

Chapter XXXVII.

The cradle of oversea traffic and of the art of naval combats, the Mediterranean, apart from all the associations of adventure and glory, the common heritage of all mankind, makes a tender appeal to a seaman. It has sheltered the infancy of his craft. He looks upon it as a man may look at a vast nursery in an old, old mansion where innumerable generations of his own people have learned to walk. I say his own people because, in a sense, all sailors belong to one family: all are descended from that adventurous and shaggy ancestor who, bestriding a shapeless log and paddling with a crooked branch, accomplished the first coasting-trip in a sheltered bay ringing with the admiring howls of his tribe. It is a matter of regret that all those brothers in craft and feeling, whose generations have learned to walk a ship's deck in that nursery, have been also more than once fiercely engaged in cutting each other's throats there. But life, apparently, has such exigencies. Without human propensity to murder and other sorts of unrighteousness there would have been no historical heroism. It is a consoling reflection. And then, if one examines impartially the deeds of violence, they appear of but small consequence. From Salamis to Actium, through Lepanto and the Nile to the naval massacre of Navarino, not to mention other armed encounters of lesser interest, all the blood heroically spilt into the Mediterranean has not stained with a single trail of purple the deep azure of its classic waters.

Of course, it may be argued that battles have shaped the destiny of mankind. The question whether they have shaped it well would remain open, however. But it would be hardly worth discussing. It is very probable that, had the Battle of Salamis never been fought, the face of the world would have been much as we behold it now, fashioned by the mediocre inspiration and the short-sighted labours of men. From a long and miserable experience of suffering, injustice, disgrace and aggression the nations of the earth are mostly swayed by fear--fear of the sort that a little cheap oratory turns easily to rage, hate, and violence. Innocent, guileless fear has been the cause of many wars. Not, of course, the fear of war itself, which, in the evolution of sentiments and ideas, has come to be regarded at last as a half-mystic and glorious ceremony with certain fashionable rites and preliminary incantations, wherein the conception of its true nature has been lost. To apprehend the true aspect, force, and morality of war as a natural function of mankind one requires a feather in the hair and a ring in the nose, or, better still, teeth filed to a point and a tattooed breast. Unfortunately, a return to such simple ornamentation is impossible. We are bound to the chariot of progress. There is no going back; and, as bad luck would have it, our civilization, which has done so much for the comfort and adornment of our bodies and the

elevation of our minds, has made lawful killing frightfully and needlessly expensive.

The whole question of improved armaments has been approached by the governments of the earth in a spirit of nervous and unreflecting haste, whereas the right way was lying plainly before them, and had only to be pursued with calm determination. The learned vigils and labours of a certain class of inventors should have been rewarded with honourable liberality as justice demanded; and the bodies of the inventors should have been blown to pieces by means of their own perfected explosives and improved weapons with extreme publicity as the commonest prudence dictated. By this method the ardour of research in that direction would have been restrained without infringing the sacred privileges of science. For the lack of a little cool thinking in our guides and masters this course has not been followed, and a beautiful simplicity has been sacrificed for no real advantage. A frugal mind cannot defend itself from considerable bitterness when reflecting that at the Battle of Actium (which was fought for no less a stake than the dominion of the world) the fleet of Octavianus Caesar and the fleet of Antonius, including the Egyptian division and Cleopatra's galley with purple sails, probably cost less than two modern battleships, or, as the modern naval book-jargon has it, two capital units. But no amount of lubberly book-jargon can disguise a fact well calculated to afflict the soul of every sound economist. It is not likely that the Mediterranean will ever behold a battle with a greater issue; but when the time comes for another historical fight its bottom will be enriched as never before by a quantity of jagged scrap-iron, paid for at pretty nearly its weight of gold by the deluded populations inhabiting the isles and continents of this planet.