

The Attack on Mel- bourne.

AN EPISODE OF 1887.

COLLAPSE OF THE EXPEDITION.

No. VI.

Simultaneously with the land attack by way of Western Port, the attempt to pass the defences at the Heads was continued. The object of the enemy was to make a dash at Melbourne, and, under threat of bombardment, to levy a contribution of several millions. The one movement was intended to be complementary to the other. In order to co-operate with the land advance it was necessary to force the passage of the shoals. But whilst the Head forts had been passed—not silenced—there still remained the formidable obstacle presented by the South Channel fort and its attendant mine fields. Our navy had also to be reckoned with, and Captain Thomas was not the officer to shrink from risking the loss of his own vessels if he could inflict anything like corresponding damage on his opponent. The loss of the Turenne on the Victory Shoal was a notable reduction of the power of the enemy. When the other vessels had run the gauntlet, and were beyond range in the anchorage near Portsea, the Queenscliff and Nepean forts aided the Crow's Nest to bring the Frenchmen to submission. Against such a terrific hailstorm the disabled cruiser could offer no effective resistance. Her commander gallantly held out in the belief that his consorts would succeed in silencing the forts, and spare him the indignity of surrender; but when the futility of this hope became apparent, there was no other course open but to haul down the flag. The pounding from the heavy guns of the forts, especially the Crow's Nest, had been merciless. At short range every shot told. The battered hull bore unmis]

had been destroyed. The battered hull bore unmistakable evidence of the severity of the fire, and the vessel was brought nearly to a sinking condition. The captain and many of his officers were wounded, and amongst the crew the mortality was very great. After the naval fight, in which the Cerberus was partially disabled, and the gunboat Victoria sunk, there was a temporary lull in the combat preliminary to renewed efforts. The Triomphante and the Ilyin were the only vessels of the enemy's squadron in fighting trim, the Vladimir Monomach having sustained injuries from the torpedo explosion of a character so serious that to manœuvre her was impossible. Her powerful armament, however, was still effective. Lying in the deep anchorage in the vicinity of Portsea, the fleet was troubled solely by the Franklin fort, but her 80-pounders were unable to maintain their fire against the heavy guns of the cruisers. We were taught by this a painful lesson of the uselessness of lightly armed forts. The enemy, instead of being kept under continual fire, obtained a breathing time which could be utilised for the preparation of their assault on the remaining link in our system of defence.

MINES AND COUNTERMINES.

Against the three, or counting the Rotomahana, the four vessels of the enemy, we could produce only the Cerberus, whose fighting power was greatly diminished by her slow speed; the torpedo boats, and our remaining gunboat, the Albert, armed with one 8in. and one 6in. gun. So far as our naval defence was concerned, we were inferior in force, though strong enough to harass and impede our foes in any attempt on the South Channel fort. Upon this work and the accompanying mine field rested our main reliance to prevent the passage of the shoals being accomplished. If this obstacle were overcome, a free way was opened to Hobson's Bay, and Melbourne would come under

son's Bay, and Melbourne would come under the peril of bombardment. The enemy were as well acquainted as ourselves with the vital importance of the task before them, and did not underrate the difficulties of the situation. A complete and comprehensive system of submarine mines had been laid under the supervision of Major Rhodes, and protected by the fire of the South Channel fort, the Nelson stationed in the rear of the field, and the Albert operating in the shoal waters on the eastern side of the channel, presented a check which needed very careful treatment. The plan of the enemy was to proceed by counter-mine, exploding the obstacles which impeded the channel, and then to run past the fort. The armament of the South Channel fort comprised two 8in. breech-loading Armstrong guns, mounted on hydro-pneumatic disappearing carriages, and the artillerymen were well protected from opposing fire. Built on the edge of the shore, near No. 5 buoy, the work commanded the channel, and the seaward guns swept a wide range. The enemy determined to make their attempt under cover of night in order the more effectually to conceal their movements and to evade the dangerous fire which otherwise might destroy their chances of success. Accordingly, until nightfall no sign of their intentions was manifested, though their arrangements were steadily proceeding. When the chosen moment had arrived, the Triomphante, Ilyin, and Rotomahana moved down towards the South Channel, leaving the Russian cruiser at the anchorage. Carefully feeling their way, the three ships advanced, seeking to hide all sign of their whereabouts. Suddenly a flash of brilliant light across the water showed that the fort was on the alert, and the boom of the heavy gun, followed by the hissing of the shell, denoted that the vessels had been observed. The Triomphante replied, less for the purpose of injuring the fort than to distract

