



Rasplata

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RASPLATA.

("THE RECKONING.")

By Commander VLADIMIR SEMENOFF, Imperial
Russian Navy.

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(Continued from December JOURNAL, p. 1622, and concluded.)

CHAPTER XI.

DIARY OF THE LAST PASSAGE—"THE RECKONING."

TO-DAY, 14th May, is Sunday, and [Russian] Mayday. One would think that these are the most favourable auspices for starting on a journey. At 6 a.m. the ships commenced to leave the bay. About 8.30 we took up cruising formation, then the auxiliaries received the signal: "Take destroyers in tow." Jonquières was present in the *Guichen* in a somewhat demonstrative manner.

Now he was able to report with a clear conscience that we were off at last. An amiable gentleman! One could not help feeling that his good wishes were sincere. (They had been transmitted by wireless.) What should we answer him?—"Adieu, mon Amiral," or "Au plaisir de vous revoir?"

By eleven o'clock we had shaped our long course and were going 9 knots. May fortune favour us!

The spirits in the fleet are not so bad. They will just keep up till the fight begins. Jokes are even made. It is said that the next admiral who comes out with the "Third Squadron" will fly his flag in the *Slava*,¹ but that he would not reap any glory.² Either he would reach us, if God so willed it, or he would find in our stead an empty space, and then he would not be able to accomplish anything. Not bad! Something like the Dying Gladiator's *Morituri te salutant*. Lieutenant S— is more gloomy than the night. He croaks. Pointing at the chart (and our track on it), he says: "*Via dolorosa*." After mass and the prayer for a safe passage, we emptied a glass of "Mumm's extra dry" in honour of the start. Lieutenant S— speaks out again: "Feasting at the time of the plague." I

¹ A battleship then nearing completion.

² "Slava" means "glory."

remonstrated with him, even good-naturedly scolded him. Why was he wallowing in his grief? We knew that well enough ourselves. Now we must hold out; it was not in our power to choose anything else. More than once one could not die. . . .

15th May.—So far all is going well. Late in the evening, as I was wandering through the ship, I looked into the ward room. I found W— (the chief engineer) sitting with K— and G— (naval reserve sub-lieutenants) drinking beer and eating sandwiches.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"Don't you understand? A navigator, too, like you! There is a difference of seven hours in longitude. Now just at this hour every German in St. Petersburg is eating his dinner at the St. Katherine Hotel." They laugh. Capital fellows! The devil take all presentiments!

Weather calm. Warm. Met three steamers, crossed the trade route (normal track) from Singapore to Hong-Kong.

16th May.—As regards night cruising we have hit it off well. It will be full moon in two days' time. The night is as bright as the day. Searchlights are quite unnecessary now. So long as we are not free to move about as we like (we are convoying the auxiliaries), torpedo attacks at night are our greatest danger. Defects make their appearance on board some of the ships. We are now three days out, and the following have already had breakdowns: *Tamboff* twice, *Orel* (battleship), *Navarin* and *Sissoi* each once. They did not last long, but it always means a delay, and the worst of it is one does not feel quite certain that these defects have now been put to rights properly. How shall we fare in action? The scouts are ahead, they have spread. We try to push them further out whilst keeping touch by wireless. But it won't work. It is hopeless! Whose fault is it? The inexperience of our torpedo officers or the Slaby-Arco system, which the Technical Committee accepted? The devil take the lot! . . .

17th May.—In the morning a fresh breakdown on board the *Navarin*. We had to ease down for five hours. The scouts are reduced to mere look-outs within signal distance. This is now accepted as the rule. At half-past five in the evening the *Orel* sheers out of the line; her steering engine had gone wrong. It is especially hot and close to-day. The sun is in the zenith, and a death-like silence reigns everywhere.

18th May.—The night passed quietly. At daybreak we stopped engines and commenced coaling. In the "Third (Nebogatoff's) Division" it goes badly; they are not accustomed to it. However, they are not much in need of it. By 3 p.m. the business is finished. *Tamboff* and *Mercurya* are detached to Saigon, and we express to them by signal our special thanks for the "admirable assistance rendered to the squadron." At 8 o'clock we were once more formed up. Suddenly—a fresh delay. On account of the *Tamboff's* departure, the destroyer

she had been towing is turned over to the *Livonia*. The latter messed about with her for an hour and a half before she was ready to go ahead. We now moved off, and exactly two hours later the hawser parted and the old story began once more. The *Livonia* was at last relieved of the job she was not equal to, and the destroyer was turned over to the *Svir*. It is terrible. The whole of this time we were crawling along at 3 knots. At 8 p.m. we sighted a steamer astern. We sent the *Oleg* to overhaul her. She was English; the captain said his cargo was petroleum; that he had no papers; that he was bound for Nagasaki. We made him keep company and put off the inspection and decision to the morning.

