

The Great War Syndicate

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In the spring of a certain year, not far from the close of the nineteenth century, when the political relations between the United States and Great Britain became so strained that careful observers on both sides of the Atlantic were forced to the belief that a serious break in these relations might be looked for at any time, the fishing schooner Eliza Drum sailed from a port in Maine for the banks of Newfoundland.

It was in this year that a new system of protection for American fishing vessels had been adopted in Washington. Every fleet of these vessels was accompanied by one or more United States cruisers, which remained on the fishing grounds, not only for the purpose of warning American craft who might approach too near the three-mile limit, but also to overlook the action of the British naval vessels on the coast, and to interfere, at least by protest, with such seizures of American fishing boats as might appear to be unjust. In the opinion of all persons of sober judgment, there was nothing in the condition of affairs at this time so dangerous to the peace of the two countries as the presence of these American cruisers in the fishing waters.

The Eliza Drum was late in her arrival on the fishing grounds, and having, under orders from Washington, reported to the commander of the Lennehaha, the United States vessel in charge at that place, her captain and crew went vigorously to work to make up for lost time. They worked so vigorously, and with eyes so single to the catching of fish, that on the morning of the day after their arrival, they were hauling up cod at a point which, according to the nationality of the calculator, might be two and three-quarters or three and one-quarter miles from the Canadian coast.

In consequence of this inattention to the apparent extent of the marine mile, the Eliza Drum, a little before noon, was overhauled and seized by the British cruiser, Dog Star. A few miles away the Lennehaha had perceived the dangerous position of the Eliza Drum, and had started toward her to warn her to take a less doubtful position. But before she arrived the capture had taken place. When he reached the spot where the Eliza Drum had been fishing, the commander of the Lennehaha made an observation of the distance from the shore, and calculated it to be more than three miles. When he sent an officer in a boat to the Dog Star to state the result of his computations, the captain of the British vessel replied that he was satisfied the distance was less than three miles, and that he was now about to take the Eliza Drum into port.

On receiving this information, the commander of the Lennehaha steamed closer to the Dog Star, and informed her captain, by means of a speaking-trumpet, that if he took the Eliza Drum into a Canadian port, he would first have to sail over his ship. To this the captain of the Dog Star replied that he did not in the least object to sail over the Lennehaha, and proceeded to put a prize crew on board the fishing vessel.

At this juncture the captain of the Eliza Drum ran up a large American flag; in five minutes afterward the captain of the prize crew hauled it down; in less than ten minutes after this the Lennehaha and the Dog Star were blazing at each other with their bow guns. The spark had been struck.

The contest was not a long one. The Dog Star was of much greater tonnage and heavier armament than her antagonist, and early in the afternoon she steamed for St. John's, taking with her as prizes both the Eliza Drum and the Lennehaha.

All that night, at every point in the United States which was reached by telegraph, there burned a smothered fire; and the next morning, when the regular and extra editions of the newspapers were poured out upon the land, the fire burst into a roaring blaze. From lakes to gulf, from ocean to ocean, on mountain and plain, in city and prairie, it roared and blazed. Parties, sections, politics, were all forgotten. Every American formed part of an electric system; the same fire flashed into every soul. No matter what might be thought on the morrow, or in the coming days which might bring better understanding, this day the unreasoning fire blazed and roared.

With morning newspapers in their hands, men rushed from the breakfast-tables into the streets to meet their fellow-men. What was it that they should do?

Detailed accounts of the affair came rapidly, but there was nothing in them to quiet the national indignation; the American flag had been hauled down by Englishmen, an American naval vessel had been fired into and captured; that was enough! No matter whether the Eliza Drum was within the three-mile limit or not! No matter which vessel fired first! If it were the Lennehaha, the more honour to her; she ought to have done it! From platform, pulpit, stump, and editorial office came one vehement, passionate shout directed toward Washington.

Congress was in session, and in its halls the fire roared louder and blazed higher than on mountain or plain, in city or prairie. No member of the Government, from President to page, ventured to oppose the tempestuous demands of the people. The day for argument upon the exciting question had been a long weary one, and it had gone by in less than a week the great shout of the people was answered by a declaration of war against Great Britain.

