

THE FRENCH NAVY IN THE GREAT WAR

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THE stream of war books is unending. They come pouring in their thousands from the publishers of America, England, Germany—yet curiously few from France. The French war books appeared three or four years ago, before the world-wide boom in such literature, and by this time they are nearly all dead and decently buried. In no language have most of these books more than a passing value as literature, but two or three, *All our Yesterdays*, *Undertones of War*, even *All Quiet*, will survive for reasons other than the interest of “human documents.” Though he does not pretend to be judged by the same literary standards as Tomlinson or Edmund Blunden, M. Paul Chack, of the French Navy, has written a series of war books which may perhaps outlast the vagaries of the present fashion. In their own country these books have had a considerable “popular” success, and both for their subjects and for their simple, straight-forward style they deserve to be better known to English-speaking readers. Books dealing with the war at sea are rare. Even the public interest that has been aroused by the Naval Conference does not seem to have provoked the war-time sailor to the flood of reminiscence and reflection that the war-time soldier is daily letting loose upon the world. Of the English and American sailor we know very little; of the French sailor nothing at all. The world at large has no idea of the part the French navy played in the war; indeed, the world at large had forgotten the existence of that navy until the question of its reduction arose to shake the foundations of conferences and set statesmen trembling on both sides of the Atlantic. If an Englishman or an American ever connects the French with the sea, it is as the fishermen of Hugo’s *Travailleurs de la Mer*, and so also the French see themselves. Even Pierre Loti is remembered not for his brief sketches of naval life in China and elsewhere, but for his famous *Pêcheur d’Islande*.

With the exception of Loti, no writer of any repute had ever attempted to set the life of the French navy before the reading public—no writer before M. Chack. He has indeed broken new ground. Himself a naval officer, in his four war books he has brought his comrades-in-arms and their exploits to the notice of

a large public that had never before given them a thought. *On se bat sur Mer* has enjoyed a great success, and his other works are hardly less popular. This popularity is the more surprising in that the subject is not merely unfamiliar but is also, on the whole, unattractive to the French nation. In England a book on naval warfare has an assured sale, and not only among the experts. The ordinary man in the street feels a personal pride in the British navy which he can never feel about the equally admirable British army. He remembers from his school days snatches of patriotic verse about Drake and Nelson, and dimly he feels that the sea is his own particular property, at once his front line and his last defence. In France, however, the sea is neither a source of menace nor a shield. The main issue was fought out, not at Toulon or Ushant, but in the forts around Verdun, and in watching that agony the French nation had little time to remember the men patrolling the sea-ways.

M. Chack had no public ready; he had to make one. An English naval writer can always rely upon the sentiment of the race to prejudice his readers favorably on his behalf. M. Chack could rely on himself alone. Fortunately for himself, fortunately perhaps for the French navy, he possesses style, that gift which the French prize above all others. It is a style peculiarly suited to the stories he has to tell. M. Chack is not subtle—he has no need to be. There is a passage in *The Mirror of the Sea* in which Conrad speaks of a sailor's phrase as having "all the force, precision, and imagery of technical language that, created by simple men with a keen eye for the real aspect of the things they see in their trade, achieves the just expression, seizing upon the essential, which is the ambition of the artist in words." Such is the style of M. Chack. He has seen what he describes, seen it both with the eye of a seaman and with the eye of an artist. He knows his subject thoroughly; he has lived and worked and slept with those ships and with those men. No mere novelist, no mere seaman could have written that description of the sunken German submarines lying on the sea-floor,

trente sousmarins ennemis dont les gouvernails bloqués 'tout à montée' semblent des nageoires de squales crêvés crispées dans un effort désespéré vers la vie.

It is the work of one who can guide a submarine as easily as he guides his pen over the paper. Knowledge gives to M. Chack the direct appeal of one who speaks with authority, and natural genius enables him to shed over that appeal the colour and interest of art.

