

## The Story of a Great Disaster.

By J. G. ROBINS, F.R.G.S.



ON the 3rd November, 1893, there occurred a very serious disaster at Santander, North Spain. Although the principal facts were reported at the time in our newspapers, nothing like a complete description of the disaster has ever before appeared. The purpose of this article is to supply, for the first time, a concise and consecutive account of what was not only a terrible but an almost unique accident. The facts were noted down from statements of eye-witnesses, and the accompanying photographs (all but the first) taken a few days after the occurrence.

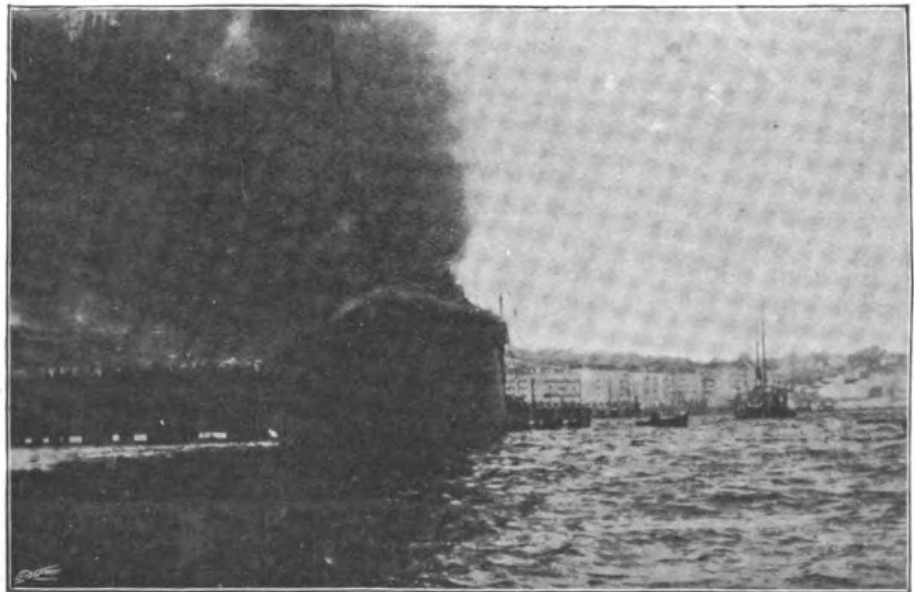
About two o'clock in the afternoon of the day in question the cargo of a steamer called the *Cabo Machichaco*, lying at a wharf in the Harbour of Santander, was found to be on fire. The weather was beautifully fine, and much of the population had ventured out of doors to enjoy the sunshine. An alarm of fire naturally caused considerable excitement, and when it became known that a steamer was burning the quay-side was very soon thronged with interested crowds, who were congratulating themselves, all unconscious of danger, upon being able to obtain so excellent a view of so novel a sight. Dense clouds of smoke arose from the steamer and the fire burnt furiously.

The local fire-brigade arrived, planted their engines upon the wharf, and attempted to extinguish the fire, but their efforts were unavailing, and it became evident that there was no hope of saving the steamer.

There happened to be in the harbour a Spanish liner (*Alfonso XIII.*), and some men were sent in boats by the captain to render

assistance. It was decided to make an attempt to flood the vessel and sink her, as the fire threatened to spread to the wharf and quay, and thus adjacent property would become endangered. Operations to this end had been begun, and efforts were being made to cut holes through the steamer's side just below water-line, when (about 4.15 p.m.) a terrific explosion occurred, which blew the entire fore-part of the steamer to pieces and scattered its fragments and the remains of the burning cargo in all directions. Several hundred persons were killed or maimed (the exact numbers were never known); a large number of buildings were wrecked by the force of the explosion; the town was set on fire in several places, and immense damage was done.

The photograph showing the burning steamer was taken very shortly before the explosion by a local photographer, who had a narrow escape. Had he not left for his studio when he did this illustration would not have appeared. The view was taken from the end of a short wharf, similar to that to which the steamer is moored. The piles of the latter wharf are visible above the water-line to the left of the steamer, whilst on the wharf are silhouetted the heads and shoulders of a crowd of persons who were



THE BURNING STEAMER, TAKEN A FEW MINUTES BEFORE THE EXPLOSION. THE SPECTATORS ON THE LEFT WERE NEARLY ALL KILLED. [Photograph.]

amongst those killed. On the right of the steamer can be seen the men from the liner engaged in their efforts to sink her.

