

II.

A UNIQUE RELIC OF RODNEY AND THE BATTLE OF THE SAINTS.

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At noon on the 25th July 1782 the batteries of Gibraltar, then in the final and most intense phase of the long siege, thundered out a grand salute in honour of the great news just brought in by the *St Philip's Castle* merchantman and the *Hector* cutter. The information conveyed was none other than that, on 12th April Admiral Sir George Rodney, with thirty-six sail of the line, had, in twelve hours' hard fighting, beaten the *Comte de Grasse*, with thirty-four sail, off the Isles of the Saints, near Dominica, in the West Indies, thereby saving Jamaica and restoring that British command of the sea, the loss of which in preceding years had brought upon us endless harm and disgrace. In a moment of pre-Nelsonian inspiration Rodney in the *Formidable* had broken the enemy's line, and in that day of battle had also broken the spell of incompetence and ill-luck which had produced up to date a depressing string of disasters to the British arms.

It was indeed a day of shatterings, and there drifted from it not only the wrecks of French ships and ambitions, but also the unlamented ruins of that hampering tradition of the "fighting instructions" which throughout the century had killed the initiative and hide-bound the actions of British seamen. No wonder, when the news at last arrived, the sorely-tried garrison of Gibraltar wreathed their battered defences in triumphant smoke.

The chief naval prize of the action was the great French flagship, the *Ville de Paris*, a "very exquisite ship" of 106 guns, which had been presented to Louis XV. by the citizens of his capital. Across the surrendered deck of this and five other prizes the destiny of Britain

began once more its march to overseas dominion which had seemed to have been fatally interrupted by the recent loss of the American colonies.

For his achievement Rodney was honoured as he deserved, and among other expressions of appreciation and gratitude some person or group of persons unknown caused the medallion to be made which forms the subject of this article (figs. 1 and 2).

A mystery surrounds the origin of this relic, since it is entirely hand-made and not the stamped product of any cut die which would have involved the likely existence of replicas. Furthermore, the British Museum and the United Services Institute have entirely failed to trace any authority by whom it might have been ordered, or any reference to the design or presentation of anything of the kind. All the testimony I can furnish is to the effect that, as far as I know, it was in the possession of my great-grandfather, the late Robert Weir, Esq., Merchant at Gibraltar (*b.* 1785, *d.* 1841). As the firm of Weir had considerable colonial and foreign connections, particularly with Valparaiso, it may be that an association of merchants may have acclaimed the freeing of the seas by subscribing to this presentation; but whether this was arranged for on the Rock or at home, or how it came back into the hands of the family, I do not know.

They certainly had considerable reason to take a personal interest in the redoubtable Sir George. On the 16th January 1780 a brig came in laden with flour and informed the beleaguered fortress that, on the 8th, Rodney had taken, off the Portugal coast, a Spanish 64-gun ship, five of 32 and 28 guns, and fifteen merchantmen of the Caracca convoy bound from Bilbao to Cadiz. On the 17th the Admiral, with twenty-one sail of the line, engaged a Spanish squadron off Cape Saint Mary, and arrived at the Rock in person from Tetuan on the 25th. Having refilled the magazines and stores of the defence he left on the 13th February. All this suggests that the merchant companies of Gibraltar may have felt it incumbent upon them to add their share to the congratulations ultimately earned by the victor of "The Saints," but this theory is advanced as purely "circumstantial conjecture," a poor substitute for direct evidence, but certainly better than the blank ignorance which would otherwise confront us. All the more because of its unknown origin, I think it reasonable to claim for this little "ancient monument" a singular and intriguing interest. Artistically as well as historically it is unique, and I publish the fact of its existence in the hope that a description of it may serve as a contribution to the study of eighteenth-century British history, customs, and art.

The medallion consists of a thin oval perforated plate of pure gold,

3 inches high by about 2½ inches broad, set on a wooden base, and covered by a narrow glass dome. The obverse (fig. 1) bears a conventional representation of a square-sterned three-decker of the period, under which, on a wavy band, appears the name *La Ville de Paris*. From a large jack-staff at the stern fly two flags in token of surrender, the eighteenth-century two-cross Jack being above the French Fleurs-de-Lys. Projecting from the main-mast and filling in the remaining space in the oval we see an enlarged edition of the Jack and the Royal Standard



Fig. 1. Rodney Medallion—Obverse. (†)

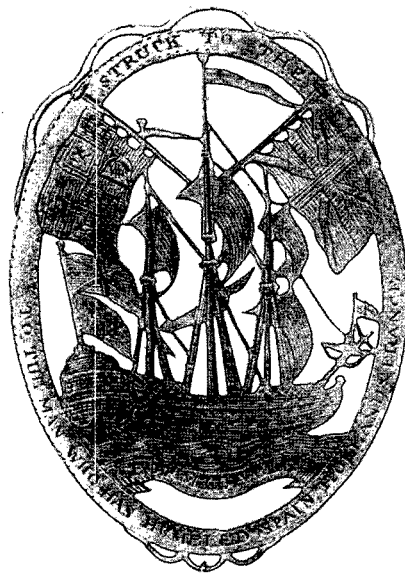


Fig. 2. Rodney Medallion—Reverse. (†)

of George III. exhibiting, by means of tiny scratches, the three Lions Passant Gardant of England, the Scottish Lion Rampant, the Irish Harp, the Fleurs-de-Lys of the old claim to the French Crown, and the arms of Hanover.

Above the bowsprit is a small flag marked with minute horizontal lines, though on the reverse it appears as a Union Jack. This latter difference is the sole variation in detail between the front and back representations of the ship, and is so small that one is at a loss to know if the engraver really intended to present us with portraits of both ships, as might at first be surmised from the appearance of the word *Formidable* at the back of the title-band.

UNIQUE RELIC OF RODNEY AND THE BATTLE OF SAINTS. 101

On the border we read: *Rodney For Ever. 12 April 82. A Proud Day for Old England.*

Turning to the reverse (fig. 2), we are confronted by what I personally take to be the same vessel, surmounted and underlined by the words, *Struck To The Formidable*, thus completing a sentence which begins with *La Ville de Paris* on the other side. The legend finishes with a hearty piece of eighteenth-century flamboyance: *To The Man Who Has Humbled Spain, Holland and France.*

Here, then, is published for the first time in one hundred and forty-six years a little metal fragment of a dead century, fashioned in a beautiful and forgotten style by hands unknown. Whether the grim Sir George Brydges Rodney ever beheld its dainty glitter we cannot tell, but the likelihood that he did is considerable, since hand-carved gold-work is not ordered singly without some direct and personal purpose in view.

The "Silent Navy" might not speak, but some of the citizens of Britain were not ashamed to speak for it; and in these days when we are so afraid of being "vainglorious" that we hesitate to glory at all, it is refreshing to come across a genuine and downright piece of simple-hearted joy in victory, reminding us directly of the high hard times and high hard men whose "far-off storm-beaten ships" once wove, like veritable shuttles of destiny, the pattern of the future upon the trackless seas.