XXX. *History of the Boat which gave Peter the Great the first Thought of building the Russian Fleet. Communicated by SIR HENRY ELLIS, K.H. Director, in a Letter to the PRESIDENT.*

Read 31 January, 1856.

MY LORD,

British Museum,
30th January, 1856.

Among the Sloane Manuscripts in the British Museum there is one, entitled “The Story of the Ship’s Boat which gave Peter the Great the first Thought of building the Russian Fleet.”

I am not aware that it has been in print; nor have I found it known to persons whose literary means, and whose knowledge of all which has been published in this or any other country relating to Russia, has enabled them to call such a Tract to recollection. It must have been written more than a century ago, since it is found in Sir Hans Sloane’s Collection of Manuscripts, which was transferred to the Trustees of the British Museum in, or soon after, 1753.

The Story is remarkable. The boat itself is, no doubt, that which is still preserved, together with its sails, at St. Petersburg in the Czar’s house; and is a far prouder monument to the memory of Peter the Great than the statue upon the rock which was set up by the Empress Catherine to the memory of her great predecessor.

The writer of this story was confessedly present at the naval solemnity which forms the chief feature of his Tract; and was then, or had been, as I gather from particular expressions, in the service of the Czar.

Who he was, after taking great pains in enquiring, I have been unable to discover.

I remain, my Lord,

Your Lordship’s faithful Servant,

HENRY ELLIS.

To the Right Hon. the Earl Stanhope,
&c. &c. &c.

“The STORY of the SHIP’S BOAT which gave his late Russian Majesty PETER ALEXOWITZ the first THOUGHTS of BUILDING the RUSSIAN FLEET.

“The Russian history is exceeding difficult to trace, because no historian takes notice of any actions till after the time of Duke Ruric, who died A. 879. Cluverius, indeed, is quoted, who relates from Greek Historians that Igor, Great Duke of Russia, crossed the Euxine Sea with a fleet of 15,000 vessels to attack Constantinople—but these are agreed to be only cock-boats, and of no consequence; and it is also further agreed that D. Uladimer was too much engaged to establish religion to regard navigation, and was blamed for the division of his country into twelve dukedoms for the sake of his twelve sons: but the disturbances this impolitic division made were soon quieted by the Great Knaze or Prince Ivan Basilowitz, who re-united three dukedoms and reduced ’em again into one body. This success by land gave umbrage to the maritime powers, lest such an enterprising prince should make any attempts by sea; and, therefore, in a congress at Lubeck, the subjects of foreigners were forbade to come into Russia to teach navigation or shipbuilding, though he seemed to have no views that way, his whole time being taken up in making conquests by land. The death of Borise Godunoff concluded the succession in his line, and after an interregnum of some years came the family of the Emperor Peter the Great. 1. The grandfather, Czar Michael Theodorowitz, who quelled the civil dissensions of the country, and guarded against the incursions of the Tartars, but had no thoughts of building ships. 2. His father, Czar Alexie Michaelowitz, not only confirmed the strength of the dominions his father had left, but advanced upon his neighbours, and enlarged his territories, and extended his thoughts also to the sea. Yet in this he made but a very small beginning, having only built a little ship called the Eagle, and one yacht or galliot on the river Wolga; and the design was totally quashed and defeated at Astracan, by a quarrel amongst the Hollanders that built and had the care of these vessels, in the way to the Caspian Sea. The captain being killed, some fled to Persia and thence to the Indies, and only two of the whole company, a surgeon and a carpenter, returned to Moscow to relate the disappointment.

“So that Czar Peter Alexiewitz truly began and perfected a Fleet, the story of which is thus related :—

“His Majesty, when yet a youth, was walking in the flax-yard at Jomaclost (an old seat of the family near Moscow), and, passing by the magazines where some remains of the household of Niketa Ivanovitz Romanoff, his great-uncle, were

laid, he spied, amongst other things, a small foreign vessel, and his curiosity not suffering him to pass it by without an enquiry, he presently asked Francis Timerman (who then lived with him and taught him geometry and fortification) what, for a vessel, that was? He told him it was an English boat. He then asked, where they made use of it? He answered, it was made use of by ships to bring and carry goods. His Majesty then ask'd in what it was preferable to our vessels? (for he observed it built in a fashion better and stronger than ours.) Timerman answered, that it goes with a sail, with the wind, or against it : which word made him greatly wonder, and, as though not credible, raised his curiosity to see a proof of it. The Czar asked Timerman, was there such a man as could refit the vessel, and show it to go so? And hearing that there was one, being overjoyed, he required him then to find him out. Then Timerman sought out the above-said carpenter, Carstens Brand (who was sent for by his father from Holland to build ships in the Caspian Sea as is before mentioned).

“Then did the seed of the Czar Alexie Michaelowitz begin to sprout. Carstens Brand, a long time despairing of employment in his own way, had hitherto subsisted himself by joyner's work ; and contrary to his expectation being called to work at his first trade, he very willingly repaired the boat, made the mast, four sails, and sailed up and down the River Yause^a in his Majesty's sight, which was yet a great wonder to his Majesty and exceedingly pleased him.

