

POLAND REVISITED--1915

I.

I have never believed in political assassination as a means to an end, and least of all in assassination of the dynastic order. I don't know how far murder can ever approach the perfection of a fine art, but looked upon with the cold eye of reason it seems but a crude expedient of impatient hope or hurried despair. There are few men whose premature death could influence human affairs more than on the surface. The deeper stream of causes depends not on individuals who, like the mass of mankind, are carried on by a destiny which no murder has ever been able to placate, divert, or arrest.

In July of last year I was a stranger in a strange city in the Midlands and particularly out of touch with the world's politics. Never a very diligent reader of newspapers, there were at that time reasons of a private order which caused me to be even less informed than usual on public affairs as presented from day to day in that necessarily atmosphereless, perspectiveless manner of the daily papers, which somehow, for a man possessed of some historic sense, robs them of all real interest. I don't think I had looked at a daily for a month past.

But though a stranger in a strange city I was not lonely, thanks to a friend who had travelled there out of pure kindness to bear me company in a conjuncture which, in a most private sense, was somewhat trying.

It was this friend who, one morning at breakfast, informed me of the murder of the Archduke Ferdinand.

The impression was mediocre. I was barely aware that such a man existed. I remembered only that not long before he had visited London. The recollection was rather of a cloud of insignificant printed words his presence in this country provoked.

Various opinions had been expressed of him, but his importance was Archducal, dynastic, purely accidental. Can there be in the world of real men anything more shadowy than an Archduke? And now he was no more; removed with an atrocity of circumstances which made one more sensible of his humanity than when he was in life. I connected that crime with Balkanic plots and aspirations so little that I had actually to ask where it had happened. My friend told me it was in

Serajevo, and wondered what would be the consequences of that grave event. He asked me what I thought would happen next.

It was with perfect sincerity that I answered "Nothing," and having a great repugnance to consider murder as a factor of politics, I dismissed the subject. It fitted with my ethical sense that an act cruel and absurd should be also useless. I had also the vision of a crowd of shadowy Archdukes in the background, out of which one would step forward to take the place of that dead man in the light of the European stage. And then, to speak the whole truth, there was no man capable of forming a judgment who attended so little to the march of events as I did at that time. What for want of a more definite term I must call my mind was fixed upon my own affairs, not because they were in a bad posture, but because of their fascinating holiday-promising aspect. I had been obtaining my information as to Europe at second hand, from friends good enough to come down now and then to see us. They arrived with their pockets full of crumpled newspapers, and answered my queries casually, with gentle smiles of scepticism as to the reality of my interest. And yet I was not indifferent; but the tension in the Balkans had become chronic after the acute crisis, and one could not help being less conscious of it. It had wearied out one's attention. Who could have guessed that on that wild stage we had just been looking at a miniature rehearsal of the great world-drama, the reduced model of the very passions and violences of what the future held in store for the Powers of the Old World? Here and there, perhaps, rare minds had a suspicion of that possibility, while they watched Old Europe stage-managing fussily by means of notes and conferences, the prophetic reproduction of its awaiting fate. It was wonderfully exact in the spirit; same roar of guns, same protestations of superiority, same words in the air; race, liberation, justice--and the same mood of trivial demonstrations. One could not take to-day a ticket for Petersburg. "You mean Petrograd," would say the booking clerk. Shortly after the fall of Adrianople a friend of mine passing through Sophia asked for some cafe turc at the end of his lunch.

"Monsieur veut dire Cafe balkanique," the patriotic waiter corrected him austerely.

I will not say that I had not observed something of that instructive aspect of the war of the Balkans both in its first and in its second phase. But those with whom I touched upon that vision were pleased to see in it the evidence of my alarmist cynicism. As to alarm, I pointed out that fear is natural to man, and even salutary. It has done as much as courage for the preservation of races and institutions. But from a charge of cynicism I have always shrunk instinctively. It is like a charge of being blind in one eye, a moral disablement, a sort of disgraceful calamity that must be carried off with a jaunty bearing--a sort of thing I am not capable of. Rather than be thought a mere jaunty cripple I allowed

myself to be blinded by the gross obviousness of the usual arguments. It was pointed out to me that these Eastern nations were not far removed from a savage state. Their economics were yet at the stage of scratching the earth and feeding the pigs. The highly-developed material civilisation of Europe could not allow itself to be disturbed by a war. The industry and the finance could not allow themselves to be disorganised by the ambitions of an idle class, or even the aspirations, whatever they might be, of the masses.

