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The Appetite of Tyranny

By

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Including Letters to an Old Garibaldian

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THE FACTS OF THE CASE

Unless we are all mad, there is at the back of the most bewildering business a story: and if we are all mad, there is no such thing as madness. If I set a house on fire, it is quite true that I may illuminate many other people's weaknesses as well as my own. It may be that the master of the house was burned because he was drunk; it may be that the mistress of the house was burned because she was stingy, and perished arguing about the expense of the fire-escape. It is, nevertheless, broadly true that they both were burned because I set fire to their house. That is the story of the thing. The mere facts of the story about the present European conflagration are quite as easy to tell.

Before we go on to the deeper things which make this war the most sincere war of human history, it is easy to answer the question of why England came to be in it at all, as one asks how a man fell down a coal-hole, or failed to keep an appointment. Facts are not the whole truth. But facts are facts, and in this case the facts are few and simple. Prussia, France, and England had all promised not to invade Belgium. Prussia proposed to invade Belgium, because it was the safest way of invading France. But Prussia promised that if she might break in, through her own broken promise and ours, she would break in and not steal. In other words, we were offered at the same instant a promise of faith in the future and a proposal of perjury in the present. Those interested in human origin may refer to an old Victorian writer of English, who, in the last and most restrained of his historical essays, wrote of Frederick the Great, the founder of this unchanging Prussian policy. After describing how Frederick broke the guarantee he had signed on behalf of Maria Theresa, he then describes how Frederick sought to put things straight by a promise that was an insult. "If she would but let him have Silesia, he would, he said, stand by her against any power which should try to deprive her of her other dominions, as if he was not already bound to stand by her, or as if his new promise could be of more value than the old one." That passage was written by Macaulay, but so far as the mere contemporary facts are concerned, it might have been written by me.

Upon the immediate logical and legal origin of the English interest there can be no rational debate. There are some things so simple that one can almost prove them with plans and diagrams, as in Euclid. One could make a kind of comic calendar of what would have happened to the English diplomatist if he had been silenced every time by Prussian diplomacy. Suppose we arrange it in the form of a kind of diary.

July 24. Germany invades Belgium.

July 25. England declares war.

July 26. Germany promises not to annex Belgium.

July 27. England withdraws from the war.

July 28. Germany annexes Belgium. England declares war.

July 29. Germany promises not to annex France. England withdraws from the war.

July 30. Germany annexes France. England declares war.

July 31. Germany promises not to annex England.

Aug. 1. England withdraws from the war. Germany invades England...

How long is anybody expected to go with that sort of game, or keep peace at that illimitable price? How long must we pursue a road in which promises are all fetishes in front of us and all fragments behind us? No: upon the cold facts of the final negotiations, as told by any of the diplomatists in any of the documents, there is no doubt about the story. And no doubt about the villain of the story.

These are the last facts--the facts which involved England. It is equally easy to state the first facts--the facts which involved Europe. The Prince who practically ruled Austria was shot by certain persons whom the Austrian Government believed to be conspirators from Serbia. The Austrian Government piled up arms and armies, but said not a word either to Serbia their suspect or Italy their ally. From the documents it would seem that Austria kept everybody in the dark, except Prussia. It is probably nearer the truth to say that Prussia kept everybody in the dark, including Austria. But all that is what is called opinion, belief, conviction or common-sense, and we are not dealing with it here. The objective fact is that Austria told Serbia to permit Servian officers to be suspended by the authority of Austrian officers, and told Serbia to submit to this within forty-eight hours. In other words, the sovereign of Serbia was practically told to take off not only the laurels of two great campaigns but his own lawful and national crown, and to do it in a time in which no respectable citizen is expected to discharge an hotel bill. Serbia asked for time, for arbitration--in short, for peace. But Prussia had already begun to mobilise; and Prussia, presuming that Serbia might thus be rescued, declared war.

