

THE LOSS OF THE EMPRESS OF BRITAIN

An Episode of the Great War of 1910



THE R.M.S. *Empress of Britain*, five days out from Quebec, was steaming slowly through the heavy Atlantic swell, rolling with the uneasy motion that quickly puts the indifferent sailor "hors de combat." Fog had only been encountered that morning but since then the constant tinkle of the gong

in the engine room had heralded fog banks at intervals, while the melancholy wailing of the siren seemed to emphasise the uncanny loneliness of the heaving grey waters. On board, however, all was life and movement; a full complement of passengers had given every opportunity for indulgence in the usual ship pastimes and not a night had passed but there had been a concert or entertainment of some kind, and in consequence the utmost good fellowship prevailed amongst all classes. In the smoking and music rooms, groups gathered together discussing plans and making arrangements for landing. A pleasant excitement had gripped the ship, and while some were anxiously looking forward to meeting old friends, others, who were strangers to the Old Country, were deep in time-tables and guide books seeing how best they could make use of the time at their disposal.

Prior to the departure from Quebec there certainly had been reports of a strained feeling between England and Germany; it was understood that some tension existed, but all talk of actual war was regarded in the light of a newspaper scare and discounted as such. Here were two great powers with no particular bone of contention in dispute, no Moroccan or Near Eastern question to fan the flame of international jealousy to a dangerous extent, and war with all its sinister significance seemed far away and improbable.

True, the London *Times* had reported strange movements of the German torpedo flotillas in the North Sea, but this had been explained away to the satisfaction of the English Government as merely tactical exercises which undoubtedly all nations have a right to undertake when, where, and how they please. The luncheon hour was just over and fresh life had been instilled into the passengers by the report of the captain that the fog showed signs of lifting. On the bridge the first officer, glass in hand, kept sweeping the horizon and straining to hear any distant blast that might evidence the presence of another ship in the neighbourhood.

"Fog seems a little lighter, sir," he suggested politely to the captain, an old R. N. R. man who had lived his life on the Atlantic. "The look-out just now said he thought he saw a small steamer away there to port. I can't hear any siren though, but that's always the way with these coasters and then they wonder they get run down and blame us for excessive speed. Coasters and smacks, they are all the same."

The captain took up the binoculars and peered uneasily into the haze. Apart from being a humane man he had made it rather a boast that since he had commanded a ship he had never been in a collision of any kind and hence was peculiarly careful never to take chances. At that moment the fog lifted and the horizon became discernible for several miles. Sure enough, away on the port beam at a distance of perhaps half a mile rolled an ugly looking craft, grey with four funnels, no ensign flying and evidently under very easy steam.

"A destroyer, I think, sir," hazarded the first officer, "though I have never seen one quite so large and ours do not have that high forecastle. Anyhow, I'm glad we missed them and it does not say much for their seamanship or good sense to lie doggo like that in a fog. Hullo! they are signalling." As he spoke a tiny stream of bunting fluttered out from the destroyer's stump mast and without a word he dived into the chart house for the signal code book.

"P. B. T. K., that's it, sir. 'Heave to; wish to communicate.'" The captain looked intently through his glasses, closed them with a snap and muttered angrily under his breath, "Damn their cheek, and they certainly are not British."

The *Empress of Britain* slowed down and the stranger rapidly approached, the smoke vomiting from her funnels showing that she had been lying under banked fires. Coming under the *Empress'* stern in order to range up to starboard, she hoisted the German flag and any doubts as to nationality were at an end. So close had she come that her decks were plainly visible without glasses and could

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be seen swarming with men, while an officer in a great-coat gave orders from the bridge. The captain looked serious, and picking up the megaphone hailed her and asked:

"What ship is that and what do you want?"

The officer on the bridge appeared to hesitate a moment and then replied in broken English: "German destroyer *Dachs*; you know zere is war."

For a moment every one on the bridge of the British ship seemed stunned; why had no one told them?—besides, they were no warship and surely they were not to be interfered with, and if not, why had they been stopped?

"What do you want with us, then?" shouted back the captain.

"I zink I had better coom on board. Zdop," came back the reply.

Meantime the German had manoeuvred herself to within about a hundred yards of the starboard side of the *Empress* and as there seemed nothing else to do the "stop" was rung on the engine-room telegraph and the great ship came to a standstill rolling uneasily in the long swell. Nothing is so quickly noticed at sea as the stoppage of the engines, and in a few moments the decks were crowded with passengers, who, tired of monotony, were anxious to avail themselves of any passing excitement. The word "war" had spread like wildfire and surmises and suggestions of every possible character were passing from mouth to mouth, while the ship's officers seemed paralysed and uncertain what to do next. A boat shot away from the side of the German ship and ran alongside the companion ladder of the *Empress*, which had been lowered. Besides the oarsmen, were two officers and half a dozen seamen all fully armed and it was noticed that the guns of the German were now trained on the English ship. The British captain greeted his unwelcome guest at the top of the ladder with a slight salute, perfunctorily returned by the latter, who suggested that the best course to follow would be to adjourn to the former's cabin and there discuss the situation. He much regretted it but his men would form a picket at the head of the companion and any attempt on the part of the *Empress* to steam away would be met by her instant destruction by a torpedo.

