

A Warning Voice from the Spanish Armada.

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Attend, all ye who list, to hear our noble England's praise;
I sing of the thrice famous deeds she wrought in ancient days,
When that great fleet invincible, against her bore in vain,
The richest spoils of Mexico, the stoutest hearts of Spain.

—Macaulay.

INTRODUCTION.

"Before one talk of military affairs he must first of all be skilled in naval tactics."

Upon a tablet in a public garden at Nan Changfu (the capital of Kiang se), the above is recorded as a remarkable saying of Change-kink, who was a General in the time of the Sung dynasty.

If this maxim was considered worthy of such record in a continental empire like China, it should be of greater value in a maritime empire like Great Britain. If it signifies that the general organisation of a force at sea for battle, should form the foundation of that of a force on land, then I think it is a maxim peculiarly applicable to this country; and that the story of the Spanish Armada of 1588, is a decided illustration of its truth.

The commonly received idea of the defeat of that Armada is that it was mainly the work of the storms of Heaven; but those who read the accounts of it in Froude, in Mottley, and in the original documents of the time, will I think, come to the conclusion, that although the complete destruction was caused by extraordinary tempests, yet the failure had occurred before they began, and that was due partly to the inherent defects in the Armada itself, but chiefly to the skill and spirit of the English Navy. And from the proceedings of both the contending parties, from the successful and the defective measures on both sides, I draw the same lessons, which even at this distance of time, are, it seems to me, of value, in considering the subject of the general defence of these islands; and which will, I think, give a pregnant meaning to the maxim of the Chinese General. It appears to me that:

There are three Lessons to be learnt from the Armada.

1st. *Decentralisation.*—That is to say that as much liberty of action both in carrying out the details of preparation, and in the actual warfare, should be given to the local Commanders as is possibly compatible with the control and supervision of the central authority.

2nd. *The preservation of the Martial Discipline of the Country.*—That is to say, that the defence of these islands shall be made to be felt such a national duty, that there shall always be ensured a sufficient proportion of the able population, to some extent armed, trained, and disciplined. And—

3rd. *An abundant supply of efficient Seamen.*—That is to say, that not only should there be effective seamen enough in the Navy and its immediate reserves, but that measures should be taken by the Government to persevere as far as a Government can, a race of thorough sailors in our seafaring population.

It may be said by some objectors, that one need not go back to the times of the Spanish Armada to learn that those three points are important to the defence of this country. And by others, that the days of danger to this country from great Armadas are gone by, never to return; and therefore that the ideas of those days are no longer applicable.

I should be very glad indeed, were it unnecessary for any person to appear in this Institution, to call attention to the importance of those or any point connected with the defence of the country; but when one sees that, notwithstanding the vast sums expended on our Army and Navy, economy and not efficiency has been the guiding rule; and that any organization of the population of the country towards its defence by land or by sea, has been looked upon as an obsolete idea of a passed epoch, one cannot think that these points have been as yet felt by the Government and the country to be of that importance. And hence, I hope, it will be not altogether a superfluous or useless undertaking, to draw attention to a remarkable illustration of their value, in one of the most vital exigencies of our national history.

Those objectors, who think that the probability of a great national struggle is a chimæra existing only in the brains of retired Admirals and Generals, I request to compare the present state of Europe with that immediately preceding the Armada. Then two or three powerful nations had been fighting for some years for rectification of boundary lines; large Armies and Fleets, armed with newly invented cannon and firearms, were to be found in the three great continental states. But the Government of England considered that her insular position and isolated policy, rendered any serious measures unnecessary for her security. There were indeed two little clouds appearing on the horizon; one was a religious war, and the other was the fear of the great maritime power of the day that her sea commerce would be interfered with. The English diplomatists however felt certain that both could be dispersed by a judicious policy of non interference; and they continued in that placid hallucination until the storm burst upon them. There is a large number of people in England now, who trust to ward off all dangers by the same policy, and who, if they should come, will trust rather, as Queen Elizabeth did, to the general spirit of the people, or even to a contrary wind, than pay a reasonable insurance for the existence of their country.