pose of injuring the fort than to distract attention and to hide the operations of the boats under the cloud of smoke. The experiments at Milford Haven proved the fact that a beam of electric light playing on a cloud of cannon smoke makes the latter more opaque and obscuring than before. The enemy, aware of this result, were resolved to turn their knowledge to account. Shrouded in obscurity, the boats of the fleet and the torpedo launches were sent forward to carry on the work of countermining, whilst the fort and the ships kept up their artillery duel. The flashes

from the guns were the only indication given of the position of the ships, and the firing was greatly at random. In the meantime, the boats were busily engaged. Mine after mine was exploded by means of torpedoes floated down upon them. The operation was one full of danger, as not infrequently the mine would go off while the boat was yet within the radius of explosion, and boat and occupants would be hurled into the air. As soon also as the object of the enemy was penetrated, the fort diverted its fire from the ships, and sought to find the range of the boats. Acquainted with the position of the field, the artillerymen were able to judge with some degree of certainty, and their fire told with such destructive effect that the enemy were obliged to suspend their operations.

THE NIGHT ATTACK.

The Victorian navy was not destined to be idle while these events were proceeding. Captain Thomas had determined to stir up the enemy, and he managed a plan for a night surprise. The injuries to the Cerberus were more serious than at first appeared, and the vessel could be fought with only one turret. He was not, however, to be deterred by this circumstance, and the

barred by this circumstance, and the Cerberus, accompanied by the torpedo boats, Childers, Nepean, and Lonsdale, stood over to the Portsea anchorage. The Childers was despatched to discover the position and movements of the enemy, the other vessels cautiously advancing at slower speed. Whilst the fast torpedo boat was absent on this errand, the guns of the South Channel fort and the reply of the Triomphante indicated the attack in that direction. Captain Thomas hesitated whether he should proceed there, but the report from the Childers that the Vladimir Monomach was alone convinced him that an opportunity was open to inflict a crushing blow on the enemy. He calculated that the South Channel fort would be able to occupy all the attention of its assailants quite long enough to enable him to do the work before him. Consequently he resolved to make the Russian cruiser his point of attack. Hoping to take the enemy at an advantage he sent the Childers to make a half circuit, in order that it might make its dash from the farther side, between the vessel and the shore, where an attack was less likely to be contemplated. The Russians, however, if not expecting to be assailed, were on their guard, and a cordon of boats was stationed around the ship at a distance of about two hundred yards, ready to give the alarm, whilst the vessel itself was protected by torpedo netting. Indeed, it soon became evident that the Childers must have been observed on her reconnoitring trip, for the waters were illuminated by the electric light, and as the Cerberus came within the radius the Russian opened on her. Finding the chance of surprise gone, Captain Thomas boldly accepted the contest, and whilst the guns of the Cerberus played on the huge hulk, which was unable to manœuvre, the torpedo boats watched their opportunity to launch their deadly missiles. The Lonsdale, which was smartly handled, made a desperate dash, and succeeded in discharging a torpedo under the