Very plausible all this sounded. War does not pay. There had been a book written on that theme--an attempt to put pacificism on a material basis. Nothing more solid in the way of argument could have been advanced on this trading and manufacturing globe. War was "bad business!" This was final.

But, truth to say, on this July day I reflected but little on the condition of the civilised world. Whatever sinister passions were heaving under its splendid and complex surface, I was too agitated by a simple and innocent desire of my own, to notice the signs or interpret them correctly. The most innocent of passions will take the edge off one's judgment. The desire which possessed me was simply the desire to travel. And that being so it would have taken something very plain in the way of symptoms to shake my simple trust in the stability of things on the Continent. My sentiment and not my reason was engaged there. My eyes were turned to the past, not to the future; the past that one cannot suspect and mistrust, the shadowy and unquestionable moral possession the darkest struggles of which wear a halo of glory and peace.

In the preceding month of May we had received an invitation to spend some weeks in Poland in a country house in the neighbourhood of Cracow, but within the Russian frontier. The enterprise at first seemed to me considerable. Since leaving the sea, to which I have been faithful for so many years, I have discovered that there is in my composition very little stuff from which travellers are made. I confess that my first impulse about a projected journey is to leave it alone. But the invitation received at first with a sort of dismay ended by rousing the dormant energy of my feelings. Cracow is the town where I spent with my father the last eighteen months of his life. It was in that old royal and academical city that I ceased to be a child, became a boy, had known the friendships, the admirations, the thoughts and the indignations of that age. It was within those historical walls that I began to understand things, form affections, lay up a store of memories and a fund of sensations with which I was to break violently by throwing myself into an unrelated existence. It was like the experience of another world. The wings of time made a great dusk over all this, and I feared at first that if I ventured bodily in there I would discover that I who have had to do with a good many imaginary lives have been embracing mere shadows in my youth. I feared. But fear in itself may become a fascination. Men have gone, alone and trembling,

into graveyards at midnight--just to see what would happen. And this adventure was to be pursued in sunshine. Neither would it be pursued alone. The invitation was extended to us all. This journey would have something of a migratory character, the invasion of a tribe. My present, all that gave solidity and value to it, at any rate, would stand by me in this test of the reality of my past. I was pleased with the idea of showing my companions what Polish country life was like; to visit the town where I was at school before the boys by my side should grow too old, and gaining an individual past of their own, should lose their unsophisticated interest in mine. It is only in the short instants of early youth that we have the faculty of coming out of ourselves to see dimly the visions and share the emotions of another soul. For youth all is reality in this world, and with justice, since it apprehends so vividly its images behind which a longer life makes one doubt whether there is any substance. I trusted to the fresh receptivity of these young beings in whom, unless Heredity is an empty word, there should have been a fibre which would answer to the sight, to the atmosphere, to the memories of that corner of the earth where my own boyhood had received its earliest independent impressions.

The first days of the third week in July, while the telegraph wires hummed with the words of enormous import which were to fill blue books, yellow books, white books, and to arouse the wonder of mankind, passed for us in light-hearted preparations for the journey. What was it but just a rush through Germany, to get across as quickly as possible?

Germany is the part of the earth's solid surface of which I know the least. In all my life I had been across it only twice. I may well say of it *vidi tantum*; and the very little I saw was through the window of a railway carriage at express speed. Those journeys of mine had been more like pilgrimages when one hurries on towards the goal for the satisfaction of a deeper need than curiosity. In this last instance, too, I was so incurious that I would have liked to have fallen asleep on the shores of England and opened my eyes, if it were possible, only on the other side of the Silesian frontier. Yet, in truth, as many others have done, I had "sensed it"--that promised land of steel, of chemical dyes, of method, of efficiency; that race planted in the middle of Europe, assuming in grotesque vanity the attitude of Europeans amongst effete Asiatics or barbarous niggers; and, with a consciousness of superiority freeing their hands from all moral bonds, anxious to take up, if I may express myself so, the "perfect man's burden." Meantime, in a clearing of the Teutonic forest, their sages were rearing a Tree of Cynical Wisdom, a sort of Upas tree, whose shade may be seen now lying over the prostrate body of Belgium. It must be said that they laboured openly enough, watering it with the most authentic sources of all madness, and watching with their be-spectacled eyes the slow ripening of the glorious blood-red fruit. The sincerest words of peace, words of menace, and I verily believe words of abasement, even if there

had been a voice vile enough to utter them, would have been wasted on their ecstasy. For when the fruit ripens on a branch it must fall. There is nothing on earth that can prevent it.

