"ADMIRAL" PARKER

(*Concluded.*)

THEIR new-found freedom, and this carefully constructed machinery of self-government, both made the men unwilling to go back to work when Admiral Buckner communicated to them the news that the Spithead men had returned to work, satisfied by the arrival of the pardon and concession of the major portion of their demands. Delegates who arrived from Spithead to induce the Nore men to return were to their surprise met with bitter reproaches for going back without making a clean sweep of all grievances. Throughout the fleet there was a general reluctance to return to the prison-house after so short a spell of liberty, and it seems probable that Parker threw his influence on the side of remaining out at least until the Lords of the Admiralty had been forced to come down to Sheerness as they had gone to Spithead.

But though this almost puerile decision was adopted, further demands had to be put forward in order to excuse it, and in the drafting of them the delegates realised that there were serious reasons for remaining out and grievances that really needed righting. They handed in on May 20th a list of new demands. To this the Admiralty replied, through Buckner on the 22nd, with a flat negative Parker and the delegates received the reply with unconcealed indignation and rowed off to the Fleet without showing any signs of submission. For six days the situation remained thus in suspense, neither the fleet nor the officers on shore yielding in the

least, but each facing the other with growing exasperation, and Parker and Buckner exchanging sharper notes than ever. Then, on May 28th, in spite of their proclaimed decision, four members of the Board of the Admiralty appeared in Sheerness.

They had been sent there by special order of the Cabinet. But they came as bearers of an ultimatum. They refused the delegates an interview, and informed them that they would consider nothing but surrender and a prayer for pardon. The Government had decided to crush the mutiny.

It is difficult for us to recapture the spirit of the latter end of the 18th century. We have to leave behind us all thoughts of Trade Unions and capitalist combines, of great warrens like Manchester and Liverpool, or of democratic Parliaments and vote-catching politicians. It was the age of the dignity of Dr. Johnson and the solemnity of Edward Gibbon; the age of a class which lived in dignified and unquestioned leisure upon the efforts of the rest of the mostly agricultural population. There did not enter into the minds of the members of this class, nor of their supporters, any doubt as to their right to occupy this position. Between them and their inferiors was a gulf which was hardly to be bridged. They could not even talk, except in the relation of master and servant. There was no community of ideas, or even religion. The upper classes listened, if at all, to unemotional sermons by wigged divines to whom Latin was nearly as easy a tongue as English: their inferiors heard either the simple but autocratic instructions of the local parson or the hysterical and wholly reprehensible enthusiasm of a wandering dissenter.

The security of this dominant class had been rudely shaken by the French Revolution. They had seen their class driven out, its property seized and its leaders executed, by the lower orders whom they so despised and patronised. Great as had been their security, their panic was even greater. Frightened beyond measure, they had passed the scandalous Six Acts and repressed savagely the most innocent Liberalism. They now had become convinced that the Nore Mutiny was a Jacobin adventure, and were prepared to destroy it.

Though the delegates could not know this, they at least seem to have realised that a crisis had come when they received from the Lords of the Admiralty a flat refusal. Parker had by this time found that his position was no sinecure. Like most leaders, he had his Right and Left wing to manage. He had to cope with delegates whom he rightly suspected of only awaiting a suitable opportunity to desert, and with others who regarded him as weak and shuffling. These latter were mostly United Irishmen, and were well infected with the equalitarian principles of the French Revolution. They wanted a revolution, and failing that would desert to France.

The discussion was long and bitter. At length a delegate was sent to the Secretary of the Admiralty delegation, curtly informing them that a majority had decided to continue the mutiny (May 29th). The Lords of the Admiralty left for London. The first and only attempt at negotiations was over. The two parties faced each other in straight opposition. Henceforward it was war, and, as though to mark it, Sheerness was put in a state of defence and the mutineers excluded. The seamen were disconcerted. The *San Fiorenzo* and the *Clyde* raised the white flag and escaped. There were struggles on other ships, including a dispute on Parker's flagship, the *Sandwich*. The mutiny seemed about to end in defeat.

As the *San Fiorenzo* escaped out to sea down the Thames estuary, she met with a number of larger ships, flying red flags and putting in to the Thames mouth. Not knowing what they were, the crew for safety's sake rehoisted the red flag, gave three cheers and were allowed to pass undisturbed. Then, on Tuesday evening (the 30th), these same mysterious ships, to the astonishment and discomfiture of the waiting officers on land, came dropping down, one after another, to Sheerness.

It soon became known that they had arrived from Yarmouth, and were the body of Admiral Duncan's fleet. Duncan's fleet was no unimportant aggregation like the Nore Fleet, but practically the sole defence of England against the Dutch. Duncan was at that moment blockading the Texel with only two ships, all that were left of his fleet. The Lords of the Admiralty had foolishly instructed him to suppress the Nore Mutiny. But when he gave the signal to stand out to sea only two ships went with him. The rest came down to the Nore in batches to aid the mutiny, the last group arriving on June 6th.