ceeded in discharging a torpedo under the bows of the cruiser, which, exploding with a roar, shook the vessel from stem to stern, and enlarged the injuries previously caused. The *Lonsdale*, however, was doomed to pay the penalty of her audacity. A riddling fire was poured upon her, and at the moment when reversing her engines a shot struck her amidships, disabling her machinery, and leaving her to drift away helpless. The fire from the machine guns decimated her crew. The *Cerberus*, also, did not escape scathless, as she was struck near the water-line by a shot which penetrated her plates, and left a nasty rent. Nevertheless, the enemy was suffering even more severely under her fire. Unable to move freely, nearly every shot of the heavy 18-ton guns told with disastrous effect. But the culminating catastrophe was at hand. The *Childers*, dashing out of the darkness, darted past the vessel, discharging two Whitehead torpedoes, which, striking the vessel, one amidships, and the other slightly to the stern, exploded almost simultaneously. A shower of sparks and shattered woodwork was thrown into the air. And then a terrible cry of anguish arose as the discovery was made manifest that the vessel was sinking. The water poured in through the huge rents in her side, and within a few moments the ship heeled over and sunk beneath the waves. Most of her crew were carried down with her, but our boats picked up the few survivors struggling on the surface.

THE ATTACK ON THE SOUTH CHANNEL FORT.

The attack on the South Channel fort was not given up by the enemy on account of the catastrophe to their consort. They had under-estimated the offensive power of the Victorian navy, and had paid the penalty of their error. Neither were they fully aware of all that had happened, though the explosions and the cessation of firing caused them to fear the worst. But unless the

them to fear the worst. But unless the enterprise was to be abandoned, and the land expedition left to its own resources, the obstacles in the South Channel must be overcome. They argued that once secure the passage through the shoals, and they could dictate their own terms at Melbourne. Besides, their blood was up, and they were not willing to allow that an expedition on such a scale of magnitude could be defeated by the unaided resources of the colony alone. The resolve was therefore come to to make another determined effort to force the channel. Abandoning the slow and arduous attempt to explode the mine fields seriatim, they conceived the idea of attempting to surprise the fort by a boat attack. They estimated that under cover of the darkness it might be possible for the boats to approach the fort in the rear and with a sudden rush to overcome resistance. They did not conceal from themselves that the undertaking was a forlorn hope, but they relied on the unexpected nature of the attack, which would be covered by a continuous fire maintained on the fort. If this effort failed it was agreed that the only course was to retire, for they were not unmindful of the danger that the British fleet, which had been decoyed away,

would soon be on their track, and they had no wish to be caught like rats in a trap. With all speed the boat expedition was organised, three hundred men being selected and despatched on their perilous task. It was recognised that there was danger of the fire from the ships injuring their own men, but these and other perils had to be encountered, or the failure of the enterprise to be admitted. The fort was deluded into the belief that the efforts to explode the mine-fields were still being continued, and its fire was drawn in this manner. The *Triomphante* kept up its bombardment of the fort as if the attack were proceeding in all serious-

attack were proceeding in all seriousness, whilst the Ilyin watched against any effort by the Victorian torpedo boats or the Cerberus. Our ironclad, however, was not in a condition to venture on any effort of the kind. Hour after hour passed away, for the distance to be traversed by the boats was considerable, and the progress slow. As the time allotted expired, the enemy increased their fire, with the view of keeping the attention of the fort engaged. To emphasise the apparent seriousness of the movement, it was also determined that the Rotomahana should run the gauntlet of the channel, the enemy recking little of her fate so long as it might serve the purpose of distracting the notice of the defenders. Her original crew were still retained on board, and were obliged to run all the perils of the chance. A select band, only sufficient to work the vessel chosen from the Triomphante, were allotted to the task, and at full speed the doomed steamer proceeded on her fatal mission. She had advanced some way when, striking one of the submerged mines, there was an explosion which shattered the bows of the vessel, and reduced her at a blow to a drifting wreck. Of those on board only a few succeeded in eventually escaping. This attempt, wild as it seemed, narrowly missed attaining its object. Those on the fort were so intent on the explosion that the enemy's boats were enabled to reach the rear of the

fort unobserved. In attempting to effect a landing, however, they fell into confusion, the alarm was raised, and before they could make good their footing on the rubble stone which protects the foundation on which the fort is built an effective resistance was presented. The machine guns were turned upon the boats, several of them were sunk, and the remainder of the expedition, defeated and disheartened, made the best of its way

and disheartened, made the best of its way back to the ships.