Colour, drama, simplicity,—these are the characteristics of M. Chack's writing. Simplicity is perhaps the most important. He is faced with the difficulty of explaining technical problems in more or less technical language, without allowing the layman to consider that he is being instructed rather than entertained. Anyone who has read even the more "popular" accounts of Jutland will realize all too clearly the confusion produced in the mind of the landsman by the use of nautical terms. It is to M. Chack's credit that he can hold the attention, not only of the French reader, but also of the foreigner who cannot be expected to understand more than one word in four of his more technical descriptions. Few indeed are the Englishmen who know anything of nautical French beyond the notices in cross-channel steamers; yet many must be thrilled at M. Chack's account of Ritchie's heroism at Dar-el-Salaam who can have no rational idea as to how Ritchie brought his boat back to safety. The secret of M. Chack's power lies in the fact that though he realizes that technical language must sometimes be employed, he does not pre-suppose technical knowledge on the part of his reader. His business is to tell a story rather than to explain a strategical situation; consequently he never sacrifices essential lucidity to a multiplicity of detail. Although his four books make no pretence to be serious history, in clearness and simplicity they might well serve as examples to many naval historians.

This direct style is well fitted to the dramatic nature of M. Chack's material. Drama is never lacking in any account of the war at sea. It forces its way up even between the lines of the *London Gazette* and the official white papers. Imagination grasps the personal and complete incidents of sea-warfare more readily than the endless inhuman struggle of the trenches. The supreme drama is, of course, Coronel and the Falklands, which is tragedy on the heroic scale, but in all of M. Chack's sketches the dramatic element is present, and he is quick to seize upon the moments in which it is most intensified. We have presented to us, not a reasoned history, but a quick succession of such moments; not an impartial account of a battle or a campaign, but the individual drama of human beings brought face to face with inevitable crisis.

Simplicity and drama are both essential, but they are not in themselves sufficient to single out M. Chack among naval writers. We can find simplicity and drama enough in books like Admiral Campbell's *Mystery Ships*. M. Chack has a further virtue. His eye for the picturesque, coupled with a remarkable gift of description, lifts his work above the level of the average "war book", and

turns it into literature. Sometimes in his desire for colour he approaches perilously near to the borders of journalese; but for the most part his descriptive writing is vivid and direct. A fondness for short sentences, and an almost invariable use of the present tense, more permissible in French than in English, produce an effect of special intensity. Take this description of a submarine charging her batteries in the calm of an Adriatic night:

La nuit est claire. Dans le Ciel, demisphère de velours bleu profond, l'étoile polaire scintille audessus du Mont Radostak. A minuit le mince croissant de la lune en son dernier quartier émerge dans l'Est. Pas une ombre sur l'eau et pas un bruit. Sur la passerelle exigüe l'enseigne du vaisseau Appell, second du bord, est du quart avec deux veilleurs. De temps à autre un marin huileux et suant surgit d'un panneau, lampe une bolée d'air frais et redescend. L'officier et les deux hommes concentrent dans leurs yeux toute leur énergie. Leurs jumelles fouillent la nuit calme. Un silence presque angoissant pèse sur la mer.

A misty day in the Channel, von Spee's squadron rounding the Horn, storms in the Mediterranean, the sea-coast of Dalmatia—Chack puts them all before us, somewhat obviously perhaps, but alive with colour and movement. He sees men and events in picture full of entrancing detail, wreckage floating in the Channel:

la mer jonchée de caisses, dont quelques unes, crêvées, ont rejeté des oranges qui émaillent l'étendue grise de mouchetures merveilleuses,

even the German minister at Valparaiso

en grande uniforme ruisselant d'or, l'épée diplomatique au flanc, le bicorné emplumé à la tête,

are all sketched in with a clearness of detail which enhances rather than lessens the speed of the narrative. M. Chack's imagination is visual rather than intellectual, and he has to a rare degree the power of impressing his own vision upon the imagination of his hearers.

Imagination, lucidity, and a sense of drama are gifts worthy of good material. Some of the episodes related by M. Chack are famous the world over, and the stories of the Falklands and Coronel, of the *Emden* and the *Konigsberg*, lose nothing in the re-telling. Less well-known but not less glorious are the histories of the French submarines and mine-sweepers. Their exploits have all the flavour of novelty for the English reader, ignorant of what his country owes to the French navy. The French blockaded the Austrian fleet in the Adriatic, thereby helping to secure the great trade-routes to the

Suez Canal, and to preserve our communications with India. Nearer home, French destroyers and mine-sweepers joined hands with our own Dover patrol to guard the entrance of the English Channel. For the safety of the transports and supply ships coming from India and Australia, for the safety of the troops passing daily from Dover and Folkestone to the battlefields of France, England has a great debt of gratitude to pay to the French navy.

