

# **THE BATTLE OF DORKING**

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**SIR GEORGE TOMKYNS CHESNEY & G. H POWELL**

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*Chesney, N.E. Tompkins*

# THE BATTLE OF DORKING

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

G. H. POWELL



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## PREFACE

THE warnings and prophecies addressed to one generation must prove very ineffective if they are equally applicable to the next. But in the eloquent appeal published forty-three years ago, by General Chesney, with its vivid description and harrowing pathos, few readers will not recognize parallel features to those of our own situation in September, 1914.

True the handicaps of the invasion of August, 1871, are heavily piled upon the losing combatant. Not only the eternal Anglo-Irish trouble (so easily mistaken by the foreigner for such a difference as might be found separating two other countries) but complications with America, as well as the common form seduction of the British fleet to the Dardanelles, a general unreadiness of all administrative departments, and a deep distrust of the "volunteer" movement, involve the whole drama in an atmosphere of profound pessimism.

But there are scores of other details, counsels, and reflections (of which we will not spoil the reader's enjoyment by anticipation) which, as the common saying is of history when it repeats itself, "might have been written yesterday." The

desperate condition of things is all the more remarkable as Englishmen had just witnessed the crushing defeat of their great ally—supposed to be the first military power of Europe—by the enemy they are supposed to despise. The story is otherwise simple enough. The secret annexation of Holland and Denmark is disclosed. People said we might have kept out of the trouble. But an impulsive nation egged on the Government who, confident that our old luck would pull us through, at once declare war. The fleet, trying to close with the enemy, is destroyed in “a few minutes” by the “deadly engines” left behind by the evasive enemy; our amateurish armies are defeated on our own soil, and *voilà tout*.

Remarkable must have been the national insouciance, or despondent the eye which viewed it, to explain the impassioned actuality of such a *reveillematin*.

For one thing it may be remarked that *The Battle of Dorking*,\* though in a sense the “history” of the pamphlet is already “ancient,” is really the first of its kind. The topic, then, of such inspiring freshness, has since become well worn.

*Mutatis mutandis*, doubtless, much of General Chesney’s advice and warning might have been repeated on the occasion of the Boer War. If that were not a practical “alarum to the patriotic

\* Contributed by Genl. Sir Geo. T. Chesney (1830-1895) to *Blackwood’s Magazine* (May, 1871). It created a great sensation and appeared in pamphlet form the same year.



Briton," we ask ourselves what could be so called. Perhaps it combined the maximum of alarm with the minimum of national risk, but its beneficent influence can scarcely be questioned.

At the date of the republication of this pamphlet we face a peril immeasurably greater than that, if not equal to the Napoleonic terror of 1803; and we face it, as concerns the mass of our population, with a calmness which—to critical eyes and in view of the appeal made by the Government to the country—is at least susceptible of an unsatisfactory explanation.

If surprise, misunderstanding, may in a measure account for that, it would be idle to pretend that the national mood and temper (and the moods and tempers of nations will vary) were altogether—if they could ever be—such as encouraged the most sanguine hopes of our success when exposed to an ordeal of suddenness, extent, and severity unknown in the world's history.

In estimating the risks of our situation, thoughtful criticism may be said to run naturally into two channels.

Firstly, in the political world—for reasons which cannot here be considered—the past decade has seen a predominance of idealist activity and ratiocination scarcely known before.

Hence the State has exhibited, to some extent, a *Utopiste* attitude likely to mislead foreign nations—it may be said with mild brevity—alike as to our real views of their conduct, and as to our

national belief in the right or duty of self-assertion.

If, in 1871, we were represented as the helpless dupes of foreign diplomacy, in 1914 we rather appear to have deceived the enemy to our own hurt. A humane aversion to War—though, for that matter, it is only by a philanthropic “illusion” that the extreme stage of self-assertion can be morally differentiated from those that precede it, may tempt politicians by a too sedulous avoidance of the unpleasing phrase to invite the dreadful reality. But, again, in the private life of the nation, other traits (some noted in the pamphlet of '71) have given cause for critical reflection. Besides Luxury—remarkable enough in its novel and fantastic forms, though a commonplace complaint of tractarians in all ages—a generally increased relaxation of all old-established ties of religion, convention or tradition, a tendency noticeable in general conduct, art and letters alike, a sort of orgy of intellectual and literary Erastianism, a *blasé* craving for sensational novelty (encouraged perhaps if not sated by the startling novelties of the age) have given scope for anxiety as to the conservation in the English nature of that solid *morale*, that “*gesundes und sicheres Gefühl*” defined by an eminent thinker as the source of all worthy activity.

These words can but very crudely sketch a complex sense of uneasiness and dissatisfaction familiar to most of us.

Mr. Kipling has sung long since of athletic

excesses and indolence. More recent critics have dwelt on the extravagant time and expense devoted to golf. General Chesney would have branded the sensationalist effeminacy of our football-gloating crowds of thousands who might be recruits. Reviewers laugh wearily over the horrors or absurdities of the latest poetic monstrosity or "futurist" nightmare. But in one phase or another the consciousness is present to all, and not unnoticed by our enemies.

And it adds a sting to our inevitable anxiety if we cannot yet feel sure how far we can "recollect" our true best selves in the very moment of action, how far there has been given to us that saving grace of a storm-tost nation, "*l'art de porter en soi le remède de ses propres défauts.*"

Every race, doubtless, has its own special weaknesses and delusions, the "idols" of its patriotic "cave," and it is a commonplace of history that the moral, physical, or intellectual "decadence" of one age is revived and actualized by the material cataclysm of another.

And the readiness, spiritual and material, of the nation *in utrumque paratus* is the index of its harmony with its environment.

On the other hand there are wars to be fully prepared for which would almost mean to be a partner in their criminality. There is an attitude of defence which, if successful, would lose all dignity were it allied with a permanent distrust in the morality and humanity of other nations.