THE RETREAT.

The *Triomphante* and the *Ilyin* alone remained of the squadron which had entered the Heads. The *Turenne* a wreck on the Victory shoal, and the *Vladimir Monomach* sunk at the Portsea anchorage, testified to the strength of our defences; and the last and vital link in the chain was still unbroken. After the ill success of their last efforts the enemy were resolved to give over the undertaking, to join the *Duquesne* outside, to re-embark the troops on the transports, and to try their luck in some other place where the means of resistance was less effective. But in devising these plans they reckoned without their host. Admiral Fairfax, though misled by the New Zealand decoy, had soon discovered the deception, and informed by the steamer sent from New South Wales of the whereabouts of the enemy, had started in immediate pursuit. On the evening before the intelligence was telegraphed from the Promontory that the British fleet, comprising the *Nelson* flagship, the corvettes *Diamond* and *Opal*, and the sloop *Miranda*, had signalled the station, and had obtained information of the progress of events. The admiral told the authorities to endeavour to detain the enemy, hoping to deliver a crushing blow which should finally dispose of the expedition. How eagerly was the morrow awaited at Queenscliff, where it soon became known that the British fleet might be expected at daybreak. The enemy, unconscious of the near approach of Admiral Fairfax, were still conscious that there was no time to be lost. Having received

on board the remains of their boat expedition, the *Triomphante* and the *Ilyin* started for the Heads to again run the gauntlet of the forts, but under different circumstances. Their movements were not

circumstances. Their movements unobserved at the Heads, and at Queenscliff and Nepean preparations were made to give them a warm reception. The Carberus was unable to render effective help, but the Childers and Nepean, by threatening attacks, did their utmost to delay the vessels. When running between the Heads, the forts opened fire on them to give them a parting remembrance. On rounding Nepean then for the first time did the enemy observe the British fleet in the offing, or rather two of the fleet, the Nelson and Diamond, for the Opal had been despatched in pursuit of the Duquesne, and the Miranda had been sent up Western Port harbour to destroy the transports which constituted the base of the land expedition. Then followed the stirring sight of a fight at sea. The contest was not of long duration. The French cruiser, after the knocking about she had undergone, and with a weakened crew, was in no condition to cope with so formidable an antagonist as the Nelson. After a sharp but short fight she was compelled to strike her flag. The Ilyin did not seek to engage the Diamond, but taking advantage of her exceptional speed, made her escape — the only one of the hostile squadron that got away, for the Duquesne was eventually chased down and captured.

THE END OF THE LAND EXPEDITION.

With the collapse of the naval attack, the fate of the subsidiary land expedition became a certainty. Even victory could be only a prelude to defeat. But our soldiers proved themselves as capable in the field as in the forts, and the day which witnessed the final rolling up of the enemy's fleet saw also the Russians retreat in despair from the blood-stained slopes of Mount Kliza. The main body alone retained some semblance of cohesion, and prepared doggedly to fight their retreat to what they believed to be their only place of safety, their ships at Stony Point. When