19th May, 2 a.m.—The *Apraxin's* machinery has developed defects. She reported by signal that the repairs would take twenty-four hours and that until then she could not make more than 6 knots. Not bad for a beginning! Cursed be our "strategists" and the "reinforcements" sent out by them! The steamer *Oldhamia* appears highly suspicious. K— (naval reserve sub-lieutenant), an experienced merchant seaman, declares the steamer's coal-bunkers are nearly empty; the coal on board would just last to Nagasaki; all the same the steamer was down to her "Plimsol-mark." Petroleum in tins or casks is a bulky but light load. He has sailed with such a cargo. They had then filled up, not only all the holds, but all empty spaces, even carried a deckload; the ballast tanks had been filled with water (to ensure her stability); they had taken on board more than the normal stowage of coal, and still the Plimsol-mark had been several feet out of the water. On board the *Oldhamia* they had little coal left; the cargo was confined to the ordinary holds, the upper deck was clear. What, then, produced this deep draught? It was evident that down below, underneath the petroleum tins, there was something heavy. The captain declared he had no papers. On questioning the crew it turned out that, with the exception of two men who were in the captain's confidence, the whole lot had only been shipped the day before sailing, had, therefore, not been on board when the cargo was being stowed, and could not give any definite information as to the contents of the holds. The captain and his two mates, the engineers as well as the two men who had been present when the holds were stowed, did not, or rather would not give any explanation. On the other hand, one of the seamen (a German) informed us that he had gathered from a conversation between two of those in the secret, which he had chanced to overhear, that the forehold contained shell, the main-hold guns. The Admiral decided to seize the steamer and to send her to Vladivostok, where the nature of the cargo

1 A special mark painted on the outside of the hull, which is placed according to certain rules by Lloyds, and which indicates when the ship is fully laden. When this mark disappears below water the ship is overladen to a dangerous extent, and no company will insure her.

could be ascertained. As she had not enough coal on board to steam that distance, the *Livonia* was ordered to supply the *Oldhamia* with 600 tons. We sent a working party with several officers to the steamer. We lay stopped the whole forenoon. At 10 a.m. we stopped another steamer. She was Norwegian. She was empty, bound south. We let her go. We made use of the stoppage to distribute amongst the ships copies of General Order No. 240, of 19th May, dealing with the night cruising formation while passing the Japanese islands, and with the measures of precaution to be taken against mines, which might have been strewn in our path. (The measures to be taken against masked night attacks, as to the possibility of which we had received information from our agents, had already been laid down in General Order No. 216 of 3rd May.) At 11.30 a.m. we proceeded. The *Livonia* is towing the *Oldhamia* and coaling her at the same time. Whilst this is going on, a special working party is endeavouring to search through the fore and after holds. This work is much impeded by the fact that the cases are badly stowed (intentionally or in consequence of hurried loading). It was necessary to make regular shafts, the sides of which had to be secured, and yet the unloading progressed very slowly from want of practice in this kind of work. A further suspicious circumstance: a cargo which is stowed so carelessly takes up still more space—whence, therefore, the draught up to the mark?

20th May, 5 a.m.—How strong is the force of habit, the love of that element with which one is bound up, in the service of which one has spent the best part of one's life! Last night it came on to blow from the east. Towards midnight the *Livonia* and *Oldhamia* had to cast off. During the night the sea got up. Scuttles had to be closed. The spray is already coming over. We are rolling. But what a sunrise! I hurry on deck to get fresh air, and feel disinclined to go below again. It is thus that I love the sea. There is a certain amount of sea, a grand, refreshing sea breeze is blowing. One takes it in in deep breaths. We are just passing Batan and Sabtan (islands between Formosa and the Philippines). Thank God! We seem to have left that awful stuffy belt of calms behind us. I greet thee, boundless ocean!