To read any of M. Chack's sketches is to realize the extent of that debt, the conditions under which the endless watch was maintained, the discomforts and dangers endured so patiently by the watchers. Discomforts and dangers might have been lessened had the material been better suited to the conditions of the blockade. In the first pages of *Ceux du Blocus* M. Chack tells "l'odyssée héroïque et lamentable" of the French submarines that penetrated the defences of the Dardanelles:

En surface, par mauvais temps, la mer démollissait leurs gouvernails de plongée. Leurs appareils lance-torpilles étaient installés sur le pont, exposés au choc des lames et aux pressions des plongées profondes. Leurs périscopes étaient d'une clarté médiocre, d'un grossissement insuffisant, d'une étanchité précaire. Leur vitesse en immersion était trop faible, leur rayon d'action aussi. Leur complication intérieure provoquait l'admiration véhémente des Anglais.

In face of such difficulties, three submarines attempted the passage of the Dardanelles. All three were lost, defeated by their own defects and not by the enemy. The *Turquoise*, last and oldest of the three, cruised for ten days the Straits of Marmora,

dix jours de combat ininterrompu—contre son propre matériel déplorable et usé qui rendit sa croisière inutile et causa sa perte lors de la descente du détroit. Cette fois encore aussi le matériel a trahi un équipage magnifique.

In old and obsolete craft, battling with defective weapons and worn-out machinery, harassed by aircraft and destroyers and in hourly danger from mines, French sailors maintained a perpetual submarine blockade across the entrance of the Adriatic. They did more. Penetrating into the very ports of the enemy, they sank ships and spread terror all along the Austrian coastline. If those in high places had but shown more comprehension and efficiency, the tale of Austrian losses would have been longer and the waste of heroic French lives less appalling. M. Chack tells the typical tragedy of his friend O'Bryne, "un géant tranquille, taillé sur un gabarit de Latin mêlé d'Irlandais." O'Bryne occupied a period of tedious

inaction at Bizerta by devising a protection for his screws and rudder against the steel entanglements sunk by the Austrians. At length he received an order to make an attempt upon the shipping at Pola, but with the order came another to replace his invention by the faulty regulation model. His friends urged him to appeal to the Admiral for leave to keep his own effective device. "Après tout, c'est toi qui va la-haut, avec ta peau et celles de tes hommes." O'Bryne refused, fearing to lose his chance of fighting. "J'ai, de cette inaction, pardessus la tête," he declared, and went to his death in the nets before Pola, caught by that very "protection" which had been forced upon him by authority.

Full of bizarre horror is the picture of his submarine, as she struggles in the steel nets, rushing vainly backwards and forwards "comme une énorme baleine prise au piège," the engines shrieking in unfamiliar, agonized tones. The Austrians wait above, knowing that a submarine is in her death-throes, caught in the nets below, but unable to hasten the inevitable end. Not for two hours were they to capture the monstrous prey of that fishing. At last she breaks surface:

Pour la dixième fois, il se cabre sur place comme un cheval au piquet. La haut, les bouées se trémoussent quand, soudain, le bateau s'étant incliné d'un angle trop grand, son étrave pointée vers le ciel crève la surface comme pour menacer toute l'escadre autrichienne dont les canons ouvrent un feu désordonné sur l'apparition.

Many of the crews of the *Curie* were killed as they emerged from the conning tower into the point-blank fire of the Austrian guns. The others went into four years imprisonment. O'Bryne, mortally wounded, suffered for two years in prison hospitals, and was sent home in 1916 to die as soon as he reached French soil.