II.

For reasons which at first seemed to me somewhat obscure, that one of my companions whose wishes are law decided that our travels should begin in an unusual way by the crossing of the North Sea. We should proceed from Harwich to Hamburg. Besides being thirty-six times longer than the Dover- Calais passage this rather unusual route had an air of adventure in better keeping with the romantic feeling of this Polish journey which for so many years had been before us in a state of a project full of colour and promise, but always retreating, elusive like an enticing mirage.

And, after all, it had turned out to be no mirage. No wonder they were excited. It's no mean experience to lay your hands on a mirage. The day of departure had come, the very hour had struck. The luggage was coming downstairs. It was most convincing. Poland then, if erased from the map, yet existed in reality; it was not a mere *pays du reve*, where you can travel only in imagination. For no man, they argued, not even father, an habitual pursuer of dreams, would push the love of the novelist's art of make-believe to the point of burdening himself with real trunks for a voyage *au pays du reve*.

As we left the door of our house, nestling in, perhaps, the most peaceful nook in Kent, the sky, after weeks of perfectly brazen serenity, veiled its blue depths and started to weep fine tears for the refreshment of the parched fields. A pearly blur settled over them, and a light sifted of all glare, of everything unkindly and searching that dwells in the splendour of unveiled skies. All unconscious of going towards the very scenes of war, I carried off in my eye, this tiny fragment of Great Britain; a few fields, a wooded rise; a clump of trees or two, with a short stretch of road, and here and there a gleam of red wall and tiled roof above the darkening hedges wrapped up in soft mist and peace. And I felt that all this had a very strong hold on me as the embodiment of a beneficent and gentle spirit; that it was dear to me not as an inheritance, but as an acquisition, as a conquest in the sense in which a woman is conquered--by love, which is a sort of surrender.

These were strange, as if disproportionate thoughts to the matter in hand, which was the simplest sort of a Continental holiday. And I am certain that my companions, near as they are to me, felt no other trouble but the suppressed excitement of pleasurable anticipation. The forms and the spirit of the land before their eyes were their inheritance, not their conquest--which is a thing precarious, and, therefore, the most precious, possessing you if only by the fear of unworthiness rather than possessed by you. Moreover, as we sat together in the same railway carriage, they were looking forward to a voyage in space, whereas I

felt more and more plainly, that what I had started on was a journey in time, into the past; a fearful enough prospect for the most consistent, but to him who had not known how to preserve against his impulses the order and continuity of his life--so that at times it presented itself to his conscience as a series of betrayals--still more dreadful.

I down here these thoughts so exclusively personal, to explain why there was no room in my consciousness for the apprehension of a European war. I don't mean to say that I ignored the possibility; I simply did not think of it. And it made no difference; for if I had thought of it, it could only have been in the lame and inconclusive way of the common uninitiated mortals; and I am sure that nothing short of intellectual certitude--obviously unattainable by the man in the street--could have stayed me on that journey which now that I had started on it seemed an irrevocable thing, a necessity of my self-respect.

London, the London before the war, flaunting its enormous glare, as of a monstrous conflagration up into the black sky--with its best Venice-like aspect of rainy evenings, the wet asphalted streets lying with the sheen of sleeping water in winding canals, and the great houses of the city towering all dark, like empty palaces, above the reflected lights of the glistening roadway.

Everything in the subdued incomplete night-life around the Mansion House went on normally with its fascinating air of a dead commercial city of sombre walls through which the inextinguishable activity of its millions streamed East and West in a brilliant flow of lighted vehicles.

In Liverpool Street, as usual too, through the double gates, a continuous line of taxi-cabs glided down the inclined approach and up again, like an endless chain of dredger-buckets, pouring in the passengers, and dipping them out of the great railway station under the inexorable pallid face of the clock telling off the diminishing minutes of peace. It was the hour of the boat-trains to Holland, to Hamburg, and there seemed to be no lack of people, fearless, reckless, or ignorant, who wanted to go to these places. The station was normally crowded, and if there was a great flutter of evening papers in the multitude of hands there were no signs of extraordinary emotion on that multitude of faces. There was nothing in them to distract me from the thought that it was singularly appropriate that I should start from this station on the retraced way of my existence. For this was the station at which, thirty-seven years before, I arrived on my first visit to London. Not the same building, but the same spot. At nineteen years of age, after a period of probation and training I had imposed upon myself as ordinary seaman on board a North Sea coaster, I had come up from Lowestoft--my first long railway journey in England--to "sign on" for an Antipodean voyage in a deep-water ship. Straight from a railway carriage I had