21st May.—Nothing of any consequence happened yesterday; or during the night either. This morning the working parties returned from *Oldhamia*. It had not been found possible to search the holds right down. Never mind—it will all be cleared up at Vladivostok. She is going through the Straits of La Pérouse by herself. T— (a naval reserve sub-lieutenant) of the *Suvoroff* is placed in command. He was permitted to select his mates. The crew is provided by several of the ships. The skipper, the engineer, and their mates had to be removed out of her, as they were inclined to be troublesome. Attempts had been made to damage the machinery,

even to sink the steamer. Where were they to be taken to? On board one of the men-of-war? The Admiral had a sudden access of tender feeling: why should one bring neutrals under fire, even if they did deal in contraband of war? He had them sent to the only neutral territory in the neighbourhood—the hospital ship, *Orel*, under the protection of the Red Cross. From there we received the astonished signal: "Five healthy Englishmen have come on board. What are we to do with them?" The Admiral's reply was somewhat in the sense of: Look after their health until the next port.—At 2 p.m. first the *Zemtchug*, then the *Ossliabia*, and eventually the *Svetlana* sighted a balloon. The latter even reported its bearing and altitude. The *Oleg* and *Zemtchug* were detached in that direction, but without any result. From us (flagship) the balloon was also seen, by many people in fact. I did not see it. Flag-Lieutenant N—— pretended that it was not a spherical balloon, but a large kite or aeroplane, which had broken loose. It was at a great height and travelling south. If it carried any passengers I don't envy them.

Towards evening the sky became overcast. There was thunder and it came on to rain.

22nd May.—The night was hazy, but cool. One notices that we have left the tropics. At 8 a.m. we altered course to N. 20° W.; this takes us between Miyako and Liu-Kiu.

Overcast, foggy, some sea running, wind N.N.E. We meant to coal to-day, but it was not possible, on account of the weather.

Yesterday the *Kuban*, and to-day the *Terek*, parted company, to cruise off the east coast of Japan. God grant that they may attract as much attention as possible! The wind is backing to N.W. We are carrying out evolutions, so as to work up the "Third Division." They have had no practice whatever.

Only one formation ever succeeds: the formation of "huddled-up-mass." A sad sight! Towards noon the weather improved somewhat. Perhaps it will be of use to us now. It prevented our coaling, but on the other hand it prevented us from sighting the islands between which we passed; that means we have not been seen from there. Our whereabouts is up to now a riddle. God grant that we may be able to coal to-morrow, when we shall be quite out of sight of the islands, and at the same time in an utterly unfrequented region, not crossed by any regular steamer tracks!

Towards evening it fell calm.

23rd May.—The night passed quietly. At 5.30 a.m. we stopped engines and started coaling. It is calm, but the look of the weather is suspicious. There is an appearance of rain. By visual and wireless signal the ships were informed that this will probably be the last time of coaling. We were to do our very best to have still the normal stowage in our bunkers on the

morning of 26th May.¹ Bad news of Fölkersam: his mind is wandering, temperature 95° F., pulse 60. I asked the fleet surgeon what this meant, translated into ordinary language. He mumbled something about "the end," waved me aside and passed on. The captain of the *Ossliabia* received secret orders not to strike the flag when Fölkersam had died. The nerves of all were so sensitive. The death of an admiral on the eve of battle! How would this be taken? Perhaps without any special emotion, but perhaps they would take it as an ill omen, suddenly break down and lose heart.

We made use of the time devoted to coaling to issue the last General Order. It began with the words: "Ready for action any hour. . . ."²

24th May.—The weather is decidedly getting worse. All the better! We had no more breakdowns and no more delays. That is excellent! The spirits are good. They have all pulled themselves together and appear to be full of confidence.

25th May.—Overnight the rainy weather has set in determinedly. The sky is uniformly grey. There are frequent light showers. A fresh breeze is blowing. Before sending off the collier transports we wanted to fill up the destroyers' bunkers for the last time, for there will hardly be any opportunity to do so between here and Vladivostok. It did not succeed owing to the state of the weather. But what is to be done? If nothing special happens, what they have on board ought to suffice. All the same, something in reserve never does any harm.

When 90 miles off Shanghai (estimated distance) we despatched the auxiliaries to that port. The *Dniepr* and *Rion* go with them. These latter are to convoy the defenceless ships as far as the Yangtse, and are then to carry out cruiser operations on the southern trade routes leading to the ports of Western Japan and the Yellow Sea.