The tale of the French submarines is full of such unheeding heroism, heroism which at times oversteps the bounds of reason. The self-chosen death of Roland Morillot, "l'âme la plus belle, la plus pure qui se puisse rencontrer," awakens a furious regret for the waste of such splendid manhood. To the ordinary reader it sounds perilously near to the ugly name of suicide. Yet who are we to pass judgment on such an act? The commander who remained in the sinking submarine rather than desert his ship was moved by feelings incomprehensible, almost objectionable to the layman, but such theatricality is curiously near to "the passionate greatness of Nelson." Uncalculating heroism is not so common nor so valueless that we can afford to cramp it into everyday standards, and, as Stevenson remarked, we are not likely to be burdened with

a superfluity of Richard Grenvilles. Roland Morillot has left an example which will not win over many followers; yet while French ships sail the sea, he will be remembered as the pattern of sailors, a shining instance of that peculiar quality, "la très haute vertu marine."

Not less heroic than Morillot and his companions in the Adriatic were the men of the Northern coasts. M. Chack has told their history in *Sur les bancs de Flandre*, perhaps the most vivid of all his books. The reader is left with an unforgettable impression of a blindfold struggle, small, determined ships battling through with the waters, tired men peering through snow and sleet and driving spray, watching and waiting for a sight of the enemy hidden behind the impenetrable weather. "To see! To see!—that is the cry of the sailor as of the rest of blind humanity." And when sight was granted to those watchers, too often vision was more baffling than the blindness, a phantom in the Channel fog, "un morceau de nuit qui semble prendre vie là-bas, une ombre sur une ombre." Who could tell whether that shadow were friend or foe? In peril from the ocean, in peril from the enemy, in peril from unseen and unseeing friends, trawlers and destroyers maintained their relentless watch. Not a few lie now beneath the track of the unheeding cross-channel steamers, "vaisseaux disparus, vaisseaux oubliés comme sont oubliés leurs équipages."

Such a task demanded men with seamanship trained by long experience and characters moulded by rigid naval discipline. France had no such men to spare. A mixed collection of fishermen and junior officers scarcely out of their teens manned the fleet that stood guard over the narrow seas. The heroes of many of the most glorious exploits along "les bancs de Flandre" were officers of an age and rank approximating to that of an English sub-lieutenant. The story of the destroyer *Bouclier* shows the spirit and resource of these boys,

Whose books were rain and sleet and fog—the dry gale and the snow,

Whose teachers were the horned mines and the hump-backed death below.

During a brief action off West Diep a shell fell near the bridge, killing all the occupants:

Frappé à la tête, le Bouclier est devenu fou. Sa barre bloquée toute à gauche, il tourne en rond comme un cheval de cirque, tracant lui-même sur l'eau sa piste, cercle phosphorescent d'où s'élancent, fontaines lumineuses blafardes, les gerbes des projectiles ennemis.

Another shell kills the officer De Curzon as he rushes towards the bridge:

Le Bouclier tourne toujours. Du tas de corps part un cri—
 "Il n'y a personne sur la passerelle!" L'homme qui a poussé
 ce cri-là, le matelot-clairon Lamarche, se souleva, s'agrippe à
 la rambarde, trébuche sur des cadavres et, la tête fendue, prêt
 à défaillir, se traîne jusju'à la barre.

Lamarche succeeded in righting the ship before his strength gave way and he fainted, but his successor was ready. Among the dead on the bridge lay Enseigne Peyronnet, six times wounded, but still alive. Returning to consciousness as the *Bouclier* steadied, he dragged himself to his feet and took the wheel:

Malgré six blessures profondes, malgré son crâne fendu et des douleurs atroces, fulgurantes à croire qu'on lui fouille la cervelle à coups de couteau, l'officier, couvert de sang, est debout. Il reprend le quart. Mieux encore, son chef tué, il prend le commandement.

There was no unwounded man on board when Peyronnet, half-blinded and hardly able to stand, brought the *Bouclier* back to Dunkerque and safety. The end of the story reads like a twentieth century version of "An Incident of the French Camp." As the destroyer enters the harbour, she is hailed from a launch:

"Bouclier, stoppez, l'Amiral Exelmans va monter a bord." A la coupée, l'enseigne Peyronnet, la tête enveloppée de pansements d'ou le sang a filtré, va rendre les honneurs au chef des patrouilles. Soutenu par Coudurier et par Meunier-Joannet le jeune officier se tient debout par un miracle d'énergie. Derrière lui sont rangés les morts. Le petit jour gris éclaire les trois couleurs des pavillons français qui les couvrent et d'où sortent les faces exsangues. La grande enseigne enveloppe fraternellement Bizot, De Curzon et Rassouen. Exelmans se découvre.