walked into the great city with something of the feeling of a traveller penetrating into a vast and unexplored wilderness. No explorer could have been more lonely. I did not know a single soul of all these millions that all around me peopled the mysterious distances of the streets. I cannot say I was free from a little youthful awe, but at that age one's feelings are simple. I was elated. I was pursuing a clear aim, I was carrying out a deliberate plan of making out of myself, in the first place, a seaman worthy of the service, good enough to work by the side of the men with whom I was to live; and in the second place, I had to justify my existence to myself, to redeem a tacit moral pledge. Both these aims were to be attained by the same effort. How simple seemed the problem of life then, on that hazy day of early September in the year 1878, when I entered London for the first time.

From that point of view--Youth and a straightforward scheme of conduct--it was certainly a year of grace. All the help I had to get in touch with the world I was invading was a piece of paper not much bigger than the palm of my hand--in which I held it--torn out of a larger plan of London for the greater facility of reference. It had been the object of careful study for some days past. The fact that I could take a conveyance at the station never occurred to my mind, no, not even when I got out into the street, and stood, taking my anxious bearings, in the midst, so to speak, of twenty thousand hansoms. A strange absence of mind or unconscious conviction that one cannot approach an important moment of one's life by means of a hired carriage? Yes, it would have been a preposterous proceeding. And indeed I was to make an Australian voyage and encircle the globe before ever entering a London hansom.

Another document, a cutting from a newspaper, containing the address of an obscure shipping agent, was in my pocket. And I needed not to take it out. That address was as if graven deep in my brain. I muttered its words to myself as I walked on, navigating the sea of London by the chart concealed in the palm of my hand; for I had vowed to myself not to inquire my way from anyone. Youth is the time of rash pledges. Had I taken a wrong turning I would have been lost; and if faithful to my pledge I might have remained lost for days, for weeks, have left perhaps my bones to be discovered bleaching in some blind alley of the Whitechapel district, as it had happened to lonely travellers lost in the bush. But I walked on to my destination without hesitation or mistake, showing there, for the first time, some of that faculty to absorb and make my own the imaged topography of a chart, which in later years was to help me in regions of intricate navigation to keep the ships entrusted to me off the ground. The place I was bound to was not easy to find. It was one of those courts hidden away from the charted and navigable streets, lost among the thick growth of houses like a dark pool in the depths of a forest, approached by an inconspicuous archway as if by secret path; a Dickensian nook of London, that wonder city, the growth of which

bears no sign of intelligent design, but many traces of freakishly sombre phantasy the Great Master knew so well how to bring out by the magic of his understanding love. And the office I entered was Dickensian too. The dust of the Waterloo year lay on the panes and frames of its windows; early Georgian grime clung to its sombre wainscoting.

It was one o'clock in the afternoon, but the day was gloomy. By the light of a single gas-jet depending from the smoked ceiling I saw an elderly man, in a long coat of black broadcloth. He had a grey beard, a big nose, thick lips, and heavy shoulders. His curly white hair and the general character of his head recalled vaguely a burly apostle in the barocco style of Italian art. Standing up at a tall, shabby, slanting desk, his silver-rimmed spectacles pushed up high on his forehead, he was eating a mutton-chop, which had been just brought to him from some Dickensian eating-house round the corner.

Without ceasing to eat he turned to me his florid, barocco apostle's face with an expression of inquiry.

I produced elaborately a series of vocal sounds which must have borne sufficient resemblance to the phonetics of English speech, for his face broke into a smile of comprehension almost at once.--"Oh, it's you who wrote a letter to me the other day from Lowestoft about getting a ship."

I had written to him from Lowestoft. I can't remember a single word of that letter now. It was my very first composition in the English language. And he had understood it, evidently, for he spoke to the point at once, explaining that his business, mainly, was to find good ships for young gentlemen who wanted to go to sea as premium apprentices with a view of being trained for officers. But he gathered that this was not my object. I did not desire to be apprenticed. Was that the case?

It was. He was good enough to say then, "Of course I see that you are a gentleman. But your wish is to get a berth before the mast as an Able Seaman if possible. Is that it?"

It was certainly my wish; but he stated doubtfully that he feared he could not help me much in this. There was an Act of Parliament which made it penal to procure ships for sailors. "An Act-of-Parliament. A law," he took pains to impress it again and again on my foreign understanding, while I looked at him in consternation.

