

Watching The Great Surrender

An eye-witness account
as recorded
in
The Manchester Guardian

WATCHING THE GREAT SURRENDER

By F. Perrot

Long before dawn broke over the misty reaches of the Forth the great fleet slipped away to sea. The mightiest armada the world has ever seen - beyond the imagination of man to grasp its terrible concentration of power - went quietly on a mission essentially peaceful. It was to take possession for the world's peace of the humbled bully of the seas. The grand fleet was playing the part of a colossal policeman, tolerant, good-humoured, but intent on his job - that of restraining the peace-breaker for his own good. In the days that I have been living in the fleet, while it buckled on its belt and truncheon, I never heard a vain-glorious boast or the note of vulgar triumph.

What was the fleet now starting on the most astonishing errand in history? A few names and numbers will give a faint conception. Two hundred and forty British ships of war were arrayed, and stole seaward in one immense line - one line as far as open water, then in two lines six miles apart, so as to be ready to take the Germans into their midst and escort them decently and in order to their resting place. First in place were the First, Second, Fourth, Fifth and Sixth battle squadrons, dreadnoughts and super-dreadnoughts every one, thirty-three in all. Sir David Beatty, commander-in-chief, flew his flag on the *Queen Elizabeth*. Then came the First, Second and Third battle cruiser squadrons, eleven ships with famous names sounding like trumpets of Empire - *Lion*, *Tiger*, *Renown*, *Repulse*, *Princess Royal*, *Australia*, *New Zealand*, *Indomitable*, *Inflexible*, *Glorious*, *Courageous* - six squadrons of light cruisers, the fierce, swift harriers

of the sea - thirty ships all told. There were great ships outside this classification - that strange creature *Furious*, the seaplane carrier, the armoured cruiser *Minotaur*, come up north, having finished her conveying business, to be at the painless extinction of the German Fleet. There was *Gaston*, the destroyer flagship, and *Champion*, and then the thick swarm at the tail of the Grand Fleet were the destroyers, one hundred and sixty of them, mostly war creations.

As we went down we picked up from their station below the bridge the five American battleships that have been doing comradely service in northern waters - with Admiral Beatty's fleet - the flagship *New York*, *Texas*, *Arkansas*, *Florida* and *Wyoming*. Their strange cage masts loomed weirdly in the moonlight. There were French representatives, too, of the floating League of Nations. The high-backed cruiser Admiral Aube and a few of their many-funnelled destroyers came up from the Dover patrol by way of a holiday. Their day was done with the ever-glorious bottling operations on the Belgian coast.

We were taking no risks today. Every ship in the Allied fleet went out to meet the Germans, ready for instant battle if need be, cleared for action. The order was that the guns were to be 'in securing position,' the ordinary fore and aft arrangement, but the men on my ship, the battleship *Monarch*, told me that thirty seconds from the flashing of a signal was all that they needed to pour a broadside into anything that wanted it. These guns were last fired at the foe in

the mirk of Jutland night while we were escorting the Germans home.

I went below into one of the 13.5" turrets, and found every man in his place ready to ram the shell home and fire the great weapon. But the target was too easy; there was nothing doing.

Heavy fog lay thick on the North Sea the previous week - fit emblem of the twilight of German power. It lifted that morning. When the fleet put out there was good visibility up to three miles, sufficient to reveal the whole of the pageant, or what of its mighty extent any one pair of eyes could see. A chill and haggard dawn was breaking when I first looked from *Monarch's* bridge on the tumbled sea, leaden like the sky. We were just passing May Island at the entrance to the Firth of Forth, bleak and black, its light staring at us. The moon gleamed through a cloud-rift. Behind the ship, and before, the intermittent glare of the ship's signals was the only sign that we were one of a far-stretching procession.

The cheerless daybreak broadened and revealed the armada scattered over leagues of sea. The Fleet had come down from Rosyth in one long line, and now, the open sea reached, the long manoeuvring began which was to end by eight o'clock in the symmetrical formation of a double line of ships six mile apart. Immediately behind the sister ships of the Second battle squadron followed the *Monarch*. The squadron was revealed to me as a series of grey shapes, squatly foreshortened, colourless but for the broad ensign at each masthead. There was no life to be seen on the decks, but signal flags fluttered up and down at intervals ahead on battleship after battleship, the Orion conspicuous with Admiral Goodenough's flag at the masthead.