When this had been done, those who demanded war breathed easier, but those who must direct the war breathed harder.

It was indeed a time for hard breathing, but the great mass of the people perceived no reason why this should be. Money there was in vast abundance. In every State well-drilled men, by thousands, stood ready for the word to march, and the military experience and knowledge given by a great war was yet strong upon the nation.

To the people at large the plan of the war appeared a very obvious and a very simple one. Canada had given the offence, Canada should be made to pay the penalty. In a very short

time, one hundred thousand, two hundred thousand, five hundred thousand men, if necessary, could be made ready for the invasion of Canada. From platform, pulpit, stump, and editorial office came the cry: "On to Canada!"

At the seat of Government, however, the plan of the war did not appear so obvious, so simple. Throwing a great army into Canada was all well enough, and that army would probably do well enough; but the question which produced hard breathing in the executive branch of the Government was the immediate protection of the sea-coast, Atlantic, Gulf, and even Pacific.

In a storm of national indignation war had been declared against a power which at this period of her history had brought up her naval forces to a point double in strength to that of any other country in the world. And this war had been declared by a nation which, comparatively speaking, possessed no naval strength at all.

For some years the United States navy had been steadily improving, but this improvement was not sufficient to make it worthy of reliance at this crisis. As has been said, there was money enough, and every ship-yard in the country could be set to work to build ironclad men-of-war: but it takes a long time to build ships, and England's navy was afloat. It was the British keel that America had to fear.

By means of the continental cables it was known that many of the largest mail vessels of the British transatlantic lines, which had been withdrawn upon the declaration of war, were preparing in British ports to transport troops to Canada. It was not impossible that these great steamers might land an army in Canada before an American army could be organized and marched to that province. It might be that the United States would be forced to defend her borders, instead of invading those of the enemy.

In every fort and navy-yard all was activity; the hammering of iron went on by day and by night; but what was to be done when the great ironclads of England hammered upon our defences? How long would it be before the American flag would be seen no more upon the high seas?

It is not surprising that the Government found its position one of perilous responsibility. A wrathful nation expected of it more than it could perform.

All over the country, however, there were thoughtful men, not connected with the Government, who saw the perilous features of the situation; and day by day these grew less afraid of being considered traitors, and more willing to declare their convictions of the country's danger. Despite the continuance of the national enthusiasm, doubts, perplexities, and fears began to show themselves.

In the States bordering upon Canada a reactionary feeling became evident. Unless the United States navy could prevent England from rapidly pouring into Canada, not only her own troops, but perhaps those of allied nations, these Northern States might become the

scene of warfare, and whatever the issue of the contest, their lands might be ravished, their people suffer.

From many quarters urgent demands were now pressed upon the Government. From the interior there were clamours for troops to be massed on the Northern frontier, and from the seaboard cities there came a cry for ships that were worthy to be called men-of-war,--ships to defend the harbours and bays, ships to repel an invasion by sea. Suggestions were innumerable. There was no time to build, it was urged; the Government could call upon friendly nations. But wise men smiled sadly at these suggestions; it was difficult to find a nation desirous of a war with England.

In the midst of the enthusiasms, the fears, and the suggestions, came reports of the capture of American merchantmen by fast British cruisers. These reports made the American people more furious, the American Government more anxious.

Almost from the beginning of this period of national turmoil, a party of gentlemen met daily in one of the large rooms in a hotel in New York. At first there were eleven of these men, all from the great Atlantic cities, but their number increased by arrivals from other parts of the country, until at last they, numbered twenty-three. These gentlemen were all great capitalists, and accustomed to occupying themselves with great enterprises. By day and by night they met together with closed doors, until they had matured the scheme which they had been considering. As soon as this work was done, a committee was sent to Washington, to submit a plan to the Government.

These twenty-three men had formed themselves into a Syndicate, with the object of taking entire charge of the war between the United States and Great Britain.

This proposition was an astounding one, but the Government was obliged to treat it with respectful consideration. The men who offered it were a power in the land,--a power which no government could afford to disregard.

