

*McClure's*  
*October, 1899*

*Admiral Dewey*

ADMIRAL DEWEY has done more than add a glorious page to our history; more even than do a deed the memory of which will always be an inspiration to his countrymen, and especially his countrymen of his own profession. He has also taught us a lesson which should have profound practical effects, if only we are willing to learn it aright.

In the first place, he partly grasped and partly made his opportunity. Of course, in a certain sense, no man can absolutely make an opportunity. There were a number of admirals who during the dozen years preceding the Spanish war were retired without the opportunity of ever coming where it was possible to distinguish themselves; and it may be that some of these lacked nothing but the chance. Nevertheless, when the chance does come, only the great man can see it instantly and use it aright. In the second place, it must always be remembered that the power of using the chance aright comes only to the man who has faithfully and for long years made ready himself and his weapons for the possible need. Finally, and most important of all, it should ever be kept in mind that the man who does a great work must almost invariably owe the possibility of doing it to the faithful work of other men, either at the time or long before. Without his brilliancy their labor might be wasted, but without their labor his brilliancy would be of no avail.

It has been said that it was a mere accident that Dewey happened to be in command of the Asiatic Squadron when the war with Spain broke out. This is not the fact. He was sent to command it in the fall of 1897, because, to use the very language employed at the time, it was deemed wise to have there a man "who could go into Manila if necessary." He owed the appointment to the high professional reputation he enjoyed, and to the character he had established for willingness to accept responsibility, for sound judgment, and for entire fearlessness.

Probably the best way (although no way is infallible) to tell the worth of a naval commander as yet untried in war is to get at the estimate in which he is held by the best fighting men who would have to serve under him. In the summer of 1897 there were in Washington captains and commanders who later won honor for themselves and their country in the war with Spain, and who were already known for the dash and skill with which they handled their ships, the excellence of their gun practice, the good discipline of their crews, and their eager desire to win honorable renown. All these men were a unit in their faith in the then Commodore Dewey, in their desire to serve under him, should the chance arise, and in their unquestioning belief that he was the man to meet an emergency in a way that would do credit to the flag.

An excellent test is afforded by the readiness which the man has shown to take responsibility in any emergency in the past. One factor in Admiral Dewey's appointment—of which he is very possibly ignorant—was the way in which he had taken responsibility in purchasing coal for the squadron that was to have been used against Chile, if war with Chile had broken out, at the time General Harrison was President. A service will do well or ill at the

outbreak of war very much in proportion to the way it has been prepared to meet the outbreak during the preceding months. Now, it is often impossible to say whether the symptoms that seem to forbode war will or will not be followed by war. At one time, under President Harrison, we seemed as near war with Chile as ever we seemed to war with Spain under President McKinley. Therefore, when war threatens, preparations must be made in any event; for the evil of what proves to be the needless expenditure of money in one instance is not to be weighed for a moment against the failure to prepare in the other. But only a limited number of men have the moral courage to make these preparations, because there is always risk to the individual making them. Laws and regulations must be stretched when an emergency arises, and yet there is always some danger to the person who stretches them; and, moreover, in time of sudden need, some indispensable article can very possibly only be obtained at an altogether exorbitant price. If war comes, and the article, whether it be a cargo of coal, or a collier, or an auxiliary naval vessel, proves its usefulness, no complaint is ever made. But if the war does not come, then some small demagogue, some cheap economist, or some undersized superior who is afraid of taking the responsibility himself, may blame the man who bought the article and say that he exceeded his authority; that he showed more zeal than discretion in not waiting for a few days, etc. These are the risks which must be taken, and the men who take them should be singled out for reward and for duty. Admiral Dewey's whole action in connection with the question of coal-supply for our fleet during the Chilean scare marked him as one of these men.

No one who has not some knowledge of the army and navy will appreciate how much this means. It is necessary to have a complete system of checks upon the actions, and especially upon the expenditures, of the army and navy; but the present system is at times altogether too complete, especially in war. The efficiency of the quartermasters and commissary officers of the army in the war with Spain was very seriously marred by their perfectly justifiable fear that the slightest departure from the requirements of the red-tape regulations of peace would result in the docking of their own pay by men more concerned in enforcing the letter of the law than in seeing the army clothed and fed. In the navy, before the passage of the Personnel Bill, a positive premium was put on a man's doing nothing but keep out of trouble; for if only he could avoid a court martial, his promotions would take care of themselves, so that from the selfish standpoint no possible good could come to him from taking risks, while they might cause him very great harm. The best officers in the service recognized the menace that this state of affairs meant to the service, and strove to counterbalance it in every way. No small part of the good done by the admirable War College, under Captains Mahan, Taylor, and Goodrich, lay in their insistence upon the need of the naval officer's instantly accepting responsibility in any crisis, and doing what was best for the flag, even though it was probable the action might be disavowed by his immediate superiors, and though it might result in his own personal inconvenience and detriment. This was taught not merely as an abstract theory, but with direct reference to concrete cases; for instance, with reference to taking possession of Hawaii, if a revolution should by chance break out there during the presence of an American war-ship, or if the war-ship of a foreign power attempted to interfere with the affairs of the island.