To my mind, the words addressed to Queen Elizabeth by some learned poet at the time are still applicable:—

"And now O Queene, above all other biest,
For whom both windes and waves are prest to fight.

To rule your owne, so succour friends opprest.
(As far from pride as ready to do right)
That England you, you England long enjoy,
No loose your friends delight, then foes annoy."

The position and Power of Spain.

Spain was at the height of that power in Europe, which she so suddenly and in some respects, accidentally acquired. It is no discredit to the Spanish renown, to speak of it as partly accidental; for, although the surprising conquests in America were due to the energy, and chivalry of her people, still those conquests would not have placed Spain in such a dominant position in Europe if her sovereign had not happened about that time to succeed by inheritance to dominions in Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Portugal.

Thus Spain seemed to have been placed by Providence in the position to reap the first fruits of the newly discovered ocean traffic; with a seaboard in the Mediterranean as well as the Atlantic, she was able to avail herself of the nautical skill of the Italian and Portuguese, and at the same time to apply the wealth and power resulting from the new world, over her dominions in the old.

Philip had acquired the dominion of Portugal, at the very time when it was most advantageous to him to use its maritime energies towards getting the dominion of the seas; he had added to his inheritances in Naples and Milan and had thus the benefit of the talent, civilisation and naval science of the Italians. His inherited provinces in the Netherlands contained the most energetic, enterprising and advanced people of the time; but the power they thus possessed was at this time rather a disadvantage than an acquisition to him, for their rebellion had commenced, and to keep it in check occupied a great part of his forces and wealth. Nevertheless the possession was a great advantage to him as far as his affairs with England were concerned, because it gave him a position on the coast immediately opposite the most vulnerable part of England, and an excuse for collecting war forces, there, without openly threatening that country.

The Spanish People.

But the marrow of his strength were his own people of Spain. They were still apparently the most warlike and chivalrous people in Europe, and still retained much of the high spirit which had marked them at one time as the most independent of the Gothic races. The result of the long wars with the Saracens, and the subsequent wars going on up to that time in Italy and the Netherlands had established the Spanish Infantry in the position once held by the archers of England, in Europe; and this superiority was strengthened at that time, by their being more generally armed with the new fire arms, than the infantry of other countries. The remarkable religious fervour of the people, though it injured their power as a nation, gave force to them as soldiers. And this great element of strength, was not, as in most other European countries, a merely latent power to be called forth on special emergencies under the feudal regulations, but in Spain it was a fully organised power, and always kept in a condition ready for action. By the help of the wealth from the Indies and from the continuous warfare in his provinces, the King of Spain was able to keep up a force of trained and experienced soldiers, accustomed to traverse Europe and to fight in any country.

The maritime power of the country had culminated in the victory at Lepanto, 17 years before, since that time Spain had been acknowledged mistress of the seas. But there was and element of weakness in it, which caused its speedy fall. It was a sea-manship based on the traditions of the Mediterranean and on the navigation of a comparatively safe coasting trade; and unfit to cope in the open ocean with that of the more daring and skilful seamen, trained in the boisterous seas of the North. The very fact of their predominance, led their ocean navigation to take the form of trading with their wealthy Indian dominions, rather than for war or stormy seas.

The internal condition of Spain was favourable to her power in Europe. The peace since the wars with the Saracens, and the commerce and consequent wealth that flowed in from the immense possessions of Spain and Portugal in the East and West Indies, had improved the conditions of the people; and yet the power of the sovereign over the people and resources of the country had become almost absolute. The population of Spain itself was about 7,000,000, or nearly half what it is at present, and the physical condition of the people was probably better. The population of the other European countries under Philip's rule, must have been greater in proportion, because they were