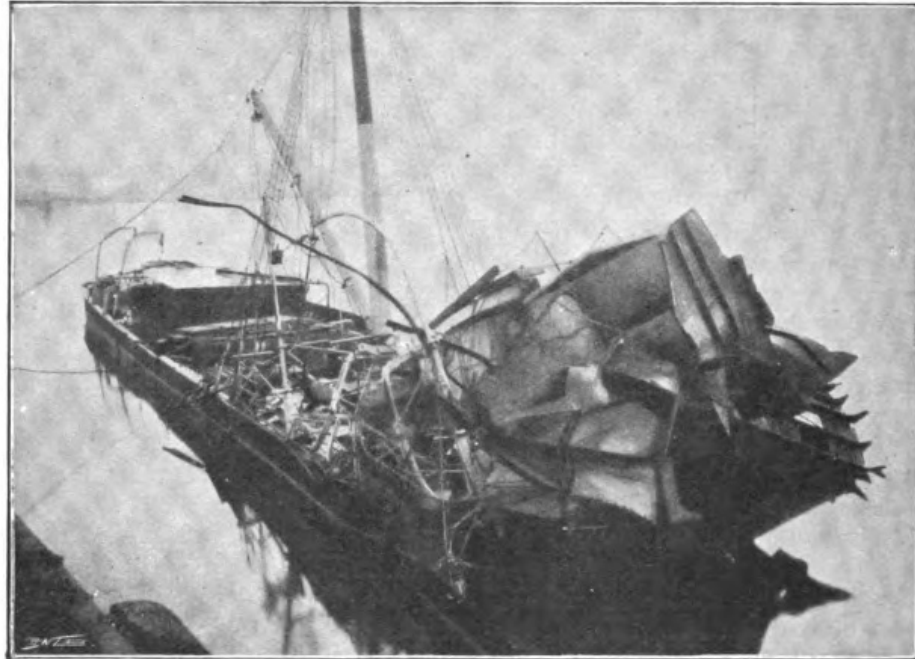
The question will naturally be asked: What was the cause of this explosion? And the answer can be given at once: Dynamite. But to the further questions: How was it that so dangerous a commodity was allowed to be in such a place? and being there, why was no warning given to the public? no very satisfactory answers can be given, principally because all the persons who could throw material light upon the subject were killed.

As is the case with all harbours of importance, there existed at Santander certain regulations concerning vessels with explosives on board. A couple of wharves, as far removed from valuable property as possible, were set apart for such vessels, and when berthed a red flag was required to be hoisted as a danger-signal. The harbour-master was expected to see that these regulations were carried out. Unfortunately he was one of the killed, as was also his deputy; neither can therefore give us his version of the story.

It was commonly reported at first that the dynamite was contraband, but this proved to be incorrect, as the consignment was set forth in the ship's manifest. Owing to an eight days' quarantine outside the harbour the documents relating to her cargo had been received through the post, and its nature was known long before the vessel was berthed. She carried a miscellaneous assortment of goods, amongst which were 1,720 cases of dynamite intended for mining purposes, brought from the neighbouring port of Bilbao. The steamer was on a coasting voyage, and the explosive was consigned to Santander, Huelva, and Seville. The cases for Santander (twenty in all) had been removed before the accident. So far as could be ascertained, about 800 cases were in the fore-part of

the vessel where the explosion took place, each case weighing something like a half-hundred-weight. The dynamite in the other hold, curiously enough, did not explode, but sank with the steamer and was afterwards removed. This was not accomplished without accident, as another (much smaller) explosion occurred, attended with some loss of life.

The second photograph was taken from the same spot as the first, but at low tide. It shows the steamer after the explosion,



From a]

THE STEAMER AFTER THE DYNAMITE EXPLOSION.

[Photograph.

lying in the mud. The fore-half is gone, but the rest remains, including (and this is very extraordinary) one of the masts.

As to responsibility, one of two things seems clear: either the harbour-master did not ascertain that the steamer was carrying dynamite, or, knowing it, did not take measures to send her to the danger-wharf.