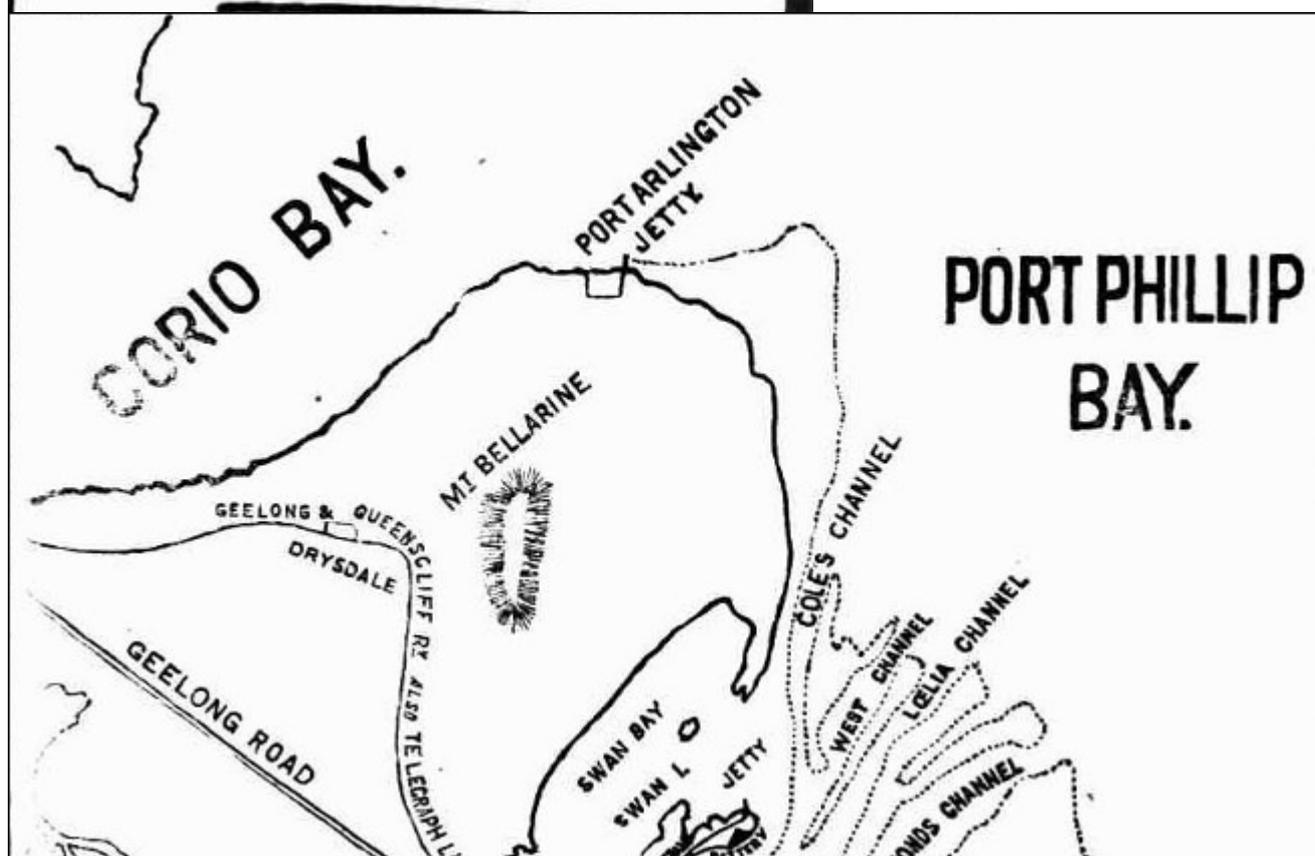
the commandant was made aware of the results at the Heads, he, in order to save the useless shedding of blood endeavoured to communicate with the enemy, and induce them to surrender. But whether the officers could not understand, or would not believe the communication, the flag of truce was rejected, and the pursuit, under the command of Lt.-Colonel Brownrigg, was steadily maintained. The object of Lt.-Colonel Brownrigg was to press on the retreating force to prevent their making any stand, or recovering their cohesion. He was well aware that our troops under Major-General Downes had crossed from Dromana, and would very soon cut them off. And this was what happened. The retreat was almost converted into a rout by the pressure of our pursuit. One or two sharp skirmishes took place between the rearguard of the Russians and our advance guard in which, flushed with victory, our men proved irresistible. Falling back, abandoning their guns, and throwing away their rifles, the defeated force was fast becoming little better than a mob. At length the expected check came. Those in front found their path barred by a strong body of our troops posted to receive them, whilst in the rear the victors in the day's fight were pressing upon them. The Mounted Rifles on the flanks proved to them that they were practically surrounded, and that their case was hopeless. The Russian general sent a flag of truce, asking for terms, to which Lt.-Colonel Brownrigg responded, in the language of General Grant, "unconditional surrender." Recognising that the situation was inevitable, and learning the fate of the expedition in other respects, the Russians submitted to the fortune of war, and laid down their arms.

