Plan showing position of the French Fleet at Yorktown, drawn by an English officer under Cornwallis. This photograph of the plan was furnished to the author by the Commandant of the Hydrographic Service at Paris.
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THE STRANGE CASE OF ADMIRAL DE GRASSE.
FORGOTTEN BY FRANCE AND AMERICA.

BY PHILIP ROBERT DILLON.

PARIS—I said to an American consul stationed at one of the chief cities of France:
"Are you familiar with the name de Grasse in American history?"
He replied: "No, I can't say I ever heard it, though I may have forgotten. Who was he?"
I asked a Frenchman, a professor at the University of Paris: "Do you know something about Admiral de Grasse of the French navy under Louis XVI?"
"Wasn't he the man who was defeated by the English at the battle of Les Saintes in the West Indies?"
"He was the man who defeated the English fleet at Chesapeake Bay and thus directly won the Independence of America and changed the history of the world. Don't you know that?"
He shrugged his shoulders "You cannot expect me to know all the little things of American history."
"Little things! Was the surrender of the British at Yorktown a 'little' thing? That was a French victory."
He again shrugged his shoulders.
The Marquis de Grasse, the present head of the fam-
ily, living at Cannes, related to me that General Pershing was making a speech to a select audience in France. He eulogized "Lafayette, Rochambeau, and de Grasse."

The people in the audience turned to each other asking—"de Grasse? Who was he?"

In all the history of the world since printing was invented, there is no other example of such blindness to the value of a man's service, such injustice to his memory, as this attitude of historians and politicians in France and America toward de Grasse.

Let us consider, shortly, the facts of the Yorktown campaign of the War of the Revolution, and what de Grasse had to do with it:

At the beginning of the summer of 1781, more than six years after the opening fight at Lexington, the cause of American independence was at its lowest tide. For four years, after the treaty of alliance with France was signed, the war dragged, with only guerilla fighting and with only slight skirmishing by the main armies. The French admiral d'Estaing, twenty months after the signing of the treaty, had come north from the West Indies with his fleet and, aided by a small American force, had attacked the British at Savannah, Ga., on Oct. 9, 1779. The battle was a bloody disaster for the French and Americans. D'Estaing sailed away and for two years thereafter no French warship came to the American coast, except a small squadron which carried Rochambeau's French army of 6,000 from France to Newport, R. I., in 1780, where it was blockaded and rendered futile by the British fleet for nine months.

So the war dragged. The business interests throughout the colonies lost hope of breaking the strangle hold which the British fleet kept on the Atlantic seaboard. Except for fugitive trading by blockade runners, American commerce was dead. The majority of busi-
ness men in the big States were for quitting the war, for compromising. The soldiers were apathetic, the politicians were of little account and were in contempt. The British were willing to grant the Americans everything except independence.

In all human probability, if Washington had assented to the urging of the powerful business interests which were, in a large measure, financing the contest, the war would have stopped and the colonies would have remained British.

But Washington visioned victory based on the hope that the French fleet would come and help him. He knew that wars are not won by guerrillas, nor by skirmishes, nor by retreats no matter how brilliantly strategic. He must have a victory, a positive constructive victory. It must come soon, else the cause were lost. He held on, waiting and hoping for the French fleet.

In the spring of 1781, the French king appointed Count de Grasse lieutenant-general of the navy of France. The new commander sailed early in May for the West Indies and arrived at Martinique. The Caribbean Sea for two years past, had been the theatre of war in the naval struggle between England and France for the command of the world.

In May and June, the French fleet under de Grasse and the British fleet under Admiral Hood fought several indecisive engagements.

It was on May 22 that Washington heard, from the American minister at Paris, that de Grasse had sailed for the West Indies. At that time the British held New York with a large army, in numbers about twice as large as Washington's army. The Americans were in position at Dobb's Ferry beside the Hudson River near New York.

For a long time Washington had in mind a plan of attack on New York, if and when the French fleet came.
The British knew this and directed their main effort to making New York impregnable.

Then, in May, 1781, a new situation developed. Lord Cornwallis, the most brilliant of the British generals in America, marched out of the Carolinas where he had been operating with his army of 7,500 men, and established himself in Virginia near Chesapeake Bay, bent on getting reinforcements from New York and then driving a wedge through the colonies by conquering Virginia.

Washington planned to capture the army of Cornwallis. It would be easier than to capture New York, and the moral effect of such a victory, though not as great as a victory at New York, would be great enough to end the war with the decision in favor of Independence.

In all his planning, the French fleet was the greatest factor. Without the French fleet he was powerless and hopeless. It will be seen that he staked the whole cause of American Independence on the French fleet.

He prevailed on the French minister, Luzerne, to write a letter to de Grasse urging that he come north with his fleet to Chesapeake Bay where he, de Grasse, "might find an opportunity for an important stroke."