It was stated that the captain was in a café when informed of the fire, and someone who knew of the dynamite referred to it. The captain—outwardly, at any rate—ridiculed the idea of danger, saying that, though dynamite would explode under certain conditions, it would be consumed quite harmlessly by the fire, and, indeed, it is well known that dynamite, when not confined, can be burned without any danger from explosion.

The captain was on his ship at the time of the accident and was destroyed with it, as were all his officers and crew except three.



EFFECT OF THE CONCUSSION INSIDE A BUILDING IN THE TOWN.  
From a Photograph.

Besides these, the local agent to the shipping company to which the *Cabo Machichaco* belonged was on board, and he and all his staff, excepting the office-boy, lost their lives.

The precise manner in which the explosion came about can only be a matter of surmise. It may have been due merely to heat acting upon the explosive when confined closely in cases; or to concussion, caused by some of the cargo falling; or to the operations of the men from the liner whilst breaking a hole through the side of the steamer.

A number of firemen on the wharf and on the vessel were killed and their appliances destroyed. Amongst other victims were the Governor of Santander, an official of marine affairs, the chief engineer for ports and lighthouses, a marquis, a colonel, also a major; and the captain, mate, and doctor of the liner, with thirty-two of the crew.

After the explosion there was a fearful scene. Hundreds of dead and wounded persons lay about the quay and the streets near, amongst them being many children who had

been out with their mothers and nurses for an airing. Limbs and fragments of human bodies were scattered in ghastly confusion (in one instance half a soldier was blown through a window); burning matter and red-hot iron from the ship and its cargo were cast into all parts of the town; all the windows in the region of the accident were blown in; buildings were partially wrecked; and, as a crowning horror, many of these ignited, and very soon several large conflagrations were in progress.

The two photographs on this page are examples of the destruction wrought by concussion inside some of the buildings. It will be noticed that the brick partitions have been blown partially down and general havoc caused throughout.

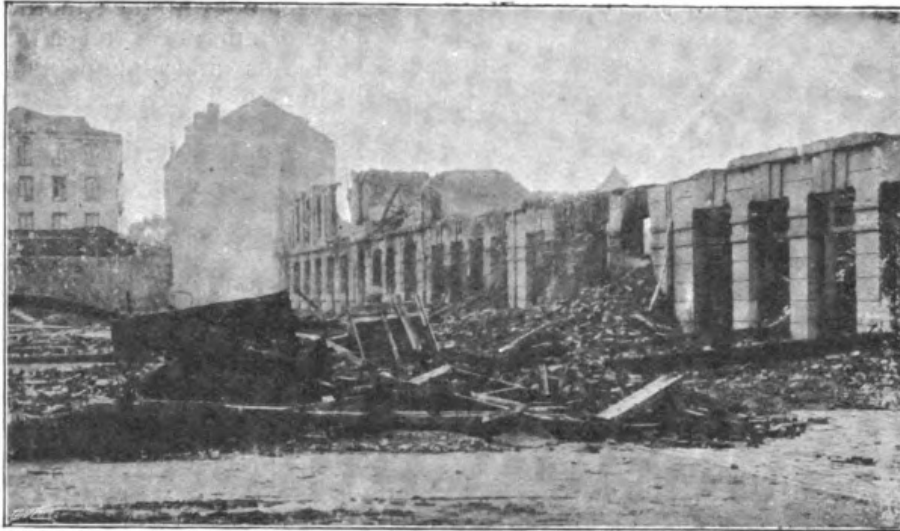
For a while consternation and confusion reigned supreme. The first thought of those who had escaped—as soon as they were capable of thinking at all—was for the injured, and these were soon receiving such attentions as the panic-stricken people could give them.

Meanwhile, the fires in the burning buildings were attaining alarming proportions, and nothing could be done to arrest their progress,



From a] INTERIOR OF A BEDROOM AFTER THE CONCUSSION.

[Photograph.