For the work which Dewey had to do willingness to accept responsibility was a prime requisite. A man afraid to vary in times of emergency from the regulations laid down in time of peace would never even have got the coal with which to steam to Manila from Hong Kong the instant the crisis came. We were peculiarly fortunate in our Secretary of the Navy, Mr. Long; but the best secretary that ever held the navy portfolio could not successfully direct operations on the other side of the world. All that he could do was to choose a good man, give him the largest

possible liberty of action, and back him up in every way; and this Secretary Long did. But if the man chosen had been timid about taking risks, nothing that could be done for him would have availed. Such a man would not have disobeyed orders. The danger would have been of precisely the contrary character. He would scrupulously have done just whatever he was told to do, and then would have sat down and waited for further instructions, so as to protect himself if something happened to go wrong. An infinity of excuses can always be found for non-action.

Admiral Dewey was sent to command the fleet on the Asiatic station primarily because he had such a record in the past that the best officers in the navy believed him to be peculiarly a man of the fighting temperament and fit to meet emergencies, and because he had shown his willingness to assume heavy responsibilities. How amply he justified his choice it is not necessary to say. On our roll of naval heroes his name will stand second to that of Farragut alone, and no man since the Civil War, whether soldier or civilian, has added so much to the honorable renown of the nation or has deserved so well of it. For our own sakes, and in particular for the sake of any naval officer who in the future may be called upon to do such a piece of work as Dewey did, let us keep in mind the further fact that he could not have accomplished his feat if he had not had first-class vessels and excellently trained men; if his war-ships had not been so good, and his captains and crews such thorough masters of their art. A man of less daring courage than Dewey would never have done what he did; but the courage itself was not enough. The Spaniards, too, had courage. What they lacked was energy, training, forethought. They fought their vessels until they burned or sank; but their gunnery was so poor that they did not kill a man in the American fleet. Even Dewey's splendid capacity would not have enabled him to win the battle of Manila Bay had it not been for the traditional energy and seamanship of our naval service, so well illustrated in his captains, and the excellent gun practice of the crews, the result of years of steady training. Furthermore, even this excellence in the personnel would not have availed if under a succession of secretaries of the navy, and through the wisdom of a succession of Congresses, the material of the navy had not been built up as it actually was.

If war with Spain had broken out fifteen years before it did,—that is, in the year 1883, before our new navy was built,—it would have been physically impossible to get the results we actually did get. At that time our navy consisted of a collection of rusty monitors and antiquated wooden ships left over from the Civil War, which could not possibly have been matched against even the navy of Spain. Every proposal to increase the navy was then violently opposed with exactly the same arguments used nowadays by the men who oppose building up our army. The congressmen who rallied to the support of Senator Gorman in his refusal to furnish an adequate army to take care of the Philippines and meet the new national needs, or who defeated the proposition to buy armor-plate for the new ships, assumed precisely the ground that was taken by the men who, prior to 1883, had succeeded in preventing the rebuilding of the navy. Both alike did all they could to prevent the upholding of the national honor in times of emergency. There were the usual arguments: that we were a great peaceful people, and would never have to go to war; that if we had a navy or army we should be tempted to use it and therefore embark on a career of military conquest; that there was no need of regulars anyhow, because we could always raise volunteers to do anything; that war was a barbarous method of settling disputes, and too expensive to undertake even to avoid national disgrace, and so on.

But fortunately the men of sturdy common sense and sound patriotism proved victors, and the new navy was begun. Its upbuilding was not a party matter. The first ships were laid down under Secretary Chandler; Secretary Whitney continued the work; Secretary Tracy carried it still further; so did Secretary Herbert, and then Secretary Long. Congress after Congress voted

the necessary money. We have never had as many ships as a nation of such size and such vast interests really needs; but still by degrees we have acquired a small fleet of battle-ships, cruisers, gunboats, and torpedo-boats, all excellent of their class. The squadron with which Dewey entered Manila Bay included ships laid down or launched under Secretaries Chandler, Whitney, Tracy, and Herbert; and all four of these secretaries, their naval architects, the chiefs of bureaus, the young engineers and constructors, the outside contractors, the shipyard men like Roach, Cramp, and Scott, and, finally and emphatically, the congressmen who during these fifteen years voted the supplies, are entitled to take a just pride in their share of the glory of the achievement. Every man in Congress whose vote made possible the building of the *Raleigh*, the *Olympia*, the *Detroit*, or the putting aboard them and their sister ships the modern eight-inch or rapid-fire five-inch guns, or the giving them the best engines and the means wherewith to practice their crews at the targets—every such man has the right to tell his children that he did his part in securing Dewey's victory, and that, save for the action of him and his fellows, it could not have been won. This is no less true of the man who planned the ships and of the other men, whether in the government service or in private employment, who built them, from the head of the great business concern which put up an armor-plate factory down to the iron-worker who conscientiously and skilfully did his part on gun-shield or gun.

