

CHAPTER V

WANGENHEIM SMUGGLES THE "GOEBEN" AND THE "BRESLAU" THROUGH THE DARDANELLES

On August 10th, I went out on a little launch to meet the *Sicilia*, a small Italian ship which had just arrived from Venice. I was especially interested in this vessel because she was bringing to Constantinople my son-in-law and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Wertheim, and their three little daughters. The greeting proved even more interesting than I had expected. I found the passengers considerably excited, for they had witnessed, the day before, a naval engagement in the Ionian Sea.

"We were lunching yesterday on deck," my daughter told me, "when I saw two strange-looking vessels just above the horizon. I ran for the glasses and made out two large battleships, the first one with two queer, exotic-looking towers and the other one quite an ordinary-looking battleship. We watched and saw another ship coming up behind them and going very fast. She came nearer and nearer and then we heard guns booming. Pillars of water sprang up in the air and there were many little puffs of white smoke. It took me some time to realize what it was all about, and then it burst upon me that we were actually witnessing an engagement. The ships continually shifted their position but went on and on. The two big ones turned and rushed furiously for the little one, and then apparently they changed their minds and turned back. Then the little one turned around and calmly steamed in our direction. At first I was somewhat alarmed at this, but nothing happened. She circled around us with her tars excited and grinning and somewhat grimy. They signalled to our captain many questions, and then turned and finally disappeared. The captain told us that the two big ships were Germans which had been caught in the Mediterranean and which were trying to escape from the British fleet. He said that the British ships are chasing them all over the Mediterranean, and that the German ships are trying to get into Constantinople. Have you seen anything of them? Where do you suppose the British fleet is? "

A few hours afterward I happened to meet Wangenheim. When I told him what Mrs. Wertheim had seen, he displayed an agitated interest. Immediately after lunch he called at the American Embassy with Pallavicini, the Austrian Ambassador, and asked for an interview with my daughter. The two ambassadors solemnly planted themselves in chairs before Mrs. Wertheim and subjected her to a most minute, though very polite, cross examination. "I never felt so important in my life," she afterward told me. They would not permit her to leave out a single detail; they wished to know how many shots had been fired, what direction the German ships had taken, what everybody on board had said, and so on. The visit seemed to give these allied ambassadors immense relief and satisfaction, for they left the house in an almost jubilant mood, behaving as though a great weight had been taken off their minds. And certainly they had good reason for their elation. My daughter had been the means of giving them the news which they had desired to hear above everything else—that the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* had escaped the British fleet and were then steaming rapidly in the direction of the Dardanelles.

For it was those famous German ships, the *Goeben* and the *Breslau*, which my daughter had seen engaged in battle with a British scout ship!

The next day official business called me to the German Embassy. But Wangenheim's animated manner soon disclosed that he had no interest in routine matters. Never had I seen him so nervous and so excited. He could not rest in his chair more than a few minutes at a time; he was constantly jumping up, rushing to the window and looking anxiously out toward the Bosphorus, where his private wireless station, the *Corcovado*, lay about three quarters of a mile away. Wangenheim's face was flushed and his eyes were shining; he would stride up and down the room, speaking now of a recent German victory, now giving me a little forecast of Germany's plans---and then he would stalk to the window again for another look at the *Corcovado*.

"Something is seriously distracting you," I said, rising. "I will go and come again some other time."

"No. not" the Ambassador almost shouted. "I want you to stay right where you are. This will be a great day for Germany! If you will only remain for a few minutes you will hear a great piece of news---something that has the utmost bearing upon Turkey's relation to the war."

Then he rushed out on the portico and leaned over the balustrade. At the same moment I saw a little launch put out from the *Corcovado* toward the Ambassador's dock. Wangenheim hurried down, seized an envelope from one of the sailors, and a moment afterward burst into the room again.

"We've got them!" he shouted to me.

"Got what?" I asked.

"The *Goeben* and the *Breslau* have passed through the Dardanelles!"

He was waving the wireless message with all the enthusiasm of a college boy whose football team has won a victory.

Then, momentarily checking his enthusiasm, he came up to me solemnly, humorously shook his forefinger, lifted his eyebrows, and said, "Of course, you understand that we have sold those ships to Turkey!"

