of the Italian Navy—Dreadnought after Dreadnought succeeding each other upon the building slips—that Italy is either acting under pressure from Berlin or as the result of rivalry between her interests and those of Austria in the Adriatic. But the fidelity with which successive Italian Governments had adhered to the Triple Alliance obliges us to consider the eventuality of a conflict between the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente.

Assuming that war broke out in four years' time between these sets of Powers, it would mean that France would have thirteen completed Dreadnoughts, Italy six, and Austria seven, and that there would be ninety six 12-inch (or larger) and thirty-six 9.4 French guns against the one

hundred and thirty-four 12-inch and twelve 9.4-inch guns of Austria and Italy, which would undoubtedly mean that Russia would have to break through the Dardanelles with her Black Sea fleet, and we should have to spare some of our precious vessels to go south to the help of our neighbor; whilst in northern waters Great Britain would have the help of the Russian squadrons in attacking Germany, but, of course, would have no help from France.

What About a Margin?
No doubt in battleships—that is, in the number of units—we are superior to any two powers, but we have not that margin of safety that is absolutely required. The torpedo and the mine in modern war play such an important part that the whole course of a campaign may be altered in a single stroke. By their first successful attack upon the Russian battleships in Port Arthur the Japanese altered the whole story of the war. Therefore we must equally guard against this chance of sudden attack and have a sufficient number of great, first-class fighting ships "up our sleeve" to replace those destroyed in action or put hors de combat by any manner of causes.

Thirteen Dreadnought battleships in three years' time will really represent our margin over one power only. For we must now learn not to lean too heavily on our pre-Dreadnoughts, which are, year by year, dropping out of the service. This means that we must continue to pour our gold upon the waters, for though unquestionably our ships are superior in power and construction to those of Germany, the difference is now but a fraction to what it was half a dozen years ago; and we must keep building hard, for in that alone we shall be able to keep ahead in the race. By the mere fact of having ships in sufficient numbers to defend our possessions we shall be able to prevent war.

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