The plan of the Syndicate was comprehensive, direct, and simple. It offered to assume the entire control and expense of the war, and to effect a satisfactory peace within one year. As a guarantee that this contract would be properly performed, an immense sum of money would be deposited in the Treasury at Washington. Should the Syndicate be unsuccessful, this sum would be forfeited, and it would receive no pay for anything it had done.

The sum to be paid by the Government to the Syndicate, should it bring the war to a satisfactory conclusion, would depend upon the duration of hostilities. That is to say, that as the shorter the duration of the war, the greater would be the benefit to the country, therefore, the larger must be the pay to the Syndicate. According to the proposed contract, the Syndicate would receive, if the war should continue for a year, one-quarter the sum stipulated to be paid if peace should be declared in three months.

If at any time during the conduct of the war by the Syndicate an American seaport should be taken by the enemy, or a British force landed on any point of the seacoast, the contract should be considered at an end, and security and payment forfeited. If any point on the northern boundary of the United States should be taken and occupied by the enemy, one million dollars of the deposited security should be forfeited for every such occupation, but the contract should continue.

It was stipulated that the land and naval forces of the United States should remain under the entire control of the Government, but should be maintained as a defensive force, and not brought into action unless any failure on the part of the Syndicate should render such action necessary.

The state of feeling in governmental circles, and the evidences of alarm and distrust which were becoming apparent in Congress and among the people, exerted an important influence in favour of the Syndicate. The Government caught at its proposition, not as if it were a straw, but as if it were a life-raft. The men who offered to relieve the executive departments of their perilous responsibilities were men of great ability, prominent positions, and vast resources, whose vast enterprises had already made them known all over the globe. Such men were not likely to jeopardize their reputations and fortunes in a case like this, unless they had well-founded reasons for believing that they would be successful. Even the largest amount stipulated to be paid them in case of success would be less than the ordinary estimates for the military and naval operations which had been anticipated; and in case of failure, the amount forfeited would go far to repair the losses which might be sustained by the citizens of the various States.

At all events, should the Syndicate be allowed to take immediate control of the war, there would be time to put the army and navy, especially the latter, in better condition to carry on the contest in case of the failure of the Syndicate. Organization and construction might still go on, and, should it be necessary, the army and navy could step into the contest fresh and well prepared.

All branches of the Government united in accepting the offer of the Syndicate. The contract was signed, and the world waited to see what would happen next.

The influence which for years had been exerted by the interests controlled by the men composing the Syndicate, had its effect in producing a popular confidence in the power of the members of the Syndicate to conduct a war as successfully as they had conducted other gigantic enterprises. Therefore, although predictions of disaster came from many quarters, the American public appeared willing to wait with but moderate impatience for the result of this novel undertaking.

The Government now proceeded to mass troops at important points on the northern frontier; forts were supplied with men and armaments, all coast defences were put in the best possible condition, the navy was stationed at important ports, and work at the ship-yards went on. But without reference to all this, the work of the Syndicate immediately began.

This body of men were of various politics and of various pursuits in life. But politics were no more regarded in the work they had undertaken than they would have been in the purchase of land or of railroad iron. No manifestoes of motives and intentions were issued to the public. The Syndicate simply went to work. There could be no doubt that early success would be a direct profit to it, but there could also be no doubt that its success would be a vast benefit and profit, not only to the business enterprises in which these men were severally engaged, but to the business of the whole country. To save the United States from a dragging war, and to save themselves from the effects of it, were the prompting motives for the formation of the Syndicate.

Without hesitation, the Syndicate determined that the war in which it was about to engage should be one of defence by means of offence. Such a war must necessarily be quick and effective; and with all the force of their fortunes, their minds, and their bodies, its members went to work to wage this war quickly and effectively.

All known inventions and improvements in the art of war had been thoroughly considered by the Syndicate, and by the eminent specialists whom it had enlisted in its service. Certain recently perfected engines of war, novel in nature, were the exclusive property of the Syndicate. It was known, or surmised, in certain quarters that the Syndicate had secured possession of important warlike inventions; but what they were and how they acted was a secret carefully guarded and protected.