Besides the captain and first officer, there were present at the interview which followed, the doctor and purser of the British ship as well as the two German officers, who proved to be commander and first lieutenant.

The German commander commenced by saying that he was sorry a state of war should exist, but since it did and his instructions were precise, all he could do was to obey. He must have within a quarter of an hour all the specie on board as well as all bags of registered mail, after which another quarter of an hour would be given, to enable the crew to clear away the boats, embark the passengers, and row away a safe distance from the ship, as owing to the fact that he was unable to spare a sufficient number of men to navigate her to a German port he would be compelled to sink her. It was a very painful duty, but with a shrug of the shoulders, they were his orders and it was the fortune of war. Indignant protests and angry remonstrances broke from the British officers. This was piracy, an insult to the British flag that would be avenged to the uttermost. Did the German officers realise what it meant to turn adrift in open boats on the Atlantic, 300 miles from shore, numbers of women and children, let alone the fact that owing to the ship being so full there could not be accommodation for all? Had they no hearts? Was the German Government fighting against all codes of international law? Did she intend to authorise wholesale murder and call it war? To all of which came the same reply with the same shrug of the shoulders, these were his instructions and as such they had to be carried out. Ideas of flight, of knocking down and stunning the officers and fighting their picket with what weapons might offer, passed through the brain of the British captain. But, *cui bono*, the German could steam almost two miles to his one, could riddle him with shell fire or send him down to the great depths by a well-placed torpedo, with all the passengers on board. No, clearly that wholesale slaughter must be avoided. It was a cruel choice, but the one alternative offered some chance of life to the mothers, wives and children. As for him, his time had come and it only remained for him to prove that the crew of a British merchant ship is made of the same stuff as the men

who stood to their last roster on the *Birkenhead* and *Victoria*. War was cruel, damned wickedly cruel, making non-combatants suffer and sending them to death like sheep, and if this was the plan of the Germans for the smashing of British trade and crippling of the shipping industry, then they were laying up for themselves a heritage of hate that centuries of friendly relations would never wipe out.

A quartermaster was summoned and given the keys of the ship's strong room, with instructions to hand over the money and mails to the German bluejackets, while the ship's officers were sent among the passengers to tell them that they must prepare to leave the ship. Women and children naturally were to have precedence, men and the crew must trust to life belts, hastily constructed rafts, and good luck. Considering the horror of the situation, there was remarkably little flurry or panic. A young bride on her honeymoon indignantly asked whether she was expected to leave all her dainty clothes behind, apparently unable to realise that the question at stake was not one of clothes but life. An English tourist returning home after a trip to Canada stormed and stamped up and down the deck, vowing vengeance on the German officer who should be cashiered, "Yes, by Gad, he should," and he would write to the *Times* and say so, quite unmindful of the fact that he might never live to hold a pen again. A Canadian farmer from the Northwest, going home after an absence of many long years, broke down completely and wandered aimlessly about with a collection of railway guides and time-tables, babbling of the trains from Liverpool to London and asking whether any of them stopped at Crewe. Faces had suddenly aged, laughter had died, men were embracing their women folk with convulsive spasms of emotion. A steward behind the bar of the smoking room was counting his checks and corking his bottles from sheer force of habit. In the steerage things were much the same. A babel of foreign voices rose and fell like the humming of innumerable bees. To their credit be it said, the excitable Latin element had by communication with the stout Canadian race caught something of the others' control, while the Slav methodically buttoned up his coat and turned up his collar, prepared for the worst in that phlegmatic way that distinguishes him from other nations and makes of him the finest soldier in the world behind fortifications.

A young Irish priest with an escetic face, rendered supernaturally strong by this sudden crisis, held aloft a crucifix and recited the prayers for the dying in a high pitched and strained voice; while at his feet knelt a motley throng of men and women who now called on God and the Blessed Virgin for that help which passeth all human understanding.

The crew were busy getting the boats out and as the German officer paused at the head of the companion ladder, even his Teutonic calm was moved. After all, these poor people had done nothing, but his precise orders admitted of no argument. "British merchant ships, which might be captured, unless it were possible to convey them to the nearest German port or place such a guard on board as would ensure the control of the vessel and its safe navigation to such port, should be sunk after giving sufficient time to allow the crew to take to the boats or as many as possible had been transferred on board the German vessel as prisoners." Now the *Dachs* was only of 400 tons displacement with a crew of 90, mostly stokers, and already she was inconveniently crowded. It was obvious that a guard could not be spared to navigate the *Empress* to a German port and equally obvious that it would be impossible to convey her with any chance of success across the North Sea, swept as it was by British cruisers and torpedo craft. In fact his own safety was a question of consideration, his coal was running short and after settling this business he would have to run to a rendezvous off the west coast of Scotland in the hope of finding a friendly collier from which to replenish. He had offered the British captain and his officers the refuge of his ship and he had secretly admired their indignant refusal. Clearly the fault was not his; the will of the Emperor and the fortune of war directed his actions and with a sigh he realised that his duty lay only one way. With the mails and the money he speedily regained his ship.

BY now the boats had been provisioned and the heart-rending task of the allotment of places was taking place. Women and children first

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