

The Doom of the "Indomitable"

How the Icelandic Battleships Battered the Barnacles off the Belligerent Hulls of the British Navy

By ROBERT BARR

THE declaration of war found the Government and the country utterly unprepared. Indeed, the formal declaration was not received until after troops had begun to land on the eastern coast of England. It was alleged that the fatal proclamation was sent in time, but that through a regrettable delay, had not been delivered before the blow was struck that staggered Great Britain out of her complacency.

Those who read the London newspapers for the two or three years preceding the outbreak, will be at a loss to understand why the British Government was taken unawares. There is scarcely a newspaper which failed to warn those in power of the possible danger to this country arising from the ever-increasing number of battleships and cruisers that Iceland was building. It was shown conclusively that this new naval force could be intended for England alone, because the sturdy Icelanders had already, by building and purchase, accumulated a fleet very much stronger than that of Germany, and numerically almost equal to that of France, while so far as efficiency was concerned, naval experts from America, who at great risk to themselves had investigated maritime affairs in Iceland, asserted that the Icelandic fleet exceeded those of both Germany and France as a fighting force. Yet Iceland went on building with greater expedition than ever, so, if her ambition was not to attack Britain, it was difficult to understand what nation was the object of her unceasing preparations.

Friends of Iceland (and it need not here be set down that England was permeated with them) showed by speech and printed word that the Icelanders were the most peaceful of all peoples; that they were fully justified in building a fleet suitable for the protection of their subsidized mercantile marine. The pro-Icebergs, as they were termed, called attention to the fact that Britain and Iceland had never been at war with one another; that in times past Great Britain had stood her friend, freely offering up both gold and men for her protection, and that all talk of war between the two islands was not only absurd, but mischievous.

The historical student will be amazed to find how thoroughly ventilated these divergent views were, and how accurate were the articles which gave particulars of Iceland's rise in the world of nations, together with full particulars of the mammoth war ships she was building.

To all this the Government of the day paid no attention. The cordial relations between Russia, Germany and France on the one hand, with Great Britain on the other, seemed to have lulled both Government and people into a sense of false security. The air was full of philanthropic schemes. The British fleet was largely used for ornamental purposes; friendly demonstrations here, naval picnics and Venetian nights there.

The year of the great crisis opened for the British Empire amidst a paen of fraternal good-fellowship. The transference of the capital of Canada from Ottawa to a point exactly mid-way between Vancouver and Quebec, where a grand new city, constructed of marble, had been built for the sole purpose of being a seat of Government, was made the occasion of a series of amazing fetes, stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific. The Queen of England, by pressing a knob of Indian ivory, sent under the Atlantic Ocean a spark that struck into a blaze of electricity the fleet anchored off Quebec, and the spark, racing westward, kindled bonfires to form a belt of crimson across the American continent, and turned on the lights in that section of the fleet anchored off Vancouver.

By happy coincidence, the various States of South Africa had been united into one realm, and the spark from England, travelling under thousands of miles of salt water, lit up other portions of the great fleet at Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth.

AUSTRALIA and New Zealand joined in with celebrations of their own, and the whole British Empire thrilled with patriotic excitement. The battleships of the British fleet, assisting in the civic celebrations, were scattered over the waters of the earth. That month of August marked the climax of prosperity to which the Anglo-Saxon race had reached.

During this month of fervour Iceland struck, and struck decisively. Early in the morning of August 27th, the Icelandic fleet, consisting of seventeen battleships, thirty-eight first-class cruisers, and twenty-five second-class, with their accompaniment of torpedo boats, torpedo boat destroyers and submarines, appeared off Leith.

At first the imposing naval procession was taken as a friendly demonstration, but it was soon seen that this was the opening of a grim tragedy. Before noon the naval harbour in the Frith, that had taken years of time and millions of money to construct, was a mass of ruins, and that night the sky was ruddy with the burning of Leith, while several fires

appeared in Edinburgh itself. With the harbour works had been destroyed several battleships and cruisers, which found themselves penned up and helpless under the well-organized attack of the Icelanders. The enemy were disappointed at finding no stores of ammunition such as they had expected to capture. The British Government had been depending for defence on the amity of nations rather than on the ammunition of the Admiralty.