I had not been half an hour in London before I had run my head against an Act of Parliament! What a hopeless adventure! However, the barocco apostle was a

resourceful person in his way, and we managed to get round the hard letter of it without damage to its fine spirit. Yet, strictly speaking, it was not the conduct of a good citizen; and in retrospect there is an unfilial flavour about that early sin of mine. For this Act of Parliament, the Merchant Shipping Act of the Victorian era, had been in a manner of speaking a father and mother to me. For many years it had regulated and disciplined my life, prescribed my food and the amount of my breathing space, had looked after my health and tried as much as possible to secure my personal safety in a risky calling. It isn't such a bad thing to lead a life of hard toil and plain duty within the four corners of an honest Act of Parliament. And I am glad to say that its seventies have never been applied to me.

In the year 1878, the year of "Peace with Honour," I had walked as lone as any human being in the streets of London, out of Liverpool Street Station, to surrender myself to its care. And now, in the year of the war waged for honour and conscience more than for any other cause, I was there again, no longer alone, but a man of infinitely dear and close ties grown since that time, of work done, of words written, of friendships secured. It was like the closing of a thirty-six-year cycle.

All unaware of the War Angel already awaiting, with the trumpet at his lips, the stroke of the fatal hour, I sat there, thinking that this life of ours is neither long nor short, but that it can appear very wonderful, entertaining, and pathetic, with symbolic images and bizarre associations crowded into one half-hour of retrospective musing.

I felt, too, that this journey, so suddenly entered upon, was bound to take me away from daily life's actualities at every step. I felt it more than ever when presently we steamed out into the North Sea, on a dark night fitful with gusts of wind, and I lingered on deck, alone of all the tale of the ship's passengers. That sea was to me something unforgettable, something much more than a name. It had been for some time the schoolroom of my trade. On it, I may safely say, I had learned, too, my first words of English. A wild and stormy abode, sometimes, was that confined, shallow-water academy of seamanship from which I launched myself on the wide oceans. My teachers had been the sailors of the Norfolk shore; coast men, with steady eyes, mighty limbs, and gentle voice; men of very few words, which at least were never bare of meaning. Honest, strong, steady men, sobered by domestic ties, one and all, as far as I can remember.

That is what years ago the North Sea I could hear growling in the dark all round the ship had been for me. And I fancied that I must have been carrying its voice in my ear ever since, for nothing could be more familiar than those short, angry sounds I was listening to with a smile of affectionate recognition.

I could not guess that before many days my old schoolroom would be desecrated by violence, littered with wrecks, with death walking its waves, hiding under its waters. Perhaps while I am writing these words the children, or maybe the grandchildren, of my pacific teachers are out in trawlers, under the Naval flag, dredging for German submarine mines.

III.

I have said that the North Sea was my finishing school of seamanship before I launched myself on the wider oceans. Confined as it is in comparison with the vast stage of this water-girt globe, I did not know it in all its parts. My class-room was the region of the English East Coast which, in the year of Peace with Honour, had long forgotten the war episodes belonging to its maritime history. It was a peaceful coast, agricultural, industrial, the home of fishermen. At night the lights of its many towns played on the clouds, or in clear weather lay still, here and there, in brilliant pools above the ink-black outline of the land. On many a night I have hauled at the braces under the shadow of that coast, envying, as sailors will, the people on shore sleeping quietly in their beds within sound of the sea. I imagine that not one head on those envied pillows was made uneasy by the slightest premonition of the realities of naval war the short lifetime of one generation was to bring so close to their homes.

Though far away from that region of kindly memories and traversing a part of the North Sea much less known to me, I was deeply conscious of the familiarity of my surroundings. It was a cloudy, nasty day: and the aspects of Nature don't change, unless in the course of thousands of years--or, perhaps, centuries. The Phoenicians, its first discoverers, the Romans, the first imperial rulers of that sea, had experienced days like this, so different in the wintry quality of the light, even on a July afternoon, from anything they had ever known in their native Mediterranean. For myself, a very late comer into that sea, and its former pupil, I accorded amused recognition to the characteristic aspect so well remembered from my days of training. The same old thing. A grey-green expanse of smudgy waters grinning angrily at one with white foam-ridges, and over all a cheerless, unglowing canopy, apparently made of wet blotting-paper. From time to time a flurry of fine rain blew along like a puff of smoke across the dots of distant fishing boats, very few, very scattered, and tossing restlessly on an ever dissolving, ever re-forming sky-line.