“And who at that time could imagine this divertizement of his Majesty would ever have improved to greater purposes, and not have been laid aside as an entertainment of his youth? But this monarch was so particularly remarkable in all he did, that the very pastimes of his childhood are esteemed as transactions momentous and weighty, and appear worthy to be recorded in history. He pursued such diversions in his childhood as led him, and many other great personages before him, to future great exploits. His pleasures were to build forts moated round ; to draw up battalions as in a real engagement with an enemy, offensive and defensive. And so the said boat did not only serve for play and pastime, but gave occasion for his building a great Fleet.

“But to return to the story. His Majesty was not content to see the sailing of the boat ; but coveted himself to go in her, and steer her ; and because he had observed the boat not to answer her helm, but often to strike against the bank, he asked the above said Carstens Brand the reason of it? Who answered,

^a A small river that runs by the suburbs of Moscow, wherein the English and Dutch merchants dwell, and falls into the Mosqua a little above the city.

because the water was narrow and she had not sufficient way. Then his Majesty ordered the boat to be carried into a water called the Prussian Pond, but that was nothing better: and his desire was so inflamed that it hourly increased, and he resolved to carry it into a larger water: and the Lake of Pereslave was mentioned to him as nearest. He wished to fly thither, but the following accident intervened to retard his journey.

“His mother the Czarine being heartily solicitous for the safety of her son, endeavoured to dissuade and divert him from it, yet with a deference and respect to his sovereign dignity. On his part, he so comported himself to her will as if he had been regardless of his own power and dignity.

“Here was the difficulty: to desist from his intended journey towards the Lake, his strong bent of mind that way would not permit; and yet to proceed without his mother’s approbation, his filial affection forbade him: and all the scruple was about her Majesty’s consent, in an undertaking least in opinion dangerous. However, his eager desire to effect his purpose made him very thoughtful to bring it about. Under the pretext of performing a vow in Trinity Monastery, he prevailed with his august mother for an opportunity of making this journey; hence, it is manifest with what an ardent zeal for the public good God inspired this monarch.

“After his Majesty had taken a full view of the extent of this lake, he then instantly and openly entreated his mother to build there a house and vessels: and so the abovesaid Carstens Brand built two small frigates and three yatchts, wherein his Majesty diverted himself a few years. But afterwards he thought this too small a water, and designed to go to the Lake Cubins, which is large and extensive but not deep enough. Then he fixed his resolution to visit a water large as his desire, and that was the sea itself; but motherly care again obstructed this design; which often represented this as a voyage dangerous and troublesome; but such was the impulse of this son’s spirit, that it could not be restrained nor diverted, and she saw him immutably resolved, notwithstanding all the dissuasion she had used.

“Therefore in 1694 his Majesty visited Arch Angel, and from thence, in his own yatcht, called the St. Peter, he sailed to Ponoia in company with English and Hollands merchant ships under convoy of one Dutch Man of War, commanded by Captain Jolle Jolson.

“His Majesty was much delighted with this voyage, so much at large, but did not stop here. He therefore bent his thoughts wholly towards building a fleet: and in his Invasion of the Tartars he had laid siege to Asoph, and happily taken

it; he then in prosecution of his purpose, which was unchangeable, thought not long about it; but put it speedily in execution. A fit place for building ships was found in the River Veronez, by a city of the same name. Masters were sent from Holland, and in 1696 a new work was begun in Russia, the building of great and noble ships, gallies, and other vessels: and to make it lasting in Russia he contrived to bring the art itself into his own nation; and to that end sent great numbers of his own nobility and gentry into Holland and other dominions to learn Ship-building and Navigation.

“And what is most wonderfull; as though this monarch was ashamed to be out-done by his subjects in this art, he made a tour to Holland himself, and at Amsterdam, in the wood-yard called the Ostend Wharf, he wrought with other volunteers in the ships, and, in a little time made that proficiency as to pass for a good carpenter; after this he desired John Pool, master of the yard, to instruct him in the proportions of a ship, which he learned in four days.

“But because in Holland this art was not taught perfectly in the mathematical way, but only some few principles of it, and the rest must be acquired by long practice and experience; and the above-said master told him they could not demonstrate this in lines, it gave him great uneasyness that he had taken so long a journey for that purpose and had failed of his end so much desired.

“A few days after it happened that his Majesty was at the house of John Theesing a merchant, where he sat in company very pensive for the above-said reason, but when in the course of conversation he was asked the cause of his melancholy, he then declared his reason for it.