Daylight next morning showed Leith in ruins, but also brought a ray of hope to Edinburgh, as another fleet was seen approaching over the horizon to the east. This sight, however, caused no panic among the invaders, and by nine o'clock the new fleet was close enough to display the Icelandic colours. It was a concourse of transports, capable of conveying an army of at least two hundred and fifty thousand men, with guns and camp equipment, horses and automobiles.

It is known now that the Icelanders expected greater opposition than they met, and that they intended to land at least one portion of their army in Scotland, but the burning of Leith, which they asserted was the result of erratic shells, made landing at that port inconvenient. So battleships, cruisers and transports sailed for Hull.

By the time they reached the Yorkshire seaport, every available ship in British waters had made a rendezvous at Dover, and while Hull was being reduced to the condition of Leith, Britain's forlorn hope sailed up the east coast for the north. The naval battle of Hull is probably the most complete sea disaster recorded in history, except the destruction of the Russian fleet by the Japanese. The Icelandic ships were all modern, and of highest efficiency as regards speed and striking power. The British fleet, though numerically superior to the enemy, contained many obsolete craft, which embarrassed and retarded their friends more than they harassed the enemy. Sir James Ponsonby, the British admiral, had hoped to postpone the battle until the arrival of the "Indomitable," hastening home from Canada, carrying in state the greetings of the Dominion to the old country, and in two days she was expected to arrive at Southampton.

THE swift cruisers of the Icelanders, however, waited for nothing. They sped east, then south, and finally west, till they came upon the British fleet off Harwich, where an indecisive conflict took place. This engagement determined Ponsonby to crush the cruisers if he could, and so he was lured to the north, almost, but never quite, overtaking them, until it was too late to retreat. The Icelandic battleships were superbly handled, and had been so placed that before a shot was fired all naval experts knew that the Home fleet was doomed. From the first it had not the slightest chance of escape or victory. By the evening of the second day the east coast was strewn with wrecks. Admiral Van Rune, of the Icelandic fleet, had fought a running fight, crushing the British up against their own coast.

No war vessel of the Home fleet was left afloat, and the Icelanders could now proceed with their invasion at any spot that suited them, for effective opposition was not to be feared from the territorial army ashore. This invasion they now set out leisurely to accomplish. In the marine contest they had lost five second-class cruisers, while two first-class were sunk. One battleship was disabled, and in spite of efforts to save her, had drifted ashore.

If Van Rune picked up any wireless information regarding the "Indomitable," he made no preparations for her reception. He knew that the British Government, after the naval battle off Hull, had asked assistance from both France and Germany, but in each case the answer had been that the understanding with Britain did not contemplate armed intervention either for or against that country. Russia had forestalled an appeal by declaring her neutrality, an example followed by the United States, and later by Italy. Van Rune learned that the nearest section of the British fleet was hurrying home from Quebec, but as there had been only one speedy "Indomitable" in that contingent, he knew he was quite safe for another four or five days. Therefore, he determined to land one-half of his army at Hull, and the other half at Harwich, where the railways were to be seized, and thus London was to be captured without serious opposition. Once in the Capital of the Empire, he expected to dictate his own terms, and sign a treaty of peace probably before the Canadian fleet arrived.

Acting under wireless orders from Lord Harry Willoughby, commander of the "Indomitable," there was speedily concentrated at Dover all the ammunition available for the twelve-inch guns and other ordnance with which the "Indomitable" was equipped, together with an ample store of provisions and fuel. The "Indomitable," breaking all records, made direct

for Dover, arriving a day before she was expected. She landed the Canadian delegation, who proceeded up to London by special train. They were received with all honours by the Queen, to whom they delivered the message of the Dominion; an impressive display which took place with great pomp just as if no such trifle as a war was in operation a few miles to the north east of Windsor Castle.