Touching signals were exchanged at the parting. Our range of vision is reduced by the rain to 2 or 3 miles, so that from the southern point of Formosa up to now no one has seen us.³ That is not so bad. Let us hope that it will continue like this. S— is wandering up and down the bridge, blacker than the night. I take him by the arm. . . .

¹ How impudently those lied who pretended that the ships had been overloaded with coal during the battle!

² General Order No. 243 of 23rd May:—Is it possible to say whether after all everything would not have been lost if the captains of the *Byedovy* and *Bystry* had faithfully carried out their task as laid down in this order—to take the Admiral and his staff to another undamaged ship the instant the *Suvoroff* might have to haul out of the line of battle? The last wound, and the one which caused him the greatest suffering, the Admiral received about forty minutes after the *Suvoroff* had been deprived of the power of leading the squadron.

³ It was so in fact.

"Well, don't you see we have come so far, and . . ."

"And?"

"And we shall get further yet."

"We are going, we are going. . . . How did you put it then? I don't recollect. . . . Oh, yes.—*To our reckoning.*"¹

FINIS.

APPENDIX.

THE HULL AFFAIR.

On our arrival at Vigo we heard how great and widespread was the stir which the incident with the fishing-boats in the North Sea had caused. The English papers called the squadron simply the "squadron of mad dogs," which ought either to be turned back or destroyed. The incident itself they stigmatised as an "act of open piracy." (This is juridically absurd, since the condition *sine-qua-non* of piracy, that is, sea robbery, is personal gain.) But public opinion in England was above all excited about the fact that "one of the Russian torpedo-boats remained on the spot until the morning and rendered no assistance to the fishermen, who were saving their comrades."

This piece of news, which emanated from the fishermen scattered on the sea, was discussed from every point of view. It was said that even the barbarians of old had spared the lives of those who had become the victims of war by chance, and had reprieved them; after this there could no longer be any doubt that it was a slap in the face for England, an insult which could only be wiped out by blood, unless the Russian Government offered complete satisfaction.

The return of the squadron and the trial by a Court of Law of the admiral commanding, the captains, and all those implicated in the affair, *but above all of the captain of the torpedo-boat*, was the least satisfaction which could be accepted.

For me, these statements were a complete revelation. My sceptical views could not be upheld against the testimony of old and experienced seamen.

"*One of the torpedo-boats remained on the spot until the morning.*"

This means that as a matter of fact there were torpedo-boats present. Thanks to our good look-out we had therefore escaped from an extraordinary danger. We happily succeeded in repelling the attack. If in doing so innocent people were made to suffer, this was no doubt most deplorable, but what was to

¹ The days of 25th, 26th and 27th May have been fully described in my book "The Battle of Tsu-shima." [Published in English by J. Murray, 1906.]

be done? At Port Arthur women and children were killed during the bombardment. Our Government should express its regret, pay damages to the families concerned, but that was all.

I will now ask leave to depart from my rule for once and relate now what I only heard later.

As soon as the Admiral had received information about the campaign initiated in the English press, he at once telegraphed to our Naval Attaché in London requesting him to bring to the notice of the press the fact that at the time when the incident under discussion took place our destroyers were 200 miles, possibly even more, ahead of the squadron, a fact which could be easily verified if the time of their arrival in French ports were taken into account; consequently the torpedo-boat which remained on the spot until morning undoubtedly belonged to those which had attacked the squadron, and had, moreover, been badly hit. Evidently the boat was repairing its own damages, or waiting for the other boats.

It is very significant that this well-reasoned and substantiated statement hardly appeared in any paper, and that the well-disciplined [*sic*] English press suddenly and completely forgot the evidence of the fishermen, which it had obstinately upheld until then. But this is a small matter compared with the fact that at the meetings of the Commission in Paris the English delegates expressed their conviction that the fishermen had undoubtedly made a mistake, that there was no torpedo-boat on the spot; that the *Kamtchatka* had passed there in the morning, and that it was this vessel which had been taken for a torpedo-boat. It was possible (according to calculation of time and speed) that the *Kamtchatka* did, in fact, pass the locality in question on the morning of 22nd October, but the accounts had spoken of a torpedo-boat which had remained on the spot until morning. And finally—I appeal in this to the experienced seamen of the whole world—can one admit that in broad daylight old “sea-dogs” in the pursuit of their calling could possibly mistake the *Kamtchatka*, a peculiarly mis-shapen merchant steamer with a high free-board, for a torpedo-boat? Even the child of a fisherman could not make so gross an error.¹ A further very convincing factor was the fact that all those in the squadron who maintained that “they had seen the torpedo-boats with their own eyes,” agreed in their statements, viz. :—number of funnels and masts, colour, superstructures, etc., etc. And this, moreover, not on board one ship, where one might have assumed that they had all been the victims of the same hypnotic influence, but on board five different ships, which, at the time, had not been in communication with one another.