From a] THE TOWN SET ON FIRE BY THE EXPLOSION—SOME OF THE RUINS. [Photograph.

there being no longer either fire-brigade or appliances. It was then discovered that the explosion had destroyed telegraphic communication, and the nearest available telegraph office was four and a half miles away by rail. A special train was hastily made up, and the Government at Madrid was apprised of the disaster. Orders were at once sent to Valladolid and Lagroño, and instructions given for bodies of engineers to proceed by rail to Santander immediately. A shipowner interested in the *Cabo Machichaco* happened to hear at Barcelona of the accident. He wired at once to Bilbao, and the people of that place rose promptly and nobly to the occasion. Two steamers were hastily chartered, and by 11.30 p.m. they were on their way with two steam fire-engines, three hand-engines, hose, ladders, ropes, etc., accompanied by forty firemen, eighty labourers, twelve doctors with four assistants and medical appliances, four sisters of mercy, and about a hundred miscellaneous volunteers. They reached Santander at 5.30 the following morning, ready and anxious to render all assistance in their power. Now, here followed what would have been a ludicrous incident but for the awful nature of the circumstances. In-

stead of being welcomed with open arms and with some show of gratitude, the would-be helpers were prevented from landing. In the name of all that is wonderful, it may be asked, why? Because quarantine had not been observed! The Provisional Governor (the Governor had been killed) declared that he

could not allow them to come ashore until they had observed the regulations, which meant a detention of some seven or eight days outside the harbour. At length, however, after the lapse of some two hours, the mayor (who, though wounded, was active) took upon himself the responsibility of waiving the objections, and the difficulty was thus got over.

The explanation probably is that there is a kind of Manchester-Liverpool jealousy (only more so) between the two places, and it is said that matters do not always go as "merry as a marriage bell." It is sad to think, however, that feelings of this nature should have been allowed to intrude in the face of so appalling a catastrophe.

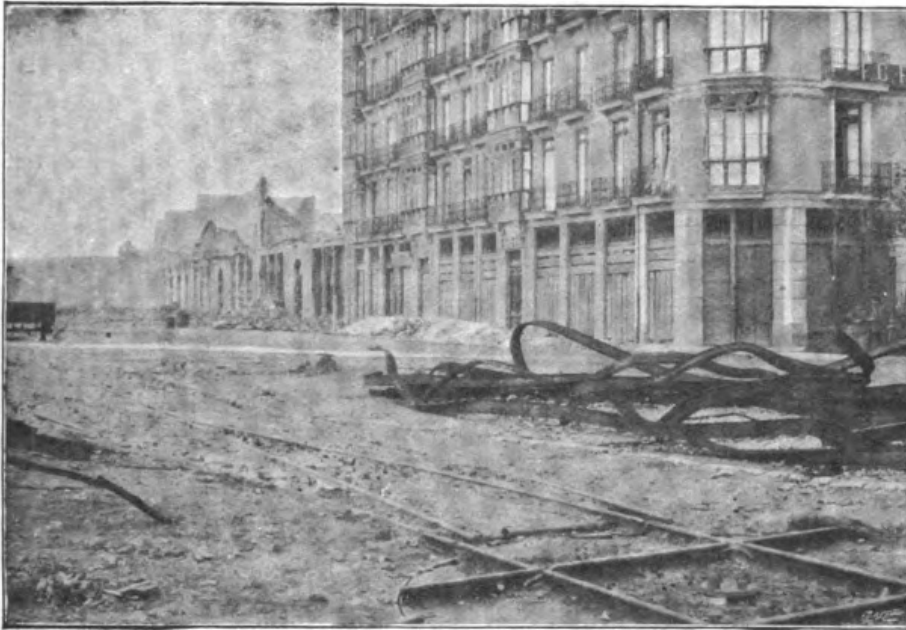
The military engineers had arrived about the same time, and devoted their attention mainly to demolishing dangerous structures,



From a]

A STREET AFTER THE BOMB.

[Photograph.



From a]

IRON GIRDERS FROM THE STEAMER BLOWN INTO THE TOWN.

[Photograph.

whilst the firemen kept down and ultimately extinguished the fires, assisted by the volunteers who had accompanied them. Before this was accomplished, however, several streets of large buildings had been destroyed, consisting of warehouses, shops, residences, etc. Two photographs are given on the preceding page showing some portions of the damaged streets. Although only the lower parts of the buildings remained to be seen, they were originally structures varying from four to five stories in height.