"And Admiral Souchon," he added with another wink, "will enter the Sultan's service!"

Wangenheim had more than patriotic reasons for this exultation; the arrival of these ships was the greatest day in his diplomatic career. It was really the first diplomatic victory which Germany had won. For years the chancellorship of the empire had been Wangenheim's laudable ambition, and he behaved now like a man who saw his prize within his grasp. The voyage of the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* was his personal triumph; he had arranged with the Turkish Cabinet for their passage through the Dardanelles, and he had directed their movements by wireless in the Mediterranean. By safely getting the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* into Constantinople, Wangenheim had definitely clinched Turkey as Germany's ally. All his intrigues and plottings for three years had now finally succeeded.

I doubt if any two ships have exercised a greater influence upon history than these two German cruisers. Few of us at that time realized their great importance, but subsequent developments have fully justified Wangenheim's exuberant satisfaction. The *Goeben* was a powerful battle cruiser of recent construction; the *Breslau* was not so large a ship, but she, like the *Goeben*, had the excessive speed that made her extremely serviceable in those waters. These ships had spent the few months preceding the war cruising in the Mediterranean, and when the declaration finally came they were taking on supplies at Messina. I have always regarded it as more than a coincidence that these two vessels, both of them having a greater speed than any French or English ships in the Mediterranean, should have been lying not far from Turkey when war broke out. The selection of the *Goeben* was particularly fortunate, as she had twice before visited Constantinople and her officers and men knew the Dardanelles perfectly. The behaviour of these crews, when the news of war was received, indicated the spirit with which the German navy began hostilities; the men broke into singing and shouting, lifted their Admiral upon their shoulders, and held a real German jollification. It is said that Admiral Souchon preserved, as a touching souvenir of this occasion, his white uniform bearing the finger prints of his grimy sailors!

For all their joy at the prospect of battle, the situation of these ships was still a precarious one. They formed no match for the large British and French naval forces which were roaming through the Mediterranean. The *Goeben* and the *Breslau* were far from their native bases; with the coaling problem such an acute one, and with England in possession of all important stations, where could they flee for safety? Several Italian destroyers were circling around the German ships at Messina, enforcing neutrality and occasionally reminding them that they could remain in port only twenty-four hours. England had ships stationed at the Gulf of Otranto, the head of the Adriatic, to cut them off in case they sought to escape into the Austrian port of Pola. The British navy also stood guard at Gibraltar and Suez, the only other exits that apparently offered the possibility of escape. There was only one other place in which the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* might find a safe and friendly reception. That was Constantinople. Apparently the British navy dismissed this as an impossibility. At that time, early in August, international law had not entirely disappeared as the guiding conduct of nations. Turkey was then a neutral country, and, despite the many evidences of German domination, she seemed likely to maintain her neutrality. The Treaty of Paris, which was signed in 1856, as well as the Treaty of London, signed in 1871, provided that war ships should not use the Dardanelles except by the special permission of the Sultan, which could be granted only in times of peace. In practice the government had seldom given this permission except

for ceremonial occasions. Under the existing conditions it would have amounted virtually to an unfriendly act for the Sultan to have removed the ban against war vessels in the Dardanelles, and to permit the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* to remain in Turkish waters for more than twenty-four hours would have been nothing less than a declaration of war. It is perhaps not surprising that the British, in the early days of August, 1914, when Germany had not completely made clear her official opinion that "international law had ceased to exist," regarded these treaty stipulations as barring the German ships from the Dardanelles and Constantinople. Relying upon the sanctity of these international regulations, the British navy had shut off every point through which these German ships could have escaped to safety---except the entrance to the Dardanelles. Had England, immediately on the declaration of war, rushed a powerful squadron to this vital spot, how different the history of the last three years might have been!