"Amiral, le commandant Bizot a été tué tout de suite. J'ai pu ramener le bateau. . . ."

C'est tout. Vaincu par la souffrance l'officier s'écroule.
 Il a tenu jusqu'au bout.

Peyronnet may stand as a type of officers who gave their youth to "les bancs de Flandre." Their companions were the Channel fishermen mobilized by the efforts of Capitaine Merveilleux de Vignaux. He was faced with a hard problem. A Boulonnais fisherman, grown grey and obstinate in his independence as master of his own vessel, was doubtless an unequalled seaman, but he was not the best subject for naval discipline. De Vignaux, however, was determined. "Il y a donc des gens assez fous pour vouloir transformer les bateaux de Calais, de Boulogne, et de Fécamp en navires de combat et les vieux pêcheurs têtus en marins de guerre! On va montrer au

galonné qu'il a affaire a des gens qui savent ce qu'ils veulent et ce qu'ils ne veulent point." Yet it was done. This "galonné" was not as the others. "L'affection des pêcheurs du Nord est solide comme leurs muscles et comme leurs bateaux." The fishermen knew and trusted De Vignaux and his lieutenant Maheas, whose patrol-ship had followed and succoured them on the Great Banks of Newfoundland or the fishing grounds beyond Norway towards the ultimate North. "Pour De Vignaux, le rôle d'officier n'est pas seulement d'accomplir un devoir, mais d'exercer un apostolat." Under his leadership men and ships, both old in experience of the Flanders banks, sailed out to take their places by the side of the trim destroyers in the hunt for the submarine.

To one of these *chalutiers* fell the honour of the first kill. On March 30, 1915, the *Sainte Jehanne* rammed and sank the *U. 37*. The *Sainte Jehanne* was particularly fortunate. There had been many similar encounters before, but the certainty of success had been denied. "Peut-on jamais être sur d'avoir tué la mauvaise bête?" If a submarine disappears beneath the surface, no one is to know whether she is indeed dead or merely "foxing" on the bottom, spitting up oil to deceive her pursuers. The sport was at once difficult, uncertain and dangerous. Sixteen ships did not return to the ancient, dirty quays of the Channel ports, sixteen ships that would never again follow the fishing off Iceland or the Great Banks.

A heavy price to pay for thirty submarines—yet not merely for those submarines. The ships which those *chalutiers* saved are sailing to-day on every ocean of the globe. The present generation is tempted to exclaim at the immense loss of men and money, to ask whether the submarine menace really demanded such colossal sacrifice. M. Chack is as severe as any in his condemnation of conservatism and inefficiency, but he realizes more clearly than some critics the difficulties before those in authority. The danger was one which had never before arisen, and it had to be encountered by enormous expenditure on untried and uncertain defences.

Problems and weapons may have been different, but in France and England the men and the tradition were the same. In his sketches of the English navy M. Chack proves that he understands men and tradition with a comprehension remarkable in a foreigner. Either the French language or the French temperament lends itself easily to heroics. M. Chack is a true Frenchman, but fortunately for him the navy is the only English institution where heroics are permissible. His Gallic outlook is not so jarring to insular readers, nor so unsuited to his subject, as it would have been had he recounted the history of our troops in Gallipoli or Flanders. Instead, he has as his theme the end of the *Good Hope* and the *Monmouth*, the