Washington waited for the answer from de Grasse. We can imagine his anxiety. He could make no move until he heard from the commander of the French fleet. If he marched his army away from his intrenched lines near New York, and the French fleet failed him, there would be no capture of Cornwallis. The failure would amount to final disaster, the war would end with Independence abandoned.

Fortunately for America, de Grasse comprehended, and acted wholeheartedly. On August 14 came a letter from him stating that his fleet of twenty-nine ships would sail shortly after that date, and would bring
3,200 soldiers and siege artillery to Chesapeake Bay prepared for instant operations.

In preparation for this eventuality, the French army under Rochambeau at Newport, R. I., had slipped away from under the British blockade and had marched through Connecticut and joined Washington. The French squadron of seven ships under de Barras was still left at Newport, locked in Narragansett Bay by the British North Atlantic fleet.

On August 19 Washington marched away from Dobb's Ferry with about 10,000 men including the French under Rochambeau, taking the route southward. From Dobb's Ferry to Yorktown is about 400 miles.

Fourteen days after, on Sept. 2, Sir Henry Clinton, the British commander in chief at New York, wrote to Cornwallis: "By intelligence which I have this day received, it would seem that Mr. Washington is moving an army southward with an appearance of haste, and gives out that he expects the cooperation of a considerable French fleet."

On the day that Clinton heard the news, Washington and his army were south of Philadelphia, 115 miles away. He had been marching southward from New York fourteen days and all that time Clinton supposed he was resting quietly in his intrenchments at Dobb's Ferry!

De Grasse, leaving Admiral Hood of the British West Indies fleet in the dark as to his intentions, sailed north and entered Chesapeake Bay on August 30. He knew he would have to fight the other British fleet which guarded New York and the American coast, but he knew also that he would have a superiority in force if he acted promptly. His strategy was masterly. It was the same strategy, in principle, that afterward immortalized Nelson.

And there was Cornwallis, confidently settled down
at Yorktown, on a peninsula commanded on three sides by deep water, awaiting reinforcements. He had no fear, for had not the British fleet commanded the American coast for a hundred years, and who was there to wrest that command from Britain?

The British Admiral Graves, cruising with his fleet along the New Jersey coast, received quick information of the arrival of the French fleet. In the usual decisive way of British navy men, he signaled his captains to sail at once to meet the enemy and destroy him or drive him from the coast. The British fleet of nineteen ships arrived off the Chesapeake capes in the forenoon of Sept. 5.

At that very hour the French fleet of twenty-seven ships was anchored in Lynnhaven Bay, just inside Cape Henry at the mouth of James River. Fifteen hundred French seamen were engaged in disembarking Saint-Simon’s division of land troops on the York peninsula where they were to join the small force of American militia under Lafayette which was watching Cornwallis.

De Grasse recalled his seamen on board and three-quarters of an hour after the British were sighted he slipped his cables, leaving his anchors in the bay, and sailed out with twenty-four ships to give battle.

The two fleets maneuvered for position during several hours. At 4 p.m. the van of the French fleet opened fire. The battle lasted about two hours and a quarter, until sunset, when firing ceased. The British “took the wind” and drew off.

The French had lost twenty-one officers and 200 men killed and wounded. The British loss was 336 officers and men.

But, worse for the British, a number of their ships were damaged. The Terrible, 74 guns, sank two days later. The Iris and Richmond, frigates of 40 guns
each, were rendered helpless and were taken by the French. Other ships were badly hurt.

French ships also suffered, but relatively far less, for de Grasse could afford to lose several ships and still maintain his superiority.

Graves was in no condition to renew the battle next day, and he kept away, seeking only to prevent the little squadron of seven French ships under de Barras, which had escaped from the blockade at Newport, from joining de Grasse. For this squadron was coming with guns and ammunition for the siege of Yorktown.

Again de Grasse outmanoeuvred the British. The French admiral enticed the British farther and farther away from the mouth of Chesapeake Bay during five days, bent only on giving safety to the seven ships of the de Barras squadron with their precious guns and ammunition. And when word was brought to him that de Barras had entered the Chesapeake, he tarried no longer with the British fleet, but sailed at once back to Yorktown, for the great business was the capture of Cornwallis and he would not be swerved from it. He knew, and the British knew, that with the joining of the de Barras squadron to de Grasse, the French, for the first time in the history of the Western continent, had command of the American coast.

Historians—except Captain Mahan—seem not to know it, but the battle of Lynnhaven Bay changed the history of the world. George Bancroft, the leading American historian, covers this naval battle and the subsequent five days' manoeuvring of de Grass in a single paragraph of five printed lines!

