

Mrs Harding's account of the HMS Formidable episode 1915

Transcribed (OCR) by Graham Davies from a copy in the Museum's archives, 2016

1st Jan. Full Moon. 20 past 12 afternoon.
1915 Low Tide 12.30, i.e. half hour after midnight.
Mr Ellis's wind gauge registered wind at 50 miles an hour.

The first of January 1915 will not soon be forgotten by us.

A violent storm of wind and rain ushered in the New Year. I am a sound sleeper but the rain lashing the windows and the wind raging round the house woke me frequently in the night. An oak tree just beyond our garden fell with a crash while we were having breakfast and smashed in the roof of a shed used as a carpenter's shop, which fortunately was empty at the time.

In the afternoon the rain stopped and Willie, Gwen and I went down to see the stormy sea; there was half an acre of foam, three or four feet deep just above high water mark on the west side of the Cobb, which showed how the wind had been lashing the waves; the children were rushing through it as if it were snow.

We came back to tea bringing a young Canadian school-girl, Lilian Adair, with us and while we were laughing and talking after tea, Barry Paterson came up with a note from his mother, inviting us to dine at the Standard Inn to meet Dr. Paterson who had rather unexpectedly arrived from London. We accordingly went down the Cobb Road in a gale of wind and rain and the first thing they told us was that the "Formidable" had been sunk in the English Channel. We talked very little about it; there was nothing to be done and we tried to put it from us. I meant to come away early as Gwen was tired but the men were talking and Barry was very anxious to show us one conjuring trick after another and it was nearly 11 when we left.

When we came out into the night, the rain had stopped, the wind had dropped, the moon was full and bright and high up in the sky; so instead of hurrying home by the muddy Cobb Road we walked along the sea front to enjoy the evening; the sea was still very rough and the waves were irregular and breaking far out at sea. Gwen spied a black object on the water and when I said I thought it was the Harbour buoy, she said it was East of the buoy. We lost sight of it in the trough of the waves and when I saw it again I thought it might only be the blackness of a wave under its white crest as it fell over. We kept stopping to watch; it was often out of sight for a long time but it always appeared again and each time was bigger than before and we felt sure it was a boat; but what could a little boat be doing in such a sea! It got bigger and bigger, it was a big boat, it turned broadside, it had men in it; we must have been watching it 10 or 12 minutes and still Willie could not see it; when we got to the east end of the Parade we ran up on to the Bell Cliff; then Willie saw it, it turned broadside again, it was a huge boat with a number of men standing up in it and it was coming in rapidly; I thought it was a German raid. [Gwen said "At any rate we won't go home till we find out what it is"]. Willie ran down the steps and called a policeman standing by the door of the Assembly rooms, and we all ran back to the Parade. The boat was close in; the policeman ran back to the street, called his mate and telling him to rouse the coxswain of the life boat, came back and joined us on the beach. The men in the boat gave a feeble shout; Gwen said "Can they be men from the Formidable?" Willie shouted "Are you English?" There was no answer but a second feeble indistinct shout. A sailor, Gush, ran down with a painter and rushed into the sea with it; the men in the boat threw a rope, it was made fast, more men came rushing down from the town and the boat was pulled in. A man came ashore, I heard him say "Formidable, torpedoed in the Channel". I went to put our cloaks and umbrellas on to the low wall, and when I turned again men were staggering to the

little steps which lead on to the beach road; I guided some up; Willie came carrying a man and he and Gwen and I lifted three men to the top of the wall. I sat on the wall and held up another man, Gwen and I pulled him up and held him a bit before we helped him on to his legs, then as he could not stand alone we put our arms round him and helped him to the Pilot Boat Inn. A dozen frozen men were standing outside and talking to someone at an upper window; I called out ,, , "Men from the Formidable" and in a minute the front door was opened and we all streamed into a big room. The kind bustling landlady came along with her arms full of wood which she threw into the grate and soon a fire was blazing up the chimney. The poor dazed soaking men sat patiently and silently down on the chairs round the walls and as more men came in, I went out into the street. The door was open at Bragg's Stores. I went in and told them I wanted coffee and milk, sugar, bread and butter and promised to pay for it.

[NB - I did not pay for it! Mr. and Mrs. Bragg would not hear of it next day. I think I gave a tip to the two eldest children who had been so useful. Mrs. Bragg had one lifeless man laid in front of her kitchen fire, where P.C. Meach and Mrs. Paterson rubbed him till he showed signs of life.]

