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Notes on Life and Letters

By

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Contents

AUTHOR'S NOTE.....	3
PART I--LETTERS	6
BOOKS--1905.....	6
I.	6
II.	8
III.	10
HENRY JAMES--AN APPRECIATION--1905.....	12
ALPHONSE DAUDET--1898.....	17
GUY DE MAUPASSANT--1904.....	20
ANATOLE FRANCE--1904.....	25
I.--"CRAINQUEBILLE".....	25
II.--"L'ILE DES PINGOUINS".....	31
TURGENEV --1917.....	34
J. C. STEPHEN CRANE--A NOTE WITHOUT DATES--1919.....	37
TALES OF THE SEA--1898.....	39
AN OBSERVER IN MALAYA --1898.....	42
A HAPPY WANDERER--1910.....	44
THE LIFE BEYOND--1910.....	47
THE ASCENDING EFFORT--1910.....	50
THE CENSOR OF PLAYS--AN APPRECIATION--1907.....	53
PART II--LIFE	56
AUTOCRACY AND WAR--1905.....	56
THE CRIME OF PARTITION--1919.....	75
A NOTE ON THE POLISH PROBLEM--1916.....	86
POLAND REVISITED--1915.....	91
I.	91
II.	96
III.	102
IV.	107
FIRST NEWS--1918.....	114
WELL DONE--1918.....	118
I.	118
II.	121
III.	125
TRADITION--1918.....	128
CONFIDENCE--1919.....	133
I.	133
II.	135
III.	137
FLIGHT--1917.....	139
SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE LOSS OF THE TITANIC--1912.....	142
CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE ADMIRABLE INQUIRY INTO THE LOSS OF THE TITANIC--1912.....	152
PROTECTION OF OCEAN LINERS {8}--1914.....	164
A FRIENDLY PLACE.....	171

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I don't know whether I ought to offer an apology for this collection which has more to do with life than with letters. Its appeal is made to orderly minds. This, to be frank about it, is a process of tidying up, which, from the nature of things, cannot be regarded as premature. The fact is that I wanted to do it myself because of a feeling that had nothing to do with the considerations of worthiness or unworthiness of the small (but unbroken) pieces collected within the covers of this volume. Of course it may be said that I might have taken up a broom and used it without saying anything about it. That, certainly, is one way of tidying up.

But it would have been too much to have expected me to treat all this matter as removable rubbish. All those things had a place in my life. Whether any of them deserve to have been picked up and ranged on the shelf--this shelf--I cannot say, and, frankly, I have not allowed my mind to dwell on the question. I was afraid of thinking myself into a mood that would hurt my feelings; for those pieces of writing, whatever may be the comment on their display, appertain to the character of the man.

And so here they are, dusted, which was but a decent thing to do, but in no way polished, extending from the year '98 to the year '20, a thin array (for such a stretch of time) of really innocent attitudes: Conrad literary, Conrad political, Conrad reminiscent, Conrad controversial. Well, yes! A one-man show--or is it merely the show of one man?

The only thing that will not be found amongst those Figures and Things that have passed away, will be Conrad en pantoufles. It is a constitutional inability. Schlafrock und pantoffeln! Not that! Never! . . . I don't know whether I dare boast like a certain South American general who used to say that no emergency of war or peace had ever found him "with his boots off"; but I may say that whenever the various periodicals mentioned in this book called on me to come out and blow the trumpet of personal opinions or strike the pensive lute that speaks of the past, I always tried to pull on my boots first. I didn't want to do it, God knows! Their Editors, to whom I beg to offer my thanks here, made me perform mainly by kindness but partly by bribery. Well, yes! Bribery? What can you expect? I never pretended to be better than the people in the next street, or even in the same street.

This volume (including these embarrassed introductory remarks) is as near as I shall ever come to deshabelle in public; and perhaps it will do something to help towards a better vision of the man, if it gives no more than a partial view of a

piece of his back, a little dusty (after the process of tidying up), a little bowed, and receding from the world not because of weariness or misanthropy but for other reasons that cannot be helped: because the leaves fall, the water flows, the clock ticks with that horrid pitiless solemnity which you must have observed in the ticking of the hall clock at home. For reasons like that. Yes! It recedes. And this was the chance to afford one more view of it--even to my own eyes.

The section within this volume called Letters explains itself, though I do not pretend to say that it justifies its own existence. It claims nothing in its defence except the right of speech which I believe belongs to everybody outside a Trappist monastery. The part I have ventured, for shortness' sake, to call Life, may perhaps justify itself by the emotional sincerity of the feelings to which the various papers included under that head owe their origin. And as they relate to events of which everyone has a date, they are in the nature of sign-posts pointing out the direction my thoughts were compelled to take at the various cross-roads. If anybody detects any sort of consistency in the choice, this will be only proof positive that wisdom had nothing to do with it. Whether right or wrong, instinct alone is invariable; a fact which only adds a deeper shade to its inherent mystery. The appearance of intellectuality these pieces may present at first sight is merely the result of the arrangement of words. The logic that may be found there is only the logic of the language. But I need not labour the point. There will be plenty of people sagacious enough to perceive the absence of all wisdom from these pages. But I believe sufficiently in human sympathies to imagine that very few will question their sincerity. Whatever delusions I may have suffered from I have had no delusions as to the nature of the facts commented on here. I may have misjudged their import: but that is the sort of error for which one may expect a certain amount of toleration.

The only paper of this collection which has never been published before is the Note on the Polish Problem. It was written at the request of a friend to be shown privately, and its "Protectorate" idea, sprung from a strong sense of the critical nature of the situation, was shaped by the actual circumstances of the time. The time was about a month before the entrance of Roumania into the war, and though, honestly, I had seen already the shadow of coming events I could not permit my misgivings to enter into and destroy the structure of my plan. I still believe that there was some sense in it. It may certainly be charged with the appearance of lack of faith and it lays itself open to the throwing of many stones; but my object was practical and I had to consider warily the preconceived notions of the people to whom it was implicitly addressed, and also their unjustifiable hopes. They were unjustifiable, but who was to tell them that? I mean who was wise enough and convincing enough to show them the inanity of their mental attitude? The whole atmosphere was poisoned with visions that were not so much false as simply impossible. They were also the result of vague and

unconfessed fears, and that made their strength. For myself, with a very definite dread in my heart, I was careful not to allude to their character because I did not want the Note to be thrown away unread. And then I had to remember that the impossible has sometimes the trick of coming to pass to the confusion of minds and often to the crushing of hearts.

Of the other papers I have nothing special to say. They are what they are, and I am by now too hardened a sinner to feel ashamed of insignificant indiscretions. And as to their appearance in this form I claim that indulgence to which all sinners against themselves are entitled.

J. C. 1920.