We were forging slowly ahead. The navigating officer at my side said; 'It's

odd to be going at this speed after four years of war. Makes me feel it's peace at last more than anything - we're so used to high speed and vigilance. And it's queer, too, to be coming out without a swarm of escorting destroyers.' The day brightened, the sun rose out of a great bank of cloud, and more and more of the fleet came into view. Three miles to the south, in a light haze the second line of battleships, a broken line as yet, became visible. In among the majestic men-o'-war an inquisitive tug had nosed itself, determined to be in at the show. From the misty distance one especially noble shape became definite. All glasses were levelled. 'That's the *Queen Elizabeth*. Look, she's flying three ensigns as broad as a house. Her flags stood out stiff in the breeze, expressing, as with a gesture, the ship's pride of place.

About 9.30 precisely came the great moment - the first glimpse of the captive German fleet. The lookout man at the masthead called down the tube to the captain's bridge: 'German fleet in sight on the starboard bow.' We were fifty miles out to sea east of the opening of the Firth of Forth. '*Der Tag*,' murmured the chief yeoman of signals, as he levelled his telescope on the incredible thing. First of all, we saw a kite balloon towed along by the *Cardiff*, our light cruiser, in the proud job of marshalling the prisoners. Behind *Cardiff* we saw a faint silhouette. Dark gray against the gray haze, like something cut out of paper. '*Seydlitz*,' said an officer. 'When I saw her last she was fairly battered.. Jutland.' So the five battle cruisers were marching to prison.

Over the *Seydlitz* one of our North Sea airships kept watch and ward. The leading German ships showed great plumes of smoke. After the *Seydlitz* came the *Moltke*, *Derfflinger*,

Hindenberg, and *Von der Tann*. They were about three miles from us.

‘What a target!’ said our captain regretfully, and he made a rapid calculation of how long it would take our thirty-three battleships to sink their nine. The nine now loomed out of the haze, all moving as at some peaceful manoeuvres. They were in this order: *Friederich der Grosse*, flying the flag of Admiral von Reuter; *Kaiser, König Albert, Prinzregent Luitpold, Kaiserin, Bayern* (the very latest), *Grosser Kurfürst, Markgraf, Kronprinz Wilhelm*.

There was a gap of three miles between the battleships and the seven light cruisers. These we could not see at all, nor the fifty German destroyers, all of the latest type, that closed the pageant. The light cruisers were: *Karlsruhe, Frankfurt, Emden* (the successor to the famous raider), *Nürnberg, Brummer, Köln, and Bremse*.

The grandest sight was that of the nine battleships towering in the misty light – magnificent and also ignominious. Soon after they were visible the sun burst out fully and made a path of rippling dazzle between us and the Germans. The phlegm of the British sailor was proof even against this miracle. Round me the officers were calmly identifying the ships from their silhouette-books – ‘See the *Derfflinger*’s tripod masts,’ and so on. Our sailors showed no emotion at all. There was not a cheer in all the British Fleet, although everywhere, on every turret and ledge, the men stood thickly, gazing silently or with some casual jest. One man who said to me, ‘This is what we’ve been waiting for all these years’ was an exception. The sailorman thought of peace to come and leave at last. There was chivalry in his heart for a beaten foe. I heard one say: ‘It’s a fine sight, but I wouldn’t be on one of their ships for the world.’ An officer said to

me: ‘We all feel this is an unparalleled humiliation to a great fleet. The High Seas Fleet has fought well, and we have nothing against it. The submarines are another story. We have won the greatest and the most bloodless victories in the history of the world. That’s enough. No mafficking on the sea.’

Of what were the Germans aboard those ships thinking? Three miles away on either side they watched our noble lines stretching far before and behind, shepherding them to an alien anchorage. The German ships advanced into the jaws of the fleet until the leading ship was level with Admiral Beatty’s flagship, which came last as we went to sea, so that when we turned she would head the line into harbour. At this moment, ten minutes past ten, it was time for us to turn. A signal ran down the fleet, and at once each division of ships turned outward and round until the line was re-formed for the homeward journey.

This was a beautiful thing to see. Each ship swept round with parade precision, furrowing up a wide wake all white and green as it turned. The sun caught everything that could shine, and lit up the flags at the masts. The *Queen Elizabeth* was resplendent, all her silvery bulk flecked with white and crimson. In her wake followed the *Oak* the commander-in-chief’s destroyer, after the *Queen Elizabeth* the *Orion*, the *Thunder*, my ship, the *Monarch*, and the rest of the Second battle squadron.

The *Queen Elizabeth* led the squadron in the culminating display, as she does when the fleet goes into battle. Looking back at one moment I saw a score of battleships all changing course simultaneously. This movement gave the finest of a day’s compressions of great strength and grace. From every fortress there spread a banner of smoke. One resplendent picture hid a nation’s

tragedy – a blue dancing sea, grey-blue ships, flags flying, and quiet satisfaction in every man's heart aboard. So complete was the triumph that the humane mind of the British seaman had thoughts to spare of pity, of fellow feeling.