destruction which overtook their slayers, the capture of the *Emden*, and the heroic monotony of the North Sea blockade. The actors in these dramas had behind them a tradition which varies somewhat from the reserve incumbent on the average Englishman. They were the spiritual descendants of the English Admirals, who, said Stevenson, "were not only great-hearted but big-spoken," adding that, in his opinion, "the finest action is the better for a bit of purple." The English do not like purple in the ordinary walks of life, but Nelson taught them to expect it from their sailors. When, therefore, M. Chack tells how Admiral Craddock buried his decorations before setting out for Coronel—"car il veut que quelque chose de lui repose en terre britannique"—the reader applauds a touch of true drama, a gesture that is in the direct line of descent from Copenhagen and Trafalgar. M. Chack is quick to seize upon such incidents, using them with a brilliance and a sureness of touch which rid them of any suspicion of theatricality. On the contrary, these moments of dramatized emotion raise his narrative beyond the level of history to the eternal interest of epic. The famous story of von Spee and the bouquet offered him at Valparaiso—"Elles seraient sûrement encore assez fraîches pour le jour de nos funérailles"—the *Sidney*, victorious over the almost legendary *Emden* "saluant du pavillon, au passage, le lieu où s'engloutirent sept officiers et cent huit marins ennemis," cry aloud that in spite of steam and steel the chain of tragedy runs unbroken through the centuries.

In one incident in particular, the eternity of "the high, heroic touch" speaks clearly and for all. At the battle of the Falklands a sailing-ship was sighted. The British had just established contact, they had within their grasp the destruction of the victors of Coronel and the re-establishment of their lost prestige, but they remembered that the law of the sea provides that steam gives way to sail:

Galamment l'Invincible, suivi de l'Inflexible, s'écarte, s'écarte même très largement afin d'éviter que les ricochets des obus allemands n'aillent faire du mal à la frêle carène, aux voiles neigueses, ensoleillées.

The ship passed straight between the lines of combatants; then, gravely saluting them for their courtesy, she disappeared from sight. They say that she was seen later in the day by the light cruisers, a tall, unknown shape through the mist and rain. "Sa route vers le Cap Horn l'a, deux fois dans cette journée, rendu témoin des gestes splendides, épiques." Who she might have been, no one will ever know. Her very colours were too faint to be distinguished. Ship or phantom, she passed heroic and significant. The dead world

of sail looked upon the wars of modern science, and the spirit of the past saluted the struggling present.

That mysterious sailing-ship witnessed a revenge, dramatic and complete, but nevertheless a revenge, and not a clear victory. M. Chack's account of Coronel is too vivid to make easy reading. He describes the uneven fight with a painful intensity, the British ships' outline against the sunset, every detail of those "longues ombres chinoises" clear to the gunners of the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, the stokers in the *Good Hope* and the *Monmouth*, ignorant of the fortunes of the battle outside, ignorant of all except their monotonous task that ended suddenly in death, the silent, smokeless blaze which was the funeral pyre of the *Good Hope* and of Admiral Craddock. And he ends his tragedy with a sentence which must make every English reader pause. "L'Amiral allemand a détruit beaucoup plus qu'une escadre. Il a ruiné le prestige anglais, et cette séculaire réputation qu'avaient toutes les flottes britanniques d'être, depuis 1789, invincibles sur la mer." The humiliation was revenged speedily and in full at the Falklands; "le prestige britannique, mis au tombeau à Coronel, est la cinquième semaine ressuscité," but the destruction of Admiral von Spee with his squadron has not restored to us the men and the ships lost beneath the waters of the Pacific.

A life for a life, a ship for a ship—that perhaps is the true result of victory. Somewhere in one of his earlier books Conrad has a sardonic remark about modern armaments. "When the time comes for another sea-fight" he writes, "the bottom of the ocean will be enriched as never before by a quantity of scrap-iron paid for at pretty nearly its weight in gold by the deluded populations of this planet." The prophecy has come true. Yet even if we reckon the result of so much effort, so much sacrifice, merely in terms of scrap-iron, at least there must be some consoling good to be found among all this futility of destruction. With peculiar insight and peculiar literary power M. Chack has re-told stories which will live long after all traces of bitterness have disappeared. In his double character of sailor and artist, he has chosen episodes which are of lasting interest equally to those who know the sea and to those who value life for its moments of great drama. No one can read his tales of French and British seamen without realizing that through all the changing conditions, through all the senseless waste of war, there runs the spirit which links up past and present, the spirit which breaks through at times of high crisis, at Cadiz, at Trafalgar, at Coronel. "La mer est fertile en rencontres angoissantes, et l'esprit de grands marins d'autrefois flotte et flottera sur les eaux, éternellement."