A portion of the cargo of the steamer consisted of iron girders. These became red-hot during the fire which preceded the explosion, and when the latter occurred they were blown into various parts of the town, having in their course, in some cases, ploughed lanes of death through the crowds of people. Two views follow of bunches of these girders that were thrown from the ship after being subjected to the action of the fire. It is possible that

the photographs do not show them exactly as they fell, as they may have been moved aside for the purpose of clearing the roadway, but the manner in which they were twisted and bent when in a heated state is very remarkable. An examination will give some idea of the distance these heavy girders were carried. Lighter materials and burning matter, however,

were projected very much farther; and, in one instance, a large building used as a tobacco-factory and store was ignited, although something like half a mile from the wharf, and the building and its contents were destroyed. This was an isolated fire quite removed from the more general conflagration shown in the preceding photographs.

The next illustration shows about half of the steamer after the explosion. This photograph was taken at low tide as the vessel lay sunk upon the mud bottom of the harbour.



NEAR VIEW SHOWING IRON GIRDERS TWISTED AND CONTOURTED BY THE FORCE OF THE EXPLOSION.

From a Photograph.



From a] THE FORE-PART OF THE STEAMER AFTER THE EXPLOSION. [Photograph.

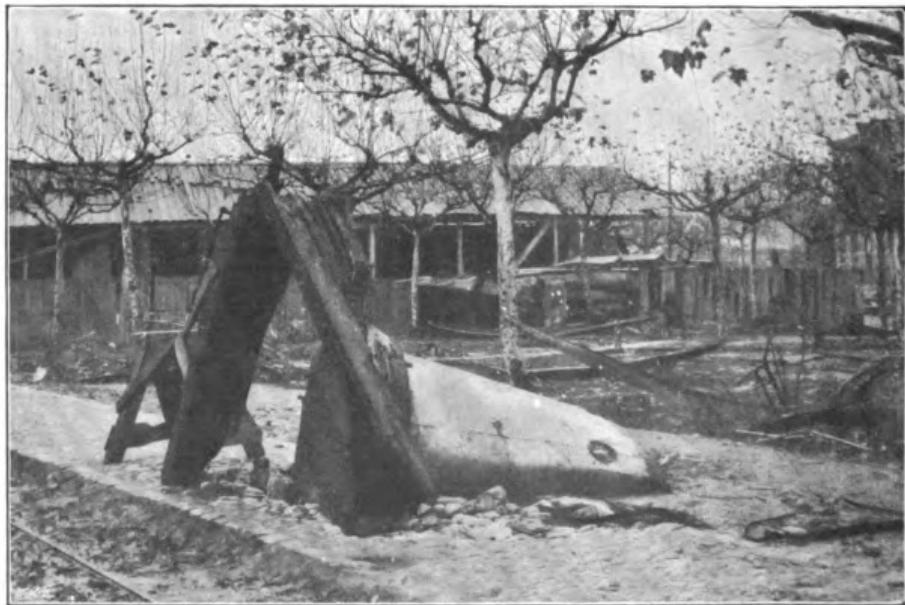
Unfortunately, the foreshortening is peculiar, owing to the position (the head of the wharf) from which the photograph had necessarily to be taken, but it gives some idea of the extraordinary results so far as the "inwards" of the steamer are concerned. The iron-work when forced into the condition seen was probably red-hot. The whole of the fore-part of the steamer had disappeared. The photograph which follows shows a portion of the vessel that fell about a quarter of a mile from the scene of the accident, just as it lies in the roadway. It will be noticed how the stone pavement was displaced by the force of the falling mass.

A walk through certain parts of the town, even several days after the accident, was a gruesome business. Large areas had been ravaged by the fire; blackened ruins and wrecked buildings were to be seen

on every hand; dead bodies and parts of bodies were constantly being fished out of the harbour; walls were splashed with blood along the quay-side, whilst in the roadways and upon the quay sickening traces of human remains were constantly to be met with. Stout planks and timbers of the quay and wharves were smashed in many places, and fragments of the steamer and cargo

were littered everywhere. The scene was more suggestive of a bombardment than anything else.

Half the people bore signs of mourning; hospitals were full, and funerals were constantly passing. It was all terribly sad, and the sadder because the accident was one which might have been prevented, or at least its effects, had it occurred at the danger-wharf, would have been trifling as compared with what actually resulted.



A PORTION OF THE STEAMER BLOWN INTO A GARDEN A QUARTER OF A MILE AWAY.  
From a Photograph.