“An Englishman in the company, who heard this, told him that in England this kind of structure was in the same perfection as other arts and sciences, and might be learned in a short time. His Majesty was glad to hear this: and hereupon in all haste went to England, and there in four months time finished his learning, and at his return brought over with him two master ship-builders, John Dean and Joseph Noy.^a

“And now it appears to have been an occasion not a little remarkable, since there is a complete Fleet in Russia, and the Czar himself was a master ship-builder, as he proved in fact^b by appointing another place for building ships in

^a “Baron Huyssen, Councillor in the Colledge of Ivan, in the History of his Majesty’s Life, tells us that his Majesty perceived the method and manner of building ships in England to be more regular and much better than that in Holland, and was often heard to say that had he never gone to England he had still remained ignorant of the art.

^b “For as soon as he returned from England he went down to Veronez, whither he carried the two English

the royal city of Petersburg which he founded. What a multitude of great ships and gallies and other vessels of every kind are here built regularly and beautifully we have no occasion to relate ; but all rejoice and wonder. And because a fleet to enable it to succeed in expeditions and engagements requires some formal regulations, or a rule, without which winds and sailors are useless, this most wise monarch set himself to this work, and partly from his own judgment, and partly out of the regulations of foreigners, he collected the excellent rules which he formed into a book : and thus has he, as it were, breathed a living soul into his own material creation, and thence we have seen by the blessing of God those happy successes in every part of the Baltic, where he made prize of a great many ships of his enemies ; with unusual success took the Swedish Rear-Admiral and his squadron, and subdued the great kingdom of Finland, which by land was never to be come at by reason of the difficulty of the roads to it, and in 1719 passed by a descent on Sweden itself, and gave them such a defeat as concluded in our advantage and triumph.

“ Thus, kind Reader, you see how merciful the most gracious God has been, and how wonderful his Providence manifested to us in old time. As low as the most ancient Histories go, Russia had no fleet ; though this was always possible had there been any thought or care to have one : afterwards adverse times arose, wherein it was impracticable so much as to think about it. But in our days this glorious work, scarce before heard of by us, having taken its beginning and rise from so small an occasion, is grown to the greatest perfection by the vigilancy, diligence, and indefatigable application and industry of this wise monarch ; and this in such a strange and wonderful manner, as a long and tedious war has not obliged him to intermit, nor many other cares, both civil and military, have given the least interruption to it.

builders Dean and Noy. The first soon after desired a discharge, which was granted, without giving any proof of his art ; the Czar himself and Joseph Noy received orders from the Lord High Admiral Theodore Alexowitch Golovin to build each of them a man-of-war.

“ The Czar having taken upon himself the title of a master ship-builder, was pleased to subject himself to the condition of that character ; and in compliance with that order gave the first proof of his skill in the art which he had learn'd abroad, and continued afterwards to bear that title, and had at all times, notwithstanding his great engagement in many other affairs, one ship upon the stocks ; and at his death left one ship half-built, one of the largest in Europe, 180 feet long upon the deck, 51 broad, and 21 deep, and mounts 110 guns, and is by relation one of the finest bodies that has ever been seen, as were indeed all the rest he built. He himself drew the draught of this great ship at Riga, where was no master ship-builder but himself : and when he returned to Petersburg he gave the Surveyor an account that he had drawn his draught of the great ship which he had orders to build from the Surveyor's Office, and, according to the regulations of the Navy, presented his draught to be examined.”

“The Story being thus told can want no confirmation : yet, to show farther in an instance very remarkable the passion his Majesty had for this little Boat, I presume to add the last token of his regard for it, whereby he seemed desirous to perpetuate the remembrance of it, as the first occasion of his naval proceedings and exploits.

“This very boat was brought from Moscow to St. Petersburg in 1723, repaired and beautified in order to make his last and most glorious appearance on the 12th August, which I shall give a short Account of, as I had an opportunity of seeing the transaction.

“In the month of June the same year his Majesty sailed to Revel with his fleet, and returned to Croonstadt in the beginning of August, at which time a great number of yatchts and bayers, about two hundred, and one galliot were ordered to meet him there, and attend on the famous little boat above.

“After this little Fleet was arrived within half a league of the place with their charge, they had orders to cast anchor till the nine flags in so many pinnaces came up to pay their respects to the Mother of their great Fleet. A small parent indeed of so large a progeny. At the return of the flaggs the yatchts, &c. weighed anchor and went into the haven, save the galliot which bore the venerable matron ; that lay off at sea till the day of the grand solemnity, when she was received with uncommon ceremony.

“For the Czar a second time made her a visit with the flaggs alone, launched her, and grac’d her with his imperial standard, his own person steering, the Great Admiral and two other Admirals rowing, with the Surveyor of the Navy Ivan Michaelowitch Golovin.

“At her launching the Great Admiral General fired seven guns as a signal to the whole Fleet, consisting of twenty-two men-of-war of the line, to fire at once.

“Then away she came, and, as she came by each ship, was saluted by all the cannon. After she had passed the whole fleet and rowed into the haven, the dutiful children paid the last compliment to their mother with one generall salute of their cannon. Then came on dinner time, and in the evening the Court and Flag Officers rendezvouzd on the edge of the Haven, and closed the evening with merriment, &c.

“A few days after the Boat was brought back to Petersburg and laid up in the castle, where she is to be taken the greatest care of.”