I believe that even Monsieur Charko would not have admitted the possibility of such a “thought-transmission”; but that is not all.

¹[And yet precisely this mistake has been made more than once by naval officers.—In this case it was *not* broad daylight, but a misty dawn.]

Nine months later I was in bed in the Japanese hospital at Sasebo, and heard from brother officers who had also been wounded, but had by then been healed and allowed to walk about the hospital, that in the adjoining hut there was a Japanese lieutenant and former captain of a torpedo-boat suffering from acute rheumatism. At that time the negotiations which were bound to lead up to the conclusion of peace had begun at Portsmouth (America). This was clear to all, and therefore our neighbour probably did not consider it necessary to be particularly secretive as regarded the past. He said quite openly that he had caught his illness during a bad passage from Europe to Japan.

"Your European autumn is worse than our winter," he said.

"Autumn?" I asked. "What month?"

"October. We, our detachment, started on our passage at the end of that month."

"In October? At the same time as our Second Squadron? How was it that we knew nothing of you? Under what colours did you sail? When did you pass the Suez Canal?"

"You are asking too much," the Japanese answered, laughing. "Under what colours? Naturally, not under Japanese. Why you did not discover us?—That you must ask yourself. When we passed through the Suez Canal?—Behind Admiral Fölkersam's division."

"But then—you were probably connected with the famous Hull affair?"

"Ha, ha! That is a very indiscreet question."

More than this we were unable to get from him, but it was, it seems to me, quite sufficient. All the more so, as at that time (October-November, 1904) vague paragraphs appeared here and there in the European press about certain torpedo-boats (four in number, built in Europe) which were then on their way to the Far East to reinforce the U.S. Squadron.

Why did our delegates at the International Commission of Inquiry in Paris concede so readily the possibility of experienced seamen mistaking *the Kamtchatka, which was passing at the time, for a torpedo-boat, which had remained the whole night until the morning on the scene of the event?*—I am unable to form a judgment. History will decide.

In November, 1904, a Schwartz-Kopf torpedo was found by fishermen on the south-east coast of the North Sea, which had been much battered by the surf. A picture of this torpedo was published in the European illustrated papers. As is known, every torpedo carries, stamped on all its parts, the name of the firm which made it and a number. If one has some of the parts of such a torpedo before one, this suffices to establish with absolute certainty, by means of the above-mentioned marks, to whom and when the torpedo was sold.

Our delegates, as it would appear, did not devote their attention very particularly either to the testimony of the fishermen, as regarded the presence of the torpedo-boat, or to this find. This is perfectly intelligible, since the supreme direction of these negotiations was in the hands of our diplomatists. As regarded these, I had, based on my lengthy experience acquired during my sea-service in foreign waters, formed the following opinion:—According to the views of those employed under the Foreign Office, every Russian subject who approaches them with a request for assistance is beyond doubt a suspicious personage, for a respectable individual never and nowhere in the civilised world gets into difficulties. Whilst, for instance, an English Consul is ever ready to stand out in the interests of any subject of His Britannic Majesty (even if he does not know him personally), to point out possible complications which might arise, threaten with summoning a squadron, with a naval demonstration, possibly with war—"our man," if he has not been able to simply send the supplicant to the right-about, tries to persuade him to drop his request somewhat after this style:—

"Is it really worth the while to make so much fuss over it? Between ourselves, you might as well confess that you yourself are not quite free from blame in the affair. You had better drop it; it will be the best course in the end."

This prejudice against their own countrymen, the firm conviction that our side always have *les pieds dans le plat* ("put its foot in it"), of course played a not inconsiderable part in the settlement of the "Hull Affair."

[NOTE BY THE TRANSLATOR.]

The Suez Canal records at Port Said have recently been searched, and show that no vessel remotely resembling torpedo craft of any class passed through the Canal anywhere near the time when Admiral Fölkersam took his detachment East.