

### The Explosion on Board the "Thunderer."

A most serious accident, which resulted in a terrible loss of life, took place on board the *Thunderer*, a twin screw, iron turret ship, armoured, 9199 (407) tons, 5600 (800) horse power, at Spithead, on Friday last. She had been undergoing a series of trials of her machinery. On Wednesday she got under weigh, but owing to a bad joint in one of the steam pipes the trial could not proceed. On Friday morning she got up steam for a trial of her speed on the measured mile, the ship being in charge of the officials connected with the Steam Reserve. Captain J. C. Wilson, the officer appointed to the *Thunderer*, was on board, but the ship not being in commission, he was not in command. Among the Steam Reserve officials on board were Captain C. L. Waddilove and Mr. John Oliver, Chief Inspector of Machinery; the Dock Yard authorities were represented by Mr. E. Newman, Chief Engineer; and the makers of the engines, Messrs. Humphrys and Tennent, of London, by Mr. Humphrys, jun. It appears that there are nine boilers to provide the engines with their motive powers, each being multitubular and of rectangular construction. About five minutes past one everything was in readiness for putting the vessel upon the measured mile, and the anchor was hoisted. After having run for about eleven minutes in the direction of the Stokes Bay a sudden explosion occurred, with a noise very similar to that of thunder; and in an instant great volumes of steam and smoke rose to a tremendous height, rendering the ship for a few moments indistinguishable from the shore. It was, of course, known at once by those on board, and it was equally apparent to those looking at the vessel from the beach, and who, it should be said, felt the shock of the explosion, that something very serious had happened; and an immediate inquiry soon showed that one of the boilers had burst. Steam continued to rise in dense volumes from the stoke hold gratings, and indeed from every conceivable crevice communicating with the deck, and the utmost consternation prevailed among the whole of the officers and men on deck. Before anyone could face the scalding steam which filled the stokehold and engine room, a general signal was run up by order of Captain Waddilove, who (with Staff Commander Robert Jackson and Mr. Harding, Queen's pilot) was on the bridge at the time, to send a tug and medical assistance. The signal was noticed and acted upon with a promptitude which was no doubt in a great measure attributable to the rising of the steam into the air and the great noise which must have been noticed by the signalmen on duty on board the *St. Vincent*, training ship for boys, Commander Arthur T. Brooke, the *Duke of Wellington*, flagship of the Port Admiral, and at the dockyard semaphore. Within a very short space of time a number of naval surgeons of the ships in port had assembled with various appliances, comprising lint, wadding, bandage, &c., and some were despatched to the vessel, while others made their way to the Royal Naval Hospital at Haslar to assist the medical staff of that institution in the arrangements which were at once made for the reception of any cases. The signal having been made, those on board the *Thunderer* had nothing to do but wait until the steam had sufficiently disappeared to enable them to go below into the engine department. This they were able to do in the course of a few minutes; but it was nearly an hour before the stokehold could be thoroughly explored. Mr.

Humphrys, soon after the accident, ran to the safety valves, which he adjusted, while Mr. George J. Weeks ran to the engines and stopped them. It was subsequently found that the whole of the front of the starboard foremost boiler in the after stokehold had been blown out with such force as to carry away everything it struck. Stokehold plates were torn up, and the whole of the stokehold, and a portion of the engine-room looked a perfect wreck. Lying about in all directions were the bodies of stokers, contractors' men, and workmen from the dockyard. Mr. Slade, the chief engineer of the ship, Mr. Robert Wingfield, engineer, and Mr. Edward W. Thomas, engineer, were also found lying among the debris. The first named officer was much mutilated, and was quite dead, while Mr. Wingfield's head was found at some distance from his body, having been blown over upon some of the other victims. On entering the engine room to attend to the engines, Mr. Weeks found Captain Wilson, who happened to be in the engine room at the time of the explosion, and managed to drag him out and get him on deck, when it was found that his hands were very much scalded. Notwithstanding this, however, he continued to give directions as to the recovery of the other bodies. In addition to those who were dead or unconscious, there were many others who were frightfully burnt and scalded on all parts of their bodies, and who ran about the deck uttering the most piercing shrieks and tearing off their clothes, and with them large portions of skin and flesh. Several of the poor fellows were with much difficulty prevented from jumping overboard into the sea. The whole of the cases were temporarily attended to by Dr. William J. Volatti, of the *Asia*, who was in medical charge of the steam reserve party on board the ship. Those who were still alive were placed in steam launches and taken as quickly as possible to Haslar Hospital, and the dead bodies, to the number of fifteen, were subsequently wrapped in flags, canvas, &c., and taken in a similar manner to the hospital and deposited in the mortuary. The whole of the stokehold and, indeed, the entire engine department was locked up, by order of the captain, as soon as the bodies had been recovered and the necessary work in connection with the ship accomplished. The engines were entirely under the charge of the contractors and their workmen.

