

PAGES OF BRITISH HISTORY.

Historical Battles—Noteworthy Events in the Story of the Creation of the British Empire.

Off The Scilly Isles, 1796.

On the morning of the 8th of June, 1796, two of our frigates—that fashion of ship which was the most beautiful and stately of "Old England's wooden walls"—were seen seventeen leagues westward of the Scilly Isles. They proved to be the Unicorn, 32 guns, Captain Thomas Williams, and the Santa Margarita, 36 guns, Captain Thomas Byam Martin, a vigilant and officer, who at a subsequent period took, after a brilliant action, L'Immortalite, 40 guns, when commanding a ship of the same weight of metal.

As the dawn brightened three large ships loomed into sight, three miles distant on the lee-beam; and Captain Martin, who first made them out to be French frigates, signalled to Captain Williams to make all sail and join him, and to come within hail. The former then informed him of the strength of the enemy. "The statement of their superiority encouraged him in his eager pursuit," says Captain Martin; in his dispatch to Admiral Kingsmill, at Cork, "having said that he would attack the largest ship, and desiring me to engage the next in strength. This noble example inspired every person with confidence of success, and each ship steered for her opponent; but the enemy determined to evade an action, and bore away under a press of sail, the smallest ship making off to windward."

At nine in the morning "they found themselves in a close bow and quarter line," and continued to run before the Unicorn, and her consort in that position, the largest ship being under easy sail. They were fast being overtaken, and supposing they would soon be brought to action, Captain Williams signalled to clear away for battle; the hammocks were brought up and stowed, the bulkheads sent down in the usual fashion, the ports and magazines opened, the fire put out in the galley, and then the drums beats to quarters.

Nearer drew the chase, and the corvette, which detained the other ships, hauled, as we have said, to windward, and passed the weather-beam of our frigates in long-shot range; but afterwards she steered in the same course with her consorts, evidently to afford support to whichever might need it most.

At one p.m. the two frigates hoisted French colours in proud defiance, as ours had already done the crosses of the Union. The largest ship showed a commodore's pennant, and at the same moment commenced a well-directed fire with her sternchasers. The French corvette at this time, greatly to the surprise of Captain Williams and his crew, brought-to, for the purpose of boarding a sloop that was passing on the contrary tack.

The largest vessel was now discovered to be the Thames, 36 guns, and 320 men (formerly one of his majesty's ships), now commanded by Citizen Fraden; and the craft of which the Unicorn was in chase was La Tribune, 44 guns and 320 men, bearing the broad pennant of Citizen Moulston, commander of a division. On her main deck were twenty-six twelve-pounders, on the fore and quarter-deck sixteen long sixes and forty two-pound carronades. She had just been launched. The corvette to windward was La Legere, 24 guns (nine-pounders) and 180 men.

As Commodore Moulston continued to wait for the Thames, the Unicorn approached them both, but was retarded in her progress by the effects of their fire. At four p.m. the Thames, being the sternmost ship, bore round to avoid the fire of the Santa Margarita; while Captain Martin, manoeuvring his ship with the greatest judgment, laid her alongside his antagonist.

The superior and well-directed fire of Captain Martin's guns soon put the Thames in his possession; as he silenced her battery, her colours were struck, and a prize-crew put on board. On seeing his consort captured, the commodore made all the sail he could, hoisting royals and running out his studding-sails, and by a very sudden and injudicious movement, sought to gain the weatherage of the Unicorn, which at that time was pursuing him towards the entrance of the Irish Channel, and both vessels soon passed close to the Tuskar Rocks, a group of the coast of Wexford, consisting of four great and dangerous masses, about two furlongs in extent, on one of which a lighthouse now guides the

mariner to the southern entrance of St. George's Channel.

The parity of sailing in the two ships, aided by the good judgment of the French commander, kept them engaged in a most exciting running fight for two entire hours. During this period the Unicorn suffered considerably aloft, as the French directed most of their efforts to cripple. "We were for some time," says her captain, in his dispatch to the admiral, "unluckily deprived of the use of our maintopsail; but on its falling to less wind after dark, we were enabled to use our super and royal steering sails, which, by slow degrees brought us so near his weather quarter as to take the wind from his canvas, when, at 10.30 at night, after having pursued him two hundred and ten miles, we shot up alongside of our antagonist, gave him three hearty cheers, and commenced close action, which continued in that position with great impetuosity on both sides for thirty-five minutes, when, on the clearing up of the smoke, I observed that the enemy had dropped on our quarter, and was close-hauled, by a masterly manoeuvre, to cross our stern and gain the wind."

This, however, Captain Williams prevented by instantly throwing all his sails aback, and thus giving his frigate strong stern-way, by which he passed the Frenchman's bow, regained his situation, and once more poured in his round shot and musketry. The effects of the fire soon put an end to all further manoeuvring, by completely dismantling the enemy's ship; her resistance gradually ceased, and her crew called out that they had surrendered.

The commander of the Tribune proved to be John Moulston, an American, who had been sixteen years in the French navy; and when brought on board the Unicorn, he was found to be severely wounded. The squadron he commanded, consisting of La Tribune, La Proserpine, the Thames, and La Legere, had only left Brest two days before. The second-named ship had parted from the rest in a fog.

"I will not attempt to find words to convey to you, sir," concludes Captain Williams, "the sense I feel of the conduct of the officers and ship's company under my command, for if it was possible to say anything that could add to the glory of the British seamen, I have ample field for doing so in the situation I held this day. Indeed, nothing less than the confidence of the most gallant support from them, and the high opinion I entertain of our second, the Santa Margarita, could induce me to risk an action with a force apparently so much our superior; and while I congratulate myself upon the happy effects of their valour in the capture of two of the enemy's frigates that have done so much mischief to our commerce during the war, and on their present cruise were likely to do so much more, you may easily conceive what my feelings are when I inform you that this service is obtained without the loss of one of the brave men under my command. My happiness will be complete if I find that the Santa Margarita has been equally fortunate."

The losses of the Tribune were thirty-seven men killed and seventeen wounded, thirteen of these severely. The losses of the Santa Margarita in capturing the Thames were only two seamen killed, the boatswain and two seamen wounded, many of the latter had thirty-two killed and nineteen wounded, many of the latter so severely wounded that they died.

The little squadron of Commodore Moulston was a very unlucky one, for, five days after the capture of those two ships, Captain Lord Amelius Beauclerk, in His Majesty's ship Dryad, when cruising, with Cape Clear bearing west by north, twelve leagues distant, at one in the morning discovered a strange sail standing towards him from the southward; but on nearing, she hauled her wind and tacked, making off with a press of sail, and the sea whitening in foam under her bows.

Lord Beauclerk instantly bore after her in pursuit; all day the chase continued, till nine in the evening, when he brought her to close action, and in forty-five minutes compelled her to strike, when she proved to be the missing frigate La Proserpine, carrying twenty-six eighteen-pounders, twelve long nine-pounders, and four thirty two pounders, with 348 men, under Citizen Pevrieu; and in this casualty was very great, for Lord Beauclerk had only seven men killed and wounded, while La Proserpine had lying on her deck thirty slain and forty-five severely injured.

For his services in this naval campaign, Captain Williams was knighted, though no reward seems to have fallen to Captain Martin. Lord Beauclerk died an Admiral of the White, and G.C.B.



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