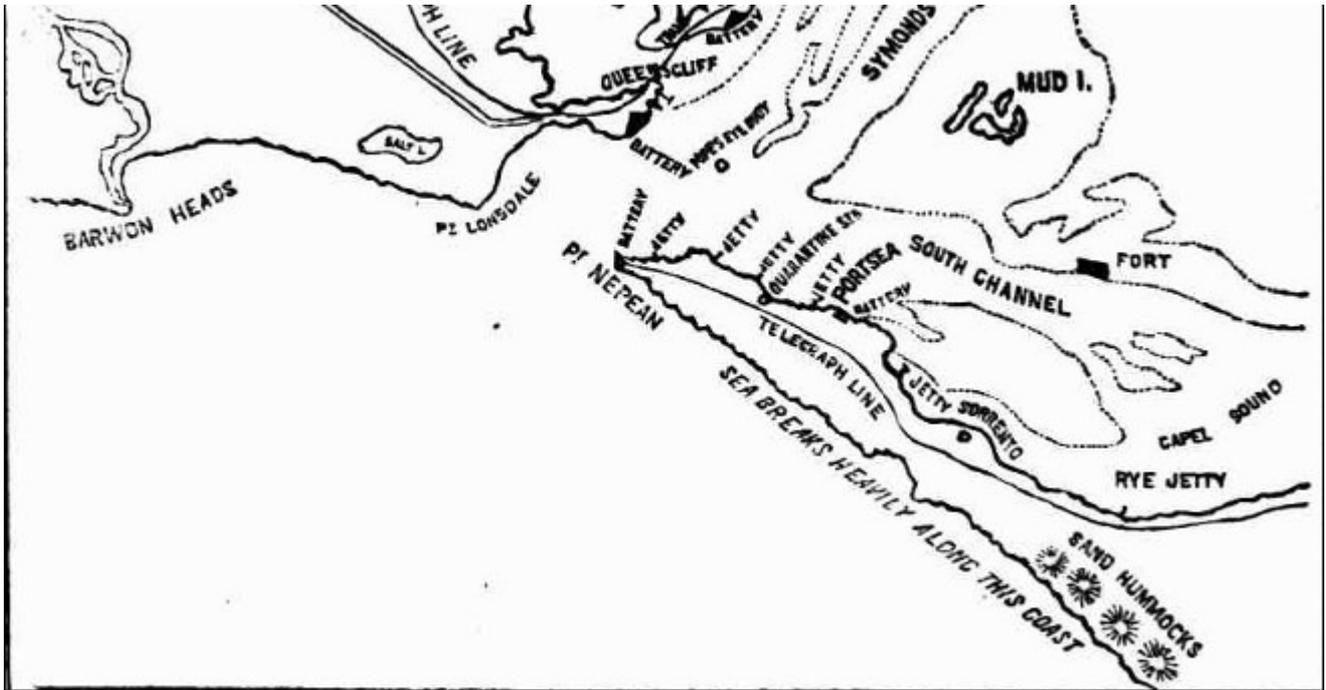
THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE EXPEDITION.

Great as was the joy over the successful defence maintained, our exultation was dashed by some consideration of the losses

dashed by some consideration of the losses we had sustained. We were yet too young in military glory to be proud of the piles of our dead; nevertheless, for those who mourned there

was the consolation that those who had perished had died for their country. Australia had passed her baptism of fire with courage, and had borne herself bravely, as befitted her descent. The test had shown that we were capable of defending ourselves. From the mother-country herself, straining under the ordeal of a war with two great nations, came encouraging plaudits. Amongst ourselves, one of the most beneficial results of this severe trial was a strengthening of the national character. But above all was the wave of generous sympathy which showed the oneness of kin of all the colonies; all petty jealousies and trifling prejudices were swept away. Australia, previously an assemblage of states, was left a United Nation.





MAP OF PORT PHILLIP HEADS AND FORTIFICATIONS.

EXPLANATION: — TELEGRAPH AND RAILWAY LINES. - - - BOUNDARIES OF SHOALS.