"His Majesty expects the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* to succeed in breaking through!" Such was the wireless that reached these vessels at Messina at five o'clock on the evening of August 4th. The twenty-four hours' stay permitted by the Italian Government had nearly expired. Outside, in the Strait of Otranto, lay the force of British battle cruisers, sending false radio messages to the Germans, instructing them to rush for Pola. With bands playing and flags flying, the officers and crews having had their spirits fired by oratory and drink, the two vessels started at full speed toward the awaiting British fleet. The little *Gloucester*, a scout boat, kept in touch, wiring constantly the German movements to the main squadron. Suddenly, when off Cape Spartivento, the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* let off into the atmosphere all the discordant vibrations which their wireless could command, jamming the air with such a hullabaloo that the *Gloucester* was unable to send any intelligible messages. Then the German cruisers turned southward and made for the Aegean Sea. The plucky little *Gloucester* kept close on their heels, and, as my daughter had related, once had even audaciously offered battle. A few hours behind the British squadron pursued, but uselessly, for the German ships, though far less powerful in battle, were much speedier. Even then the British admiral probably thought that he had spoiled the German plans. The German ships might get first to the Dardanelles, but at that point stood international law across the path, barring the entrance.

Meanwhile Wangenheim had accomplished his great diplomatic success. From the *Corcovado* wireless station in the Bosphorus he was sending the most agreeable news to Admiral Souchon. He was telling him to hoist the Turkish flag when he reached the Strait, for Admiral Souchon's cruisers had suddenly become parts of the Turkish navy, and, therefore, the usual international prohibitions did not apply. These cruisers were no longer the *Goeben* and the *Breslau*, for, like an oriental magician, Wangenheim had suddenly changed them into the *Sultan Selim* and the *Medilli*. The fact was that the German Ambassador had cleverly taken advantage of the existing situation to manufacture a "sale." As I have already told, Turkey had two dreadnaughts under construction in England when the war broke out. These ships were not exclusively governmental enterprises; their purchase represented what, on the surface, appeared to be a popular enthusiasm of the Turkish people. They were to be the agencies through which Turkey was to attack Greece and win back the islands of the Aegean, and the Turkish people had raised the money to build them by a so-called popular subscription. Agents had gone from house to house, painfully collecting- these small sums of money; there had been entertainments and fairs, and, in their eagerness for the cause, Turkish women had sold their hair for the benefit of the common fund. These two vessels thus represented a spectacular outburst of patriotism that was unusual in Turkey, so unusual, indeed, that many detected signs that the Government had stimulated it. At the very moment when the war began, Turkey had made her last payment to the English shipyards and the Turkish crews had arrived in England prepared to take the finished vessels home. Then, a few days before the time set to deliver them, the British Government stepped in and commandeered these dreadnaughts for the British navy.

There is not the slightest question that England had not only a legal but a moral right to do this; there is also no question that her action was a proper one, and that, had she been dealing with almost any other nation, such a proceeding would not have aroused any resentment. But the Turkish people cared nothing for distinctions of this sort; all they saw was that they had two ships in England, which they had greatly strained their resources to purchase, and that England had now stepped in and taken them. Even without external pressure they would have resented the act, but external pressure was exerted in plenty. The transaction gave Wangenheim the greatest opportunity of his life. Violent attacks upon England, all emanating from the German Embassy, began to fill the Turkish press. Wangenheim was constantly discoursing to the Turkish leaders on English perfidy and he now suggested that Germany, Turkey's good friend, was prepared to make compensation for England's "unlawful" seizure. He suggested that Turkey go through the form of "purchasing" the *Goeben* and the *Breslau*,

which were then wandering around the Mediterranean, perhaps in anticipation of this very contingency, and incorporate them in the Turkish navy in place of the appropriated ships in England. The very day that these vessels passed through the Dardanelles, the *Ikdam*, a Turkish newspaper published in Constantinople, had a triumphant account of this "sale," with big headlines calling it a great success for the Imperial Government."

Thus Wangenheim's manoeuvre accomplished two purposes: it placed Germany before the populace as Turkey's friend, and it also provided a subterfuge for getting the ships through the Dardanelles, and enabling them to remain in Turkish waters. All this beguiled the more ignorant of the Turkish people, and gave the Cabinet a plausible ground for meeting the objection of Entente diplomats, but it did not deceive any intelligent person. The *Goeben* and *Breslau* might change their names, and the German sailors might adorn themselves with Turkish fezzes, but we all knew from the beginning that this sale was a sham. Those who understood the financial condition of Turkey could only be amused at the idea that she could purchase these modern vessels. Moreover, the ships were never incorporated in the Turkish navy; on the contrary, what really happened was that the Turkish navy was annexed to these German ships. A handful of Turkish sailors were placed on board at one time for appearance sake, but their German officers and German crews still retained active charge. Wangenheim, in his talks with me, never made any secret of the fact that the ships still remained German property. "I never expected to have such big checks to sign," he remarked one day, referring to his expenditures on the *Goeben* and the *Breslau*. He always called them "our" ships. Even Talaat told me in so many words that the cruisers did not belong to Turkey.