AT twenty minutes past four in the morning the "Indomitable" steamed out of Dover Harbour and sped east like a Derby winner. She did not pause as she sighted the transport fleet hovering off Harwich; a fleet completely unprotected. Lord Harry saw, with a certain grim satisfaction, that the English themselves had set fire to the terminus of the Great Eastern Railway, and that station sheds, hotel, wharfs and piers were one mass of flames, fanned by strong easterly winds which promised the Icelanders some little difficulty in landing from small boats at Felixstowe.

The "Indomitable" scarcely slackened pace as she approached the transports, but at something more than five miles' distance she began firing with deadly effect from her long guns. Before she reached the fleet seven of the transports had been sunk. The sea was covered with small boats, tossing about on the rising waves, through which the "Indomitable" crashed as solidly as a rock. She passed northward without a pause, unheeding the cries of thousands of drowning men, an act which the continental newspapers unanimously described as one of gross inhumanity, and they dwelt on the uselessness of Peace Conferences when a nation supposed to lead in civilization could participate in such a massacre.

Lord Harry Willoughby, however, had other fish to fry, and cared little for what even his Home Press said about him. He was racing for the north, and approaching Hull, swept a great circle eastward. Van Rune mistook her, with her two funnels, two masts, and mercantile-looking hull, for a German liner from New York, an illusion shattered by a twelve-inch cannon six miles away. The Icelandic battleships spread out in a crescent-shaped line, the convex contour towards the shore, and their united fire was concentrated upon the daring stranger, now withdrawn to a distance estimated at ten miles. None of the Icelandic shells reached her, and her own shells came at such infrequent intervals that Van Rune supposed something had gone wrong. His own fleet was shaking heaven and earth with the detonations of heavy guns. As he stood on the deck of the flagship, the gigantic "Rekievik," a shell struck at the foot of the foremost funnel, penetrated three decks, and exploded.

The great ship reeled as though she had grounded on a rock, and before she could recover a second shell fell almost in the same spot, but further to the port side, sank to her interior, and burst out the armour plating below the water line. When the third shell struck, the Rekievik was heeled over until it was impossible to stand on her deck, and as if it needed but the impact of the third shell, she turned turtle, and disappeared in a cloud of steam and spray.

This appalling catastrophe, happening in the midst of an unarmed fleet, spread consternation. The sea of terror in the offing had quite palpably picked out the Queen bee of the hive, slowly, carefully measuring distance, estimating strength of power, calculating the speed of the wind, and had struck three swift blows that crushed the flagship as if she were a wasp.

NOW the "Indomitable" was crawling in closer. The ineffective cannonade of the fleet had ceased. The "Indomitable" also was silent. Only a scattered film of wreckage on the dancing waves showed where the gigantic "Rekievik" had floated but a few short minutes before. Suddenly the two shells came together, and both struck the "Hecla." Her funnels fell; the deck heaved up as if rent asunder by an earthquake, crushing hundreds of living men as if they were mosquitoes, and out of a fissure ascended a white balloon of steam. The "Hecla" did not turn turtle as her sister ship had done, but sank like a stone.

This second disaster threw the fleet into confusion; the lack of a head was beginning to be felt. Van Rune and his officers lay quiet under the waves, with their ruined fighting machine. The "Hecla" had carried down with her Admiral Clinch, second in command, but just before he was struck he had flown a signal, ordering the whole fleet to steam out upon the enemy. Immediately after the disappearance of the "Hecla" various ships began signalling contradictory orders. Some of the vessels struck out for the open sea, but slowed down when they found the rest were not following. Thus the ends of the concave line closed in, and for a few minutes the battleships were dangerously massed together, a predicament of which the "Indomitable" was quick to take advantage. At full speed she tore in towards

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