The British admiral, admitting defeat, sailed back to New York to repair his ships, hoping for reinforcements from the West Indies fleet, hoping that he would be ready to give battle again to the French in time to save Cornwallis.

Alas for Graves and his brave sailors! Before they
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recovered from the disaster of Lynnhaven Bay, Cornwallis was taken, as we shall see.

Meanwhile Washington and Rochambeau had reached the headquarters of Chesapeake Bay at Head of Elk on Sept. 8, and there they received news of the French naval victory.

Washington immediately wrote to de Grasse: “I take satisfaction in felicitating your Excellency on the glory of having driven the British fleet from the coast and taking two of their frigates. These happy events, and the decided superiority of your fleet, give us the happiest presages of the most complete success in our combined operations in this bay.”

But how was an army of 10,000 men to cover the distance of 200 miles from the head of Chesapeake Bay to Yorktown? Virginia was a wild country. Wide rivers and dense forests blocked the march by land. Such a march would have been almost impossible.

Again the French fleet.

De Grasse sent his transports and Washington’s army was carried by water to York Peninsula.

The money to pay the French soldiers who had come with the fleet had been promised by the French government and was to have been paid as soon as they landed. It had not reached the disbursing officers at the appointed time and there were disappointment and murmurings.

Again de Grasse to the rescue. He pledged his chateau of Tilly and his lands in the West Indies and the money was loaned on his personal endorsement.

The allied army on shore numbered 8,800 Americans and 7,800 French under Washington and Rochambeau. Cornwallis had 8,500 men.

Dominating the entire situation was the French fleet, twenty-seven ships, holding the gateway to the Atlantic against the escape of Cornwallis, against the
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succour that would, but for de Grasse, come to him from New York.

The allies laid siege to Yorktown on Sept. 28. From that day the story of the final military act of the American Revolution went forward with the sureness of fate. No prisoner, upon the day of his sentence, was more fatally fixed to his end than was Cornwallis destined to the catastrophe which culminated in his surrender on Oct. 19, 1781.

When the news of the surrender reached London, on Nov. 25, the prime minister, Lord North, threw up his arms wildly: "Oh God! it is all over! it is all over! it is all over!"

On the day after the surrender, Washington wrote to de Grasse, saying: "——the surrender of York, from which so much glory and advantage are derived to the allies, and the honor of which belongs to your Excellency, has greatly exceeded our most sanguine expectations."

And when the news reached France, de Grasse became the hero of that nation. It was the English themselves who had given him the sobriquet "The Intrepid Frenchman" and now all France repeated it with pride—all France except a faction at the court of King Louis XVI who hated the admiral. We shall see how they destroyed him.

The history of the French navy under the later Bourbon kings is often a sorry story of court intrigue and even of treachery and treason.

De Grasse was the head of a great family of old Provence near the Mediterranean that had been powerful when William of Normandy conquered England. His titles were: Prince of Antibes, Count de Grasse, Lord of Flins, Mondreville, Saint Laurent, Valette and Vernes, Commander of the Order of Saint Louis, Knight of St. John of Jerusalem, Lieutenant-general of the Naval Forces.
By right of birth he might have been a courtier near the throne. But he preferred the sea. He had been sent to sea as a cadet when he was twelve years old, in the year 1733. All his after life up to the surrender at Yorktown, nearly fifty years, had been spent in the navy, with only short visits to the royal court, at long intervals. He had served in twenty-one sea battles.

It was a period when command in the navy was given by court favor, usually. Noblemen were appointed captains of ships though they might not know how to box the compass and knew not the other rudiments of seamanship. De Grasse scorned these incompetent officers, and naturally the courtiers hated him. On the other hand the common sailors gloried in him.

The inevitable disaster came to him seven months after the victory at Lynnhaven Bay.

He remained in Chesapeake Bay only a few days after the surrender of Cornwallis. He sailed to the West Indies to continue the naval war against England.

He had struck England a terrible blow at Chesapeake Bay, and all the British nation cried out to their own government demanding another battle to restore England’s prestige. England’s greatest fleet, the greatest in all her history up to that time, was assembled in the Carribean Sea under Admiral Rodney.

On April 12, 1782, the two fleets met in the strait between the islands of Guadaloupe and Dominica. There is a group of six smaller islands in this strait called “Les Saintes” and the French name the battle after these little islands. The English call it the battle of “Dominique.”

De Grasse had sought to avoid a battle, for he had but thirty-two ships while the British had forty-three, according to his own report. But he seems to have been caught. He made his plans and signaled his orders
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from his flagship the *Ville de Paris*. The battle commenced at eight o’clock in the morning.

The French fleet was divided into three squadrons, of which de Grasse personally commanded one, the center. The other two were commanded respectively by M. de Bougainville and Marquis de Vaudreuil.