"The Germans say they belong to the Turks," he remarked, with his characteristic laugh. "At any rate, it's very comforting for us to have them here. After the war, if the Germans win, they will forget all about it and leave the ships to us. If the Germans lose, they won't be able to take them away from us!"

The German Government made no real pretension that the sale had been *bona fide*; at least when the Greek Minister at Berlin protested against the transaction as unfriendly to Greece,---naïvely forgetting the American ships which Greece had recently purchased---the German officials soothed him by admitting, *sotto voce*, that the ownership still remained with Germany. Yet when the Entente ambassadors constantly protested against the presence of the German vessels, the Turkish officials blandly kept up the pretence that they were integral parts of the Turkish navy!

The German officers and crews greatly enjoyed this farcical pretence that the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* were Turkish ships. They took delight in putting on Turkish fezzes, thereby presenting to the world conclusive evidence that these loyal sailors of the Kaiser were now parts of the Sultan's navy. One day the *Goeben* sailed up the Bosphorus, halted in front of the Russian Embassy, and dropped anchor. Then the officers and men lined the deck in full view of the enemy embassy. All solemnly removed their Turkish fezzes and put on German caps. The band played "Deutschland über Alles," the "Watch on the Rhine," and other German songs, the German sailors singing loudly to the accompaniment. When they had spent an hour or more serenading the Russian Ambassador, the officers and crews removed their German caps and again put on their Turkish fezzes. The *Goeben* then picked up her anchor and started southward for her station, leaving in the ears of the Russian diplomat the gradually dying strains of German war songs as the cruiser disappeared down stream.

I have often speculated on what would have happened if the English battle cruisers, which pursued the *Breslau* and the *Goeben* up to the mouth of the Dardanelles, had not been too gentlemanly to violate international law. Suppose that they had. entered the Strait, attacked the German cruisers in the Marmora, and sunk them. They could have done this, and, knowing all that we know now, such an action would have been justified. Not improbably the destruction would have kept Turkey out of the war. For the arrival of these cruisers made it inevitable that Turkey, when the proper moment came, should join her forces with Germany. With them the Turkish navy became stronger than the Russian Black Sea Fleet and thus made it certain that Russia could make no attack on Constantinople. The *Goeben* and the *Breslau*, therefore, practically gave the Ottoman and German naval forces control of the Black Sea. Moreover, these two ships could easily dominate Constantinople, and thus they furnished the means by which the German navy, if the occasion should arise, could terrorize the Turks. I am convinced that, when the judicious historian reviews this war and its consequences, he will say that the passage of the Strait by these German ships made it inevitable that Turkey should join Germany at the moment that Germany desired her assistance, and that it likewise sealed the doom of the Turkish Empire. There

were men in the Turkish Cabinet who perceived this, even then. The story was told in Constantinople---though I do not vouch for it as authentic history---that the cabinet meeting at which this momentous decision had been made had not been altogether harmonious. The Grand Vizier and Djemal, it was said, objected to the fictitious "sale," and demanded that it should not be completed. When the discussion had reached its height Enver, who was playing Germany's game, announced that he had already practically completed the transaction. In the silence that followed his statement this young Napoleon pulled out his pistol and laid it on the table.

"If any one here wishes to question this purchase," he said quietly and icily, "I am ready to meet him."

A few weeks after the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* had taken up permanent headquarters in the Bosphorus, Djavid Bey, Minister of Finance, happened to meet a distinguished Belgian jurist, then in Constantinople.

"I have terrible news for you," said the sympathetic Turkish statesman. "The Germans have captured Brussels."

The Belgian, a huge figure, more than six feet high, put his arm soothingly upon the shoulder of the diminutive Turk.

"I have even more terrible news for you," he said, pointing out to the stream where the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* lay anchored. "The Germans have captured