We went back to port much slower than we came. The German ships were only making nine or ten knots. Were they short of coal, or were they not in trim for making any speed, as the German delegates are said to have confessed to Admiral Beatty? The British ships kept step. The weather cleared about noon, affording us a perfect view of the German fleet, all looking to ignorant eyes much as if punched out of a piece of tin, the same pattern. The *Bayern*, solitary in her class, was distinguishable, the two funnels placed close together. The whole scene lightened and became gay. The crews left their battle stations and popped on deck for a view. Bugles blew, flags whipped out, the silvery 'blimp' warship circled about the fleet, apparently joy-riding. One of the men was seen dangling his legs over the platform side and waving to the navy. The throb of her propeller was heard. The 'blimp' was having a jaunt now that her task of submarine spotting is over.

The French warships kept a little apart from the line, as if in courteous self-effacement.

Sir David Beatty had his own personal mascot on his ship that day. It was the huge ensign flown at the peak of the *Queen Elizabeth*. This ensign came from the *Lion*, his old ship, and in the Battle of Jutland, part of it was shot away. Sir David Beatty with pardonable pride chose this war-worn flag to adorn his leading ship that day. The wheel had come full circle.

An amazing spectacle was the show of destroyers. When the German heavy

ships were approaching their anchorage, the fast and largest section of the imprisoned fleet, the fifty modern destroyers, were only coming into view. The fifty were escorted by three times their number of fast British destroyers. The two hundred vessels came along in lines of five abreast with the Germans safely in the middle. Clear as the sky was at that time, the destroyers covered so vast an area that the rear of the procession could not be seen. The sea was covered with the array as a chess-board is with pieces.

Shortly before the armada drew in again to the entrance there was a transformation. The southernmost of the escorting lines turned once more and filed in past the German fleet, a beautifully executed manoeuvre. Off May Island the whole order was rearranged. Our northern line forged quickly ahead to Rosyth, leaving the German ships to be shown their anchorage and inspected by the ships of the First battle squadron. Admiral Beatty's order ran: 'The German flag will be lowered at sunset and will not be hoisted again without permission.' Before we left the High Seas Fleet behind the *Monarch* came so close that the rows of German sailors could be seen clustered on turret and forecastle. The Germans were witnesses of a scene that must have been a bitter drop in the cup. They heard the British fleet cheering its commander. As each battleship swept past the *Queen Elizabeth* the crews thundered out three cheers. The Chief stood on his bridge saluting. A cheerfully camouflaged cruiser, packed with men, rushed past the flagship making a noise. The Germans in the background were sad spectators of this climax to our joy. It might have cheered them a little to hear the British officer saying: 'What magnificent ships!' Admiration was ..

universal throughout the fleet, especially for the *Hindenberg*, the latest thing in battle cruisers. A sailor put it naively: 'Why, you can't tell them from ours.' The day ended on every ship with a service to God for our triumph.

The strangest contrast of the day came at sunset – four o'clock. At that time the Admiral's flagship was back at her moorings above the bridge; the luckless German fleet was safe in custody. At sundown on the flagship of the Grand Fleet all hands were piped aft. Men and officers assembled, expecting a speech from Admiral Beatty to mark 'the end of a perfect day.' As they were waiting a bugle rang out forward, and instantly several hundred men turned round like one and addressed the flag. The bugler was 'making the sunset' in accordance with the old navy custom by which the end of day is signaled whether in war or peace. As the last note of the call died down the ship's company gave three rousing cheers for the commander-in-chief. Sir David Beatty, who was standing in the stern of the ship, replied conversationally, 'Thank you,' adding in the same breath, 'I always told you they would have to come out.' Men and officers responded with a chuckle of acquiescence, and in less than half a minute everybody was back at duty or pleasure.

That was the scene above the bridge; the culminating triumph, quiet as always in the navy, but very real.

At the same moment, seven miles below the bridge, the last-scene curtain was falling on the German drama off May Island which sentinels the entry into the Firth. Seventy-one German ships lay at anchor powerless in the grip of the conqueror. In a semicircle round the only outlet lay British cruisers and destroyers. At the moment when on the flagship the bugle rang joyously out and the commander-in-chief was being cheered, the German ensign came fluttering down at the order of that same man, maybe never to be hoisted again. The seaplanes on the dusk were hovering overhead. The British key was turned on the flower of the German fleet. Woe to the vanquished!

The King and the Prince were with us to give us a send-off. From the captain's bridge of the *Monarch* I watched the King making the rounds of the ships. He stood high on the top of the destroyer *Oak*, gravely saluting as he went down the stupendous array. The ship's men were ranked along the decks. It was a stately progress. Bugles sounded and the national tune drifted faintly over the water as one ship's band after another took it up, and as he came alongside each ship he was cheered from a thousand throats.

- *The Manchester Guardian*