The *Thunderer* was taken in tow about half past three o'clock, by the *Echo* and *Camel*, Government tugs, brought into harbour and berthed alongside the dockyard. Large numbers of persons at once thronged to the vessel's side, and the police had a difficult duty to perform in preventing undue haste on the part of those desirous of getting on board. The admiral superintendent of the dockyard (Sir Leopold McClin-tock), on the mooring of the ship alongside, gave orders that all the dockyard hands on board her should be paid (Friday being pay day) and allowed to leave the yard immediately, so as to relieve the anxiety which was being manifested by their families. As soon as practicable a list of the killed and injured—so far as could be ascertained—was posted outside the dockyard gates.

On the nature of the accident becoming known, the authorities promptly told off working parties from the *Duke of Wellington*, under the command of Sub Lieutenant Loring and Mr. T. Baskerville, boatswain, to assist in conveying the injured and dead to the hospital. As soon as practicable the most serious cases, after having received such attention as the resources of the vessel would allow, were placed on board the *Mine*,

torpedo launch of the Royal Engineers. The steamer then made for Haslar at full speed. On arriving at the pier many willing hands were ready to assist the wounded men on to stretchers. This, however, was a task of no little difficulty, for, as may be imagined, the poor fellows were so shockingly scalded and otherwise injured, that the slightest movement occasioned the sufferer the most acute pain. Very few could bear any clothing on them—and indeed the explosion had left very little on some—and from their bodies the skin hung in shreds. The suppressed groans of the poor fellows were enough, even though one had not been an observer of their condition, to show how fearful were their sufferings. The injured men having been placed on stretchers, were hoisted on the shoulders of four seamen, and taken to the hospital. Captain Wilson continued to give orders on the pier until the whole of the sufferers had disembarked. On the completion of the work he was conveyed in one of the *St. Vincent's* boats to the dockyard. A number of stretchers were ready on the pier, and each, on receiving its occupant, was slowly carried up the avenue of trees which leads from the pier to the hospital. As every man was brought in he was placed in bed, and zealously attended by the staff of surgeons, amongst whom were Dr. W. R. E. Smart, C. B., Inspector General of Hospitals, Deputy Inspector W. Loney, Surgeon E. W. Lissett, Surgeon Gerard J. Jarvine, Surgeon Kell, Surgeon Wood (*Scrapis*), Surgeon Murry (*Orontes*), Surgeon Volatti (*Asia*). Sometime after all the injured had been landed, a steam launch from the *Duke of Wellington* arrived at Spithead, and her next freight was now more ghastly than that of the former. On the launch coming alongside the pier, a number of inanimate forms, some enveloped in flags, others in blankets and tarpaulins, told their own sad tale. On by one they were lifted on to stretchers; but despite the care that was exercised in their disembarkation, occasionally a shattered limb would protrude, or the disfigured features of some poor sufferer—blackened and begrimed with coal dust—were disclosed. In all, fifteen lifeless bodies were landed, and carried to the Hospital. One poor fellow had his head blown from his body; and whilst the latter was carried on a stretcher, a sailor carried the former wrapped up in a tarpaulin. The bodies were placed in the mortuary, and the capacity of this building was tested to its uttermost. On and under tables the corpses were laid, and the sight presented by the room full of bodies is an easier matter for imagination than description.

The inquest was opened in a room at the hospital on Saturday afternoon, for the purpose of identification of the bodies and the giving of the legal warrants for interment. Mr. E. J. Harvey, the coroner for the county, was assisted by Mr. W. H. Carrington, the borough coroner of Portsmouth. Little was said by the coroner in his remarks to the jury beyond stating to them the obvious necessity of proceeding at once with that stage of the inquiry. He reminded them, however, that on a future day they would have before them the best scientific evidence procurable. The occurrence was one of the most dreadful he had ever experienced, and one which they could not hurry over. They must give every attention and consideration to the case, and it was evident that the business must be a protracted one. The jury went to the mortuary, and in the performance of a conscientious duty endured as well as might the sickening spectacle they were bound to view. On returning to the room, evidence as to identity was given.