With the number of mutinous ships more than doubled by this addition, there was no more talk of surrender. On June 2nd Parker gave an order which might almost have led to victory. His Committee ordered the blockade of London. The fleet was drawn up across the Thames mouth, with roughly half-mile intervals between each ship. Four ships—two sloops and two battleships—in the channel between the Nore and Southend captured every merchantman or provision boat that arrived. The chain of ships drawn up behind prevented any escape. In four days a hundred and more ships were in their hands.

This was the high watermark of their success. A fortnight before the Admiralty had been certain of triumph. Since then it had been forced to come down to Sheerness, and been sent back with a rebuff. The mutineers had been joined by fourteen more ships, another of England's fleets had disappeared from her defences, and the capital of the country was blockaded. The Government was stung to vigorous action. They completed the isolation of the fleet from the land, stopping all supplies and communications. Parliament passed a Bill authorising the Admiralty to declare any ship it chose to be "in a state of rebellion"—in other words handing over the mutineers to the discretion of the Lords Commissioners.

We know very little of the internal life of the fleet during this time. Some jack-in-office at the Admiralty has destroyed the *Promiscuous Letters* which contained the most valuable information. We are in the position of any landsman observer at Southend at that date. He could have seen the long line of graceful, high-pooped ships of the line, with red flags fluttering from the intricate rigging, and the entangled mass of masts rising from the hundred and more merchant ships held idly near the Nore Light.

Such an observer would have seen, on June 5th, the traffic of the river beginning to move again, and on the tenth he could have seen the mass of trading ships held prisoner separately and slowly resume their voyage upstream. Parker had signed an order permitting all but naval storeships to pass, and, although the reason given was to placate London opinion and to show the seamen's loyal intentions, there is little doubt that it was really an evidence of discouragement.

Then the Admiralty took the step which defeated the mutiny. They had the lights and buoys removed. The fleet was pinned, a prisoner. It dared not sail up the river; it could not sail out. It would be starved out.

The delegates were deeply alarmed. For the moment desperation gave matters into the hands of the revolutionaries. Parker seems to have let things slide and merely carried out the orders given him by his Left wing. They decided that the fleet would sail to the Humber, there take prizes, and then to the Texel and surrender to France. An alternative project, scattering the fleet, some to France, some to Ireland, some to America, was apparently rejected. Therefore, on June 9th, the *Sandwich* gave the signal to sail. The rest of the ships acknowledged it. The *Sandwich* waited, but not a ship moved. Whatever the delegates might say, the seamen would not face the sands of the Thames estuary uncharted. The last effort of the mutiny had failed.

So during the next week the mutinous ships one by one drifted down to Sheerness and surrendered. The *Leopard* and *Repulse* started the rot, and each ship, after a fight between the two parties inside, followed them in. Some few ringleaders escaped in open boats, but most were caught for the bloody revenge the Admiralty was preparing.

On board the *Sandwich* there was no struggle. Parker had by now fallen back entirely under old influences. He had become again the 18th century English gentleman. Oppressed by a feeling of the wickedness of rebelling against his King and his class, he was now only concerned with making a proper submission and atonement for what seemed a ghastly mistake. He quietly submitted to being put in irons.

It had originally been intended to bring Parker before a civil court but, for reasons which may easily be guessed, an order issued on June 19th arraigned him before a court-martial. The Admiralty did not desire any of the scruples which might have hindered a civil court to save Parker from death.

The trial took place on board the *Neptune* in the Long Reach, on the Medway between Chatham and Sheerness. The prisoner was by this time completely broken in. He was no longer upheld by any enthusiasm for the cruelly oppressed seamen whom he had led: he thought only of assuming the dignifiedly, contrite but resigned attitude befitting a man of gentle blood who found himself in such a position in the reign of His Most Excellent Majesty King George the Third. In his trial he attempted merely to prove that he had been a moderating influence and had assumed power only in order to check the extremists.

He was condemned to death. His wife made vain attempts to save his life by proving him a lunatic; the Admiralty brushed her appeals aside. At his execution he was careful to maintain the proper conduct of a "gentleman"; to protest his loyalty and to meet death courageously with aid of religion but without any signs of emotion or of the "enthusiastic" expressions of a Wesleyan. "His conduct," writes the historian, "was rational and religious without ostentation or sublimated ecstasy."

He spoke very briefly, saying that he did not desire to address the ship's company, but merely expressing the hope that his death might be held a sufficient atonement for the mutiny and that others would be spared. The crew, drawn up to witness his death, remained silent and motionless, but their feelings must have been unenviable as they watched the fate of the man they had so enthusiastically acclaimed and so basely deserted.

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