

Chapter XLVIII.

And yet the fact remains that, had the wind failed and the fleet lost steerage way, or, worse still, had it been taken aback from the eastward, with its leaders within short range of the enemy's guns, nothing, it seems, could have saved the headmost ships from capture or destruction. No skill of a great sea officer would have availed in such a contingency. Lord Nelson was more than that, and his genius would have remained undiminished by defeat. But obviously tactics, which are so much at the mercy of irremediable accident, must seem to a modern seaman a poor matter of study. The Commander-in-Chief in the great fleet action that will take its place next to the Battle of Trafalgar in the history of the British navy will have no such anxiety, and will feel the weight of no such dependence. For a hundred years now no British fleet has engaged the enemy in line of battle. A hundred years is a long time, but the difference of modern conditions is enormous. The gulf is great. Had the last great fight of the English navy been that of the First of June, for instance, had there been no Nelson's victories, it would have been wellnigh impassable. The great Admiral's slight and passion-worn figure stands at the parting of the ways. He had the audacity of genius, and a prophetic inspiration.

The modern naval man must feel that the time has come for the tactical practice of the great sea officers of the past to be laid by in the temple of august memories. The fleet tactics of the sailing days have been governed by two points: the deadly nature of a raking fire, and the dread, natural to a commander dependent upon the winds, to find at some crucial moment part of his fleet thrown hopelessly to leeward. These two points were of the very essence of sailing tactics, and these two points have been eliminated from the modern tactical problem by the changes of propulsion and armament. Lord Nelson was the first to disregard them with conviction and audacity sustained by an unbounded trust in the men he led. This conviction, this audacity and this trust stand out from amongst the lines of the celebrated memorandum, which is but a declaration of his faith in a crushing superiority of fire as the only means of victory and the only aim of sound tactics. Under the difficulties of the then existing conditions he strove for that, and for that alone, putting his faith into practice against every risk. And in that exclusive faith Lord Nelson appears to us as the first of the moderns.

Against every risk, I have said; and the men of to-day, born and bred to the use of steam, can hardly realize how much of that risk was in the weather. Except at the Nile, where the conditions were ideal for engaging a fleet moored in shallow water, Lord Nelson was not lucky in his weather. Practically it was nothing but a

quite unusual failure of the wind which cost him his arm during the Teneriffe expedition. On Trafalgar Day the weather was not so much unfavourable as extremely dangerous.

It was one of these covered days of fitful sunshine, of light, unsteady winds, with a swell from the westward, and hazy in general, but with the land about the Cape at times distinctly visible. It has been my lot to look with reverence upon the very spot more than once, and for many hours together. All but thirty years ago, certain exceptional circumstances made me very familiar for a time with that bight in the Spanish coast which would be enclosed within a straight line drawn from Faro to Spartel. My well-remembered experience has convinced me that, in that corner of the ocean, once the wind has got to the northward of west (as it did on the 20th, taking the British fleet aback), appearances of westerly weather go for nothing, and that it is infinitely more likely to veer right round to the east than to shift back again. It was in those conditions that, at seven on the morning of the 21st, the signal for the fleet to bear up and steer east was made. Holding a clear recollection of these languid easterly sighs rippling unexpectedly against the run of the smooth swell, with no other warning than a ten-minutes' calm and a queer darkening of the coast-line, I cannot think, without a gasp of professional awe, of that fateful moment. Perhaps personal experience, at a time of life when responsibility had a special freshness and importance, has induced me to exaggerate to myself the danger of the weather. The great Admiral and good seaman could read aright the signs of sea and sky, as his order to prepare to anchor at the end of the day sufficiently proves; but, all the same, the mere idea of these baffling easterly airs, coming on at any time within half an hour or so, after the firing of the first shot, is enough to take one's breath away, with the image of the rearmost ships of both divisions falling off, unmanageable, broadside on to the westerly swell, and of two British Admirals in desperate jeopardy. To this day I cannot free myself from the impression that, for some forty minutes, the fate of the great battle hung upon a breath of wind such as I have felt stealing from behind, as it were, upon my cheek while engaged in looking to the westward for the signs of the true weather.

Never more shall British seamen going into action have to trust the success of their valour to a breath of wind. The God of gales and battles favouring her arms to the last, has let the sun of England's sailing-fleet and of its greatest master set in unclouded glory. And now the old ships and their men are gone; the new ships and the new men, many of them bearing the old, auspicious names, have taken up their watch on the stern and impartial sea, which offers no opportunities but to those who know how to grasp them with a ready hand and an undaunted heart.