So much for the men who furnished the material and the means for assembling and practicing the personnel. The same praise must be given the men who actually drilled the personnel, part of which Dewey used. If our ships had merely been built and then laid up, if officers and crews had not been exercised season after season in all weathers on the high seas in handling their ships both separately and in squadron, and in practicing with the guns, all the excellent material would have availed us little. Exactly as it is of no use to give an army the best arms and equipment if it is not also given the chance to practice with its arms and equipment, so the finest ships and the best natural sailors and fighters are useless to a navy if the most ample opportunity for training is not allowed. Only incessant practice will make a good gunner; though, inasmuch as there are natural marksmen as well as men who never can become good marksmen, there should always be the widest intelligence displayed in the choice of gunners. Not only is it impossible for a man to learn how to handle a ship or do his duty aboard her save by long cruises at sea, but it is also impossible for a good single-ship captain to be an efficient unit in a fleet unless he is accustomed to maneuver as part of a fleet.

It is particularly true of the naval service that the excellence of any portion of it in a given crisis will depend mainly upon the excellence of the whole body, and so the triumph of any part is legitimately felt to reflect honor upon the whole and to have been participated in by every one. Dewey's captains could not have followed him with the precision they displayed, could not have shown the excellent gun practice they did show—in short, the victory would not have been possible had it not been for the unwearied training and practice given the navy during the dozen years previous by the admirals, the captains, and the crews who incessantly and in all weathers kept their vessels exercised, singly and in squadron, until the men on the bridge, the men in the gun-turrets, and the men in the engine-rooms knew how to do their work perfectly, alone or together. Every officer and man, from the highest to the lowest, who did his full duty in raising the navy to the standard of efficiency it had reached on May 1, 1898, is entitled to feel some personal share in the glory won by Dewey and Dewey's men. It would have been absolutely impossible not merely to improvise either the material or the personnel with which Dewey fought, but to have produced them in any limited number of years. A thoroughly good navy takes a long time to build up, and the best officer embodies always the traditions of a first-class

service. Ships take years to build, crews take years before they become thoroughly expert, while the officers not only have to pass their early youth in a course of special training, but cannot possibly rise to supreme excellence in their profession unless they make it their life-work.

We should therefore keep in mind that the hero cannot win save for the forethought, energy, courage, and capacity of countless other men. Yet we must keep in mind also that all this forethought, energy, courage, and capacity will be wasted unless at the supreme moment some man of the heroic type arises capable of using to the best advantage the powers lying ready to hand. Whether it is Nelson, the greatest of all admirals, at Abukir, Copenhagen, or Trafalgar; or Farragut, second only to Nelson, at New Orleans or Mobile; or Dewey at Manila—the great occasion must meet with the great man, or the result will be at worst a failure, at best an indecisive success. The nation must make ready the tools and train the men to use them, but at the crisis a great triumph can be achieved only should some heroic man appear. Therefore it is right and seemly to pay homage of deep respect and admiration to the man when he does appear.

Admiral Dewey performed one of the great feats of all time. At the very outset of the Spanish war he struck one of the two decisive blows which brought the war to a conclusion, and as his was the first fight, his success exercised an incalculable effect upon the whole conflict. He set the note of the war. He had carefully prepared for action during the months he was on the Asiatic coast. He had his plans thoroughly matured, and he struck the instant that war was declared. There was no delay, no hesitation. As soon as news came that he was to move, his war-steamers turned their bows toward Manila Bay. There was nothing to show whether or not Spanish mines and forts would be efficient; but Dewey, cautious as he was at the right time, had not a particle of fear of taking risks when the need arose. In the tropic night he steamed past the forts, and then on over the mines to where the Spanish vessels lay. What material inferiority there was on the Spanish side was nearly made up by the forts and mines. The overwhelming difference was moral, not material. It was the difference in the two commanders, in the officers and crews of the two fleets, and in the naval service, afloat and ashore, of the two nations. On the one side there had been thorough preparation; on the other, none that was adequate. It would be idle to recapitulate the results. Steaming in with cool steadiness, Dewey's fleet cut the Spaniards to pieces, while the Americans were practically unhurt. Then Dewey drew off to breakfast, satisfied himself that he had enough ammunition, and returned to stamp out what embers of resistance were still feebly smoldering.

The victory insured the fall of the Philippines, for Manila surrendered as soon as our land forces arrived and were in position to press their attack home. The work, however, was by no means done, and Dewey's diplomacy and firmness were given full scope for the year he remained in Manila waters, not only in dealing with Spaniards and insurgents, but in making it evident that we would tolerate no interference from any hostile European power. It is not yet the time to show how much he did in this last respect. Suffice it to say that by his firmness he effectually frustrated any attempt to interfere with our rights, while by his tact he avoided giving needless offense, and he acted in hearty accord with our cordial well-wishers, the English naval and diplomatic representatives in the islands.

Admiral Dewey comes back to his native land having won the right to a greeting such as has been given to no other man since the Civil War.