The first step of the Syndicate was to purchase from the United States Government ten war-vessels. These were of medium size and in good condition, but they were of an old-fashioned type, and it had not been considered expedient to put them in commission. This action caused surprise and disappointment in many quarters. It had been supposed that the Syndicate, through its agents scattered all over the world, would immediately acquire, by purchase or lease, a fleet of fine ironclads culled from various maritime powers. But the Syndicate having no intention of involving, or attempting to involve, other countries in this quarrel, paid no attention to public opinion, and went to work in its own way.

Its vessels, eight of which were on the Atlantic coast and two on the Pacific, were rapidly prepared for the peculiar service in which they were to be engaged. The resources of the Syndicate were great, and in a very short time several of their vessels, already heavily plated with steel, were furnished with an additional outside armour, formed of strips of elastic steel, each reaching from the gunwales nearly to the surface of the water. These strips, about a foot wide, and placed an inch or two apart, were each backed by several powerful air-buffers, so that a ball striking one or more of them would be deprived of much of its momentum. The experiments upon the steel spring and buffers adopted by the Syndicate showed that the force of the heaviest cannonading was almost deadened by the powerful elasticity of this armour.

The armament of each vessel consisted of but one gun, of large calibre, placed on the forward deck, and protected by a bomb-proof covering. Each vessel was manned by a captain and crew from the merchant service, from whom no warlike duties were expected. The fighting operations were in charge of a small body of men, composed of

two or three scientific specialists, and some practical gunners and their assistants. A few bomb-proof canopies and a curved steel deck completed the defences of the vessel.

Besides equipping this little navy, the Syndicate set about the construction of certain sea-going vessels of an extraordinary kind. So great were the facilities at its command, and so thorough and complete its methods, that ten or a dozen ship-yards and foundries were set to work simultaneously to build one of these ships. In a marvellously short time the Syndicate possessed several of them ready for action.

These vessels became technically known as "crabs." They were not large, and the only part of them which projected above the water was the middle of an elliptical deck, slightly convex, and heavily mailed with ribs of steel. These vessels were fitted with electric engines of extraordinary power, and were capable of great speed. At their bows, fully protected by the overhanging deck, was the machinery by which their peculiar work was to be accomplished. The Syndicate intended to confine itself to marine operations, and for the present it was contented with these two classes of vessels.

The armament for each of the large vessels, as has been said before, consisted of a single gun of long range, and the ammunition was confined entirely to a new style of projectile, which had never yet been used in warfare. The material and construction of this projectile were known only to three members of the Syndicate, who had invented and perfected it, and it was on account of their possession of this secret that they had been invited to join that body.

This projectile was not, in the ordinary sense of the word, an explosive, and was named by its inventors, "The Instantaneous Motor." It was discharged from an ordinary cannon, but no gunpowder or other explosive compound was used to propel it. The bomb possessed, in itself the necessary power of propulsion, and the gun was used merely to give it the proper direction.

These bombs were cylindrical in form, and pointed at the outer end. They were filled with hundreds of small tubes, each radiating outward from a central line. Those in the middle third of the bomb pointed directly outward, while those in its front portion were inclined forward at a slight angle, and those in the rear portion backward at the same angle. One tube at the end of the bomb, and pointing directly backward, furnished the motive power.

Each of these tubes could exert a force sufficient to move an ordinary train of passenger cars one mile, and this power could be exerted instantaneously, so that the difference in time in the starting of a train at one end of the mile and its arrival at the other would not be appreciable. The difference in concussionary force between a train moving at the rate of a mile in two minutes, or even one minute, and another train which moves a mile in an instant, can easily be imagined.

In these bombs, those tubes which might direct their powers downward or laterally upon the earth were capable of instantaneously propelling every portion of solid ground or rock

to a distance of two or three hundred yards, while the particles of objects on the surface of the earth were instantaneously removed to a far greater distance. The tube which propelled the bomb was of a force graduated according to circumstances, and it would carry a bomb to as great a distance as accurate observation for purposes of aim could be made. Its force was brought into action while in the cannon by means of electricity while the same effect was produced in the other tubes by the concussion of the steel head against the object aimed at.

What gave the tubes their power was the jealously guarded secret.