Between these two ends of fact, the ultimatum to Serbia, the ultimatum to

Belgium, any one so inclined can of course talk as if everything were relative. If any one ask why the Czar should rush to the support of Servia, it is as easy to ask why the Kaiser should rush to the support of Austria. If any one say that the French would attack the Germans, it is sufficient to answer that the Germans did attack the French. There remain, however, two attitudes to consider, even perhaps two arguments to counter, which can best be considered and countered under this general head of facts. First of all, there is a curious, cloudy sort of argument, much affected by the professional rhetoricians of Prussia, who are sent out to instruct and correct the minds of Americans or Scandinavians. It consists of going into convulsions of incredulity and scorn at the mention of Russia's responsibility for Servia or England's responsibility for Belgium; and suggesting that, treaty or no treaty, frontier or no frontier, Russia would be out to slay Teutons or England to steal colonies. Here, as elsewhere, I think the professors dotted all over the Baltic plain fail in lucidity, and in the power of distinguishing ideas. Of course it is quite true that England has material interests to defend, and will probably use the opportunity to defend them: or, in other words, of course England, like everybody else, would be more comfortable if Prussia were less predominant. The fact remains that we did not do what the Germans did. We did not invade Holland to seize a naval and commercial advantage: and whether they say that we wished to do it in our greed, or feared to do it in our cowardice, the fact remains that we did not do it. Unless this common-sense principle be kept in view, I cannot conceive how any quarrel can possibly be judged. A contract may be made between two persons solely for material advantage on each side: but the moral advantage is still generally supposed to lie with the person who keeps the contract. Surely it cannot be dishonest to be honest--even if honesty is the best policy. Imagine the most complex maze of indirect motives; and still the man who keeps faith for money cannot possibly be worse than the man who breaks faith for money. It will be noted that this ultimate test applies in the same way to Servia as to Belgium and Britain. The Servians may not be a very peaceful people; but, on the occasion under discussion, it was certainly they who wanted peace. You may choose to think the Serb a sort of born robber: but on this occasion it was certainly the Austrian who was trying to rob. Similarly, you may call England perfidious as a sort of historical summary; and declare your private belief that Mr. Asquith was vowed from infancy to the ruin of the German Empire, a Hannibal and hater of the eagles. But, when all is said, it is nonsense to call a man perfidious because he keeps his promise. It is absurd to complain of the sudden treachery of a business man in turning up punctually to his appointment: or the unfair shock given to a creditor by the debtor paying his debts.

Lastly, there is an attitude not unknown in the crisis against which I should particularly like to protest. I should address my protest especially to those lovers and pursuers of Peace who, very short-sightedly, have occasionally adopted it. I

mean the attitude which is impatient of these preliminary details about who did this or that, and whether it was right or wrong. They are satisfied with saying that an enormous calamity, called War, has been begun by some or all of us; and should be ended by some or all of us. To these people this preliminary chapter about the precise happenings must appear not only dry (and it must of necessity be the driest part of the task) but essentially needless and barren. I wish to tell these people that they are wrong; that they are wrong upon all principles of human justice and historic continuity: but that they are specially and supremely wrong upon their own principles of arbitration and international peace.

These sincere and high-minded peace-lovers are always telling us that citizens no longer settle their quarrels by private violence; and that nations should no longer settle theirs by public violence. They are always telling us that we no longer fight duels; and need no longer wage wars. In short, they perpetually base their peace proposals on the fact that an ordinary citizen no longer avenges himself with an axe. But how is he prevented from revenging himself with an axe? If he hits his neighbour on the head with the kitchen chopper, what do we do? Do we all join hands, like children playing Mulberry Bush, and say "We are all responsible for this; but let us hope it will not spread. Let us hope for the happy day when he shall leave off chopping at the man's head; and when nobody shall ever chop anything for ever and ever." Do we say "Let bygones be bygones; why go back to all the dull details with which the business began; who can tell with what sinister motives the man was standing there within reach of the hatchet?" We do not. We keep the peace in private life by asking for the facts of provocation, and the proper object of punishment. We do go into the dull details; we do enquire into the origins; we do emphatically enquire who it was that hit first. In short we do what I have done very briefly in this place.

Given this, it is indeed true that behind these facts there are truths; truths of a terrible, of a spiritual sort. In mere fact, the Germanic power has been wrong about Servia, wrong about Russia, wrong about Belgium, wrong about England, wrong about Italy. But there was a reason for its being wrong everywhere; and of that root reason, which has moved half the world against it, I shall speak later. For that is something too omnipresent to be proved, too indisputable to be helped by detail. It is nothing less than the locating, after more than a hundred years of recriminations and wrong explanations, of the modern European evil: the finding of the fountain from which poison has flowed upon all the nations of the earth.