Mr. and Mrs. Bragg and their son and daughter went to work nobly, they lighted 2 fires and boiled kettles. I rushed up the town and knocked at four or five houses, telling the people what had happened and begging for boiling water, tea, coffee, soup, anything they could get; someone in the town clerk's office was telephoning for the doctors and the mayor. I rushed back to Bragg and in an incredibly short time a quart of coffee was ready; I took it across to the Inn with an arm full of cups; eager hands were stretched out to me and I gave a little drop to each and said more was coming. How Mrs. Bragg did it I can't think, she made quantities of coffee and soup, other people came to the Inn with steaming jugs and with cups; coffee flowed in; I cut up and buttered 3 loaves and took them across, and whenever I met anyone I sent them off to the Vicar, the Cottage Hospital, to the Standard Inn, begging people to come and help.

Gradually people arrived with dry clothes and blankets and the stronger men were taken off in batches by the friendly people who opened their houses and hospitably welcomed them. As the room emptied, there was more chance of looking after the poor fellows who had dropped down on the floor in their wet clothes and showed no sign of life. Doctors and nurses arriving on the scene these men were rubbed and artificially respirationed, brandy was injected, their wet things were taken off and one by one they recovered. I had lost sight of Gwen and Willie and I was so busy that I had no time to think and it gave me a great shock when I was rejoicing over two men who were beginning to recover consciousness to hear from Gwen that 9 men were lying dead at the Cinema House; while I had been helping to feed the living, Willie and Gwen had been helping to carry up the dead and dying. One man did not regain consciousness till 5 the next morning.

The wonder was that so many survived that awful night and day; they had been 21 hours in the open boat without food or drink, many of them in very scanty clothing as they were in bed at the time of the accident. Their rudder had been carried away, and they had broken many oars. One man, Carroll, steered with an oar; he and a fine strong handsome man called Byng had kept up the spirits of the party, rousing those who seemed likely to be overcome by sleep and encouraging all to continue their efforts. They had seen our harbour lights since dusk and had tried to make towards them, but they were exhausted, they had very few oars, there was a hole in the boat, which let in the water as fast as they baled it out with their boots and no wonder their progress was slow, the ebbing tide brought them in at the last.

Seventy-one men had started in the boat, one by one fourteen had succumbed and had been dropped overboard; of 57 who reached our beach, six were already dead and 3 died on landing. One of the survivors told me about one of the boys who had kept up his spirits right through that terrible night and had even laughed and joked when they got near enough to see us standing on the shore, but when they called the roll he was dead. His mother came to the funeral and saw him before the coffin was closed; he was lying with a pleasant smile on his face, and his mother said she was so thankful to have seen him, and to carry away such a happy picture of him. There was no sign of all the terrible ordeal he had passed through. The vicar went with her to see him and told me this.

GD – Mrs Ann Harding adds further information, dated January 17th 1924, Churnside, Lyme Regis.

I have just been reading the account of the survivors of the Formidable arriving in Lyme, which I wrote at the time. I thought I had a letter which I wrote the morning after the arrival of the boat to my Mother but I can't find it so I thought while it was all fresh in my memory I would add a few notes and details.

The exact spot where the men came up, was the five steps on the lower Parade opposite Alcove Cottage; sometimes the storm clears away the shingle and several more steps are to be seen; but that night there were only five. Miss Bruce and her mother were living at Alcove Cottage at the time and Miss Bruce hearing the noise on the shore, thought it was a German landing; after a time she came to the window and Gwen saw her and called to her and begged her to come and help, for she was a trained nurse. She opened her house and one man who was carried in, died on the carpet in her drawing room.

We have heard people say that P.C. Stockley said he heard shouting out at sea, before my husband called him from the door of the Assembly Rooms, but all I can say is, we heard no sound; the boat came in silently; even when my husband called out to them as they came in, they did not reply. As the first man came on to the beach I heard him say "Formidable, torpedoed in the Channel" , and that was the first voice I heard.

As I turned from the low wall where I had put all our cloaks, books, umbrellas (and the policeman's cape and truncheon which he had handed to me) I saw the men 4 or 5 of them coming up towards me and had such an uncanny feeling that I had seen such a sight before; they came up with their clothes and hair clinging tight to them as if they were enveloped in skins, and I thought afterwards they must have reminded me of the pirates coming ashore in Barrie's * play Peter Pan which I had seen recently.

