

ATTACKS ON HOSPITAL SHIPS.

THE GERMAN METHOD.

SLANDERS IN ADVANCE.

(By Our Naval Correspondent.)

Although the first official announcement left in doubt the means employed by the enemy to sink the *Britannia*, later news points unmistakably to the torpedoing of the great hospital ship by a submarine. The circumstance that the attack was made in broad daylight, when all the marks of the vessel's merciful mission must have been most conspicuous, and when her course showed that she was obviously on her way to pick up sick and wounded, shows that a deliberate opportunity was made by the Germans to exhibit their disregard for the laws of nations and at the same time to get rid of a vessel likely to be a formidable competitor for passenger traffic after the war.

The record of the Central Powers has been particularly bad, not only in regard to the treatment of the hospital ships of the Allies, but also to the glaring accusations and innuendoes of an improper use of such vessels by Great Britain. The latter became so frequent and mendacious about a year ago that the Admiralty had to issue more than one categorical denial of them. These false stories began about the time that the submarine war on merchant ships was instituted, and when the hospital ship *Asturias* had been unnecessarily attacked by torpedo in the English Channel. One of the first of them stated that Germans in Portsmouth Harbour had reported that two hospital ships started from there daily for France, deeply loaded, returning regularly unloaded, as could be seen from their emerging higher from the water. It was therefore suggested that the ships carried war materials and ammunition under the protection of the Red Cross. This culpable lie was possibly based on a substratum of truth, since hospitals require supplies, but it indicated the eagerness of the German official mind to find excuses for unlawful acts.

Later in the year the German Wireless elaborated other charges of the kind. Reports from Spain were said to have told of large numbers of hospital ships having been seen on their way to the Mediterranean. The ships would become much more numerous, it was alleged, since the activity of the "U" boats in that sea. Sworn statements were also said to be in German possession that war materials had been carried in such ships labelled "soft soap." Describing "the biggest fraud the British Navy has practised," a German message on November 21, 1915, spoke of 70 British transports having passed Gibraltar, all "heavily laden and painted like hospital ships, on their way to Greek waters." In denying all these stories, the Admiralty said that there were 42 British hospital ships working to and from the Mediterranean, and although all were fully ballasted to secure safety and comfort, they were not "deeply laden," but on the contrary were generally some feet higher than deep draught. Other counts in the indictment were similarly disposed of. In view of the allegations, however, the hospital ship *Mauretania* was examined at Naples by the American, Danish, and Swiss Consuls, who jointly signed a declaration that there were neither combatants nor warlike stores on board her.