The method of aiming was as novel as the bomb itself. In this process nothing depended on the eyesight of the gunner; the personal equation was entirely eliminated. The gun was so mounted that its direction was accurately indicated by graduated scales; there was an instrument which was acted upon by the dip, rise, or roll of the vessel, and which showed at any moment the position of the gun with reference to the plane of the sea-surface.

Before the discharge of the cannon an observation was taken by one of the scientific men, which accurately determined the distance to the object to be aimed at, and reference to a carefully prepared mathematical table showed to what points on the graduated scales the gun should be adjusted, and the instant that the muzzle of the cannon was in the position that it was when the observation was taken, a button was touched and the bomb was instantaneously placed on the spot aimed at. The exactness with which the propelling force of the bomb could be determined was an important factor in this method of aiming.

As soon as three of the spring-armoured vessels and five "crabs" were completed, the Syndicate felt itself ready to begin operations. It was indeed time. The seas had been covered with American and British merchantmen hastening homeward, or to friendly ports, before the actual commencement of hostilities. But all had not been fortunate enough to reach safety within the limits of time allowed, and several American merchantmen had been already captured by fast British cruisers.

The members of the Syndicate well understood that if a war was to be carried on as they desired, they must strike the first real blow. Comparatively speaking, a very short time had elapsed since the declaration of war, and the opportunity to take the initiative was still open.

It was in order to take this initiative that, in the early hours of a July morning, two of the Syndicate's armoured vessels, each accompanied by a crab, steamed out of a New England port, and headed for the point on the Canadian coast where it had been decided to open the campaign.

The vessels of the Syndicate had no individual names. The spring-armoured ships were termed "repellers," and were numbered, and the crabs were known by the letters of the alphabet. Each repeller was in charge of a Director of Naval Operations; and the whole

naval force of the Syndicate was under the command of a Director-in-chief. On this momentous occasion this officer was on board of Repeller No. 1, and commanded the little fleet.

The repellers had never been vessels of great speed, and their present armour of steel strips, the lower portion of which was frequently under water, considerably retarded their progress; but each of them was taken in tow by one of the swift and powerful crabs, and with this assistance they made very good time, reaching their destination on the morning of the second day.

It was on a breezy day, with a cloudy sky, and the sea moderately smooth, that the little fleet of the Syndicate lay to off the harbour of one of the principal Canadian seaports. About five miles away the headlands on either side of the mouth of the harbour could be plainly seen. It had been decided that Repeller No. 1 should begin operations. Accordingly, that vessel steamed about a mile nearer the harbour, accompanied by Crab A. The other repeller and crab remained in their first position, ready to act in case they should be needed.

The approach of two vessels, evidently men-of-war, and carrying the American flag, was perceived from the forts and redoubts at the mouth of the harbour, and the news quickly spread to the city and to the vessels in port. Intense excitement ensued on land and water, among the citizens of the place as well as its defenders. Every man who had a post of duty was instantly at it; and in less than half an hour the British man-of-war Scarabaeus, which had been lying at anchor a short distance outside the harbour, came steaming out to meet the enemy. There were other naval vessels in port, but they required more time to be put in readiness for action.

As soon as the approach of Scarabaeus was perceived by Repeller No. 1, a boat bearing a white flag was lowered from that vessel and was rapidly rowed toward the British ship. When the latter saw the boat coming she lay to, and waited its arrival. A note was delivered to the captain of the Scarabaeus, in which it was stated that the Syndicate, which had undertaken on the part of the United States the conduct of the war between that country and Great Britain, was now prepared to demand the surrender of this city with its forts and defences and all vessels within its harbour, and, as a first step, the immediate surrender of the vessel to the commander of which this note was delivered.

The overwhelming effrontery of this demand caused the commander of the Scarabaeus to doubt whether he had to deal with a raving lunatic or a blustering fool; but he informed the person in charge of the flag-of- truce boat, that he would give him fifteen minutes in which to get back to his vessel, and that he would then open fire upon that craft.

The men who rowed the little boat were not men-of-war's men, and were unaccustomed to duties of this kind. In eight minutes they had reached their vessel, and were safe on board.

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