Almost from the very beginning of the battle, de Grasse’s orders were mistaken, misinterpreted, or ignored by his subordinates, particularly by de Bougainville. Before a court of inquiry later in France, it was proved that nine signals from the flagship were disregarded. “Manoeuvres the most important were not executed.”

At noon the French line was broken. At 1.30 p.m. the French fleet was cut into three groups far from each other. De Grasse was convinced that he was being betrayed by his subordinates.

At 3 p.m. de Bougainville’s squadron of ten ships, which had thus far participated hardly at all in the battle, now turned before the wind and ran away.

At 5 p.m. the second squadron commanded by Marquis de Vaudreuil, of twelve ships, “took the wind” and quit, the marquis judging that the contest was hopeless.

Of the remaining French ships, two had been captured and others were flying as fugitives. Only the flagship and two other ships continued to battle, and these two latter soon surrendered.

De Grasse, in his published report of the battle, wrote: “I continued alone the combat in the *Ville de Paris* to satisfy my honor and to occupy the ships of the enemy which would have been able to worry the retreat of our squadron which had so worthily helped me, but what could the name and the hundred cannon of my ship do against ten others which blasted us with shot from more than 400 guns without ceasing?”

The fight of the *Ville de Paris* alone against ten Eng-
lish ships that surrounded it, for one and a half hours, was one of the memorable examples of naval heroism of all time. There is nothing like it in American history except the fight of Perry in the Lawrence at the battle of Lake Erie, and this latter was a smaller affair.

As the story is told, an officer reported to the admiral that there were no more balls for the cannon. De Grasse ordered: "Let them melt my silver!" and it was with the balls of the ship's silver that the last guns of the Ville de Paris were shotted.

De Grasse surrendered, at sunset, eleven hours after the battle had opened.

Of all the crew of the flagship, four hundred officers and men, there were only three who had not been killed or wounded, and the admiral was one of the three!

The French lost half dozen ships and the others were in flight.

De Grasse was taken a prisoner to England where he was received with honor as "the Intrepid French-man." Englishmen everywhere told and repeated the story of his fight with admiration. But his own countrymen were cold and bitter to him.

When peace was declared, in 1783, he was freed and he went back to France. A court of inquiry—a court martial—was convened at l'Orient. His enemies charged him with incompetence and even cowardice. A fighter always, he fought back to the last. He published his defense in a printed book in which he scathingly denounced de Bougainville and others, accusing them of treachery.

He was acquitted, and de Bougainville was condemned to receive a public reprimand. But—

Immediately after the trial de Grasse was exiled by the king, was ordered to retire to his chateau at Tilly and was forbidden ever to present himself before the king.
De Bougainville, on the contrary, though he had been convicted, was quickly raised to higher honors. He became one of the heroes of France and his memory is preserved in hundreds of memorials to this day. Streets are named after him in cities and towns all over France.

The present Marquis de Grasse tells me that there was not one street in all France named after the great admiral, until recently when he prevailed on the municipality of Grasse, in the south of France, to name a street “rue d’amiral d’Grasse.”

I have seen the letter, at the French Ministre of Marine in Paris, written by Marechal de Castries the minister of marine under Louis XVI, to de Grasse. It reprimands him for “spreading through Europe accusations against several officers.” Therein lay the crime of de Grasse. He published his accusations against those who had betrayed him and betrayed France, but who were men of great social and political power.

So they exiled him, and he lived in seclusion at Tilly, about forty miles from Paris, for four years. He never again saw his king. He went to Paris for a visit and died there on Jan. 11, 1788, aged sixty-six years.

He died with a broken heart.

I said to an officer high in the French navy: “You lost a few ships at the battle of Les Saintes. The defeat of de Grasse had no effect whatever on civilization nor even on later French history. But de Grasse was the victor at Chesapeake Bay and his victory changed the history of the world. For which battle should he be remembered by France?”

“You speak as an American, because de Grasse was of value to your cause. But my flag was defeated at Les Saintes! One does not forget that!”

“The philosopher who is a historian must judge
values according to their importance in the total of civilization. He must vision beyond the flag."

"Bah! I am not a philosopher, but only a naval officer. My flag is above philosophy!"

Very likely naval officers of all nations would drink the toast "My flag! It is above philosophy!"

So French naval officers and French historians, with few exceptions, carry out to this day the frivolous and unjust disgrace put upon de Grasse by King Louis XVI.

And George Bancroft, the leading American historian of the American Revolution, covers the battle of Lynnhaven Bay and the subsequent five-days naval manoeuvring that won American independence, in a single paragraph of five lines!

Shall Americans, like the French, condemn the great admiral because he offended powerful countries at the court of King Louis?

There is no monument to de Grasse in all America.