I saw a man rush into the sea and thought he was carrying a rope to the boat; the man was Harry (?) Gush who has a fish shop now in Broad Street. I asked him about it afterwards, and he said, he rushed in to catch a rope thrown from the boat; he did not carry a rope out.

None of us saw Sergeant Stockley "swim round the boat" to save a man; and as a matter of fact, we don't think he did any more than any of the other men; Govier was one of the men who got soaked; I remember that quite well, as he was in khaki, a soldier home on leave, and he could not go back to his depot next day as his clothes were not dry in time. Many of the men were wet through, helping the feebler men out of the boat. When the doors of the Pilot Boat Inn were opened Mrs. Atkins came forward looking so hospitable and friendly, and ushered them into a big room at the back, and returned in a moment with her arms full of wood, saying we will soon have a blaze. She was so kind and bustling and helpful, but she died a year or so afterwards; I heard she had never recovered from the shock she had that night.

The men soon began to smoke, and Gwen and I were rubbing an apparently lifeless man on the table; Gwen said, "he wants more air, he will never recover here, so I went over and asked Mrs. Bragg and we carried him over and laid him on the floor in front of her fire, and P.C. Meach and our friend Mrs. Paterson (who had trained as a nurse) rubbed him till he showed signs of life; meanwhile another man on another table needed air and again I went to Mrs. Bragg; she looked at me in a sort of despair, then threw open the door of her drawing-room and there on her sofa we put the ship's cook, and rubbed him. After some time, he moved and opened his eyes and said angrily "what are you doing to me?" As soon as they could be moved Mr. Woodroffe's motor took them up to the Cottage Hospital. I don't know how many were put to bed in the Pilot Boat, I was told there was more room at the Cottage Hospital and I went upstairs to see if anyone would like to go; there seemed to be a dormitory full of men, and they were being looked after by the man we used to call the Mohammedan, a tall soldierly man who was supposed not to be quite right in his head, who lived at the Three Cups all that winter. He was said to be a Colonel in the Indian Army.

It all happened so suddenly, that there was no time to be frightened or even excited; I remember going about looking after the men, as if it was my usual job, and I did not realize what had happened, till Mrs.

Jacob the Vicar's wife came in to the Inn a long time after, with her arms full of dry clothes and towels, and a look of awe on her face. When the men were all safely bestowed about 3 in the morning, and we thought we had better come home, I suddenly felt tired and was only too glad when Willie asked Mr. Woodroffe, whether he would bring us up the hill in his motor; he also brought one of the sailors, and we took him to Canon Jacob's house and I went upstairs with Mary Jacob to see him installed in a bedroom. We went down to the hospital early next morning to give some help to the Matron, Miss Haddon and her "Sister" Sister Ellis. It was astonishing to see the difference a night's rest had made in the appearance of the men. I hardly recognised the ship's cook, to whom we had specially attended the night before.

Willie was besieged by the men to send off telegrams to their friends and relatives; I think he said he sent off 26; and we went down to a shop and brought back numbers of black lead pencils, for the men to write themselves; they could not get up, as they had no clothing.

The difficulty of underclothes was solved by telegraphing to the Mayoress of Exeter, who out of her Red X stores supplied each man with a complete set and the people in the town produced trousers, coats, etc; and the Admiralty in a few days sent in overcoats and boots. Mr. Budgett the Secretary of the Hospital measured the men's feet for boots on Sunday afternoon, when Gwen and I were down there.

The general feeling of the town was envy of us that we had been on the shore at the time, and able to help; they could not do enough for the men in providing them with cigarettes, oranges, sweets. One of the sailors said "I did not think there were such kind people in the world!" and another man named his daughter who was born a few days afterwards "Phyllis Regis" and he has written to Lyme each year on the anniversary of the great day of rescue.

Some of the men slept at Dr. Cooper's house, and before they left, Mrs. Cooper gave a big tea party to all the survivors.

The Bishop of Salisbury came to conduct the funeral service in the Parish Church and afterwards at the cemetery. The whole town went to the funeral; one of the Belgian refugees carried the Belgian colours at the funeral and M. Le Comte de Latenay de Lissac, who was living at Kersbrook Cottage, carried the French colours.

The coloured crest which was on the big boat which brought the men to Lyme, was taken off and presented to the town, and it is now in the Council Chamber at Lyme Town Hall.