Those flurries, and the steady rolling of the ship, accounted for the emptiness of the decks, favouring my reminiscent mood. It might have been a day of five and thirty years ago, when there were on this and every other sea more sails and less smoke-stacks to be seen. Yet, thanks to the unchangeable sea I could have given myself up to the illusion of a revised past, had it not been for the periodical transit across my gaze of a German passenger. He was marching round and round the boat deck with characteristic determination. Two sturdy boys gambolled round him in his progress like two disorderly satellites round their parent planet. He was bringing them home, from their school in England, for their

holiday. What could have induced such a sound Teuton to entrust his offspring to the unhealthy influences of that effete, corrupt, rotten and criminal country I cannot imagine. It could hardly have been from motives of economy. I did not speak to him. He trod the deck of that decadent British ship with a scornful foot while his breast (and to a large extent his stomach, too) appeared expanded by the consciousness of a superior destiny. Later I could observe the same truculent bearing, touched with the racial grotesqueness, in the men of the Landwehr corps, that passed through Cracow to reinforce the Austrian army in Eastern Galicia. Indeed, the haughty passenger might very well have been, most probably was, an officer of the Landwehr; and perhaps those two fine active boys are orphans by now. Thus things acquire significance by the lapse of time. A citizen, a father, a warrior, a mote in the dust-cloud of six million fighting particles, an unconsidered trifle for the jaws of war, his humanity was not consciously impressed on my mind at the time. Mainly, for me, he was a sharp tapping of heels round the corner of the deck-house, a white yachting cap and a green overcoat getting periodically between my eyes and the shifting cloud-horizon of the ashy-grey North Sea. He was but a shadowy intrusion and a disregarded one, for, far away there to the West, in the direction of the Dogger Bank, where fishermen go seeking their daily bread and sometimes find their graves, I could behold an experience of my own in the winter of '81, not of war, truly, but of a fairly lively contest with the elements which were very angry indeed.

There had been a troublesome week of it, including one hateful night--or a night of hate (it isn't for nothing that the North Sea is also called the German Ocean)--when all the fury stored in its heart seemed concentrated on one ship which could do no better than float on her side in an unnatural, disagreeable, precarious, and altogether intolerable manner. There were on board, besides myself, seventeen men all good and true, including a round enormous Dutchman who, in those hours between sunset and sunrise, managed to lose his blown-out appearance somehow, became as it were deflated, and thereafter for a good long time moved in our midst wrinkled and slack all over like a half-collapsed balloon. The whimpering of our deck-boy, a skinny, impressionable little scarecrow out of a training-ship, for whom, because of the tender immaturity of his nerves, this display of German Ocean frightfulness was too much (before the year was out he developed into a sufficiently cheeky young ruffian), his desolate whimpering, I say, heard between the gusts of that black, savage night, was much more present to my mind and indeed to my senses than the green overcoat and the white cap of the German passenger circling the deck indefatigably, attended by his two gyrating children.

"That's a very nice gentleman." This information, together with the fact that he was a widower and a regular passenger twice a year by the ship, was communicated to me suddenly by our captain. At intervals through the day he

would pop out of the chart-room and offer me short snatches of conversation. He owned a simple soul and a not very entertaining mind, and he was without malice and, I believe, quite unconsciously, a warm Germanophil. And no wonder! As he told me himself, he had been fifteen years on that run, and spent almost as much of his life in Hamburg as in Harwich.

"Wonderful people they are," he repeated from time to time, without entering into particulars, but with many nods of sagacious obstinacy. What he knew of them, I suppose, were a few commercial travellers and small merchants, most likely. But I had observed long before that German genius has a hypnotising power over half-baked souls and half-lighted minds. There is an immense force of suggestion in highly organised mediocrity. Had it not hypnotised half Europe? My man was very much under the spell of German excellence. On the other hand, his contempt for France was equally general and unbounded. I tried to advance some arguments against this position, but I only succeeded in making him hostile. "I believe you are a Frenchman yourself," he snarled at last, giving me an intensely suspicious look; and forthwith broke off communications with a man of such unsound sympathies.

Hour by hour the blotting-paper sky and the great flat greenish smudge of the sea had been taking on a darker tone, without any change in their colouring and texture. Evening was coming on over the North Sea. Black uninteresting hummocks of land appeared, dotting the duskiness of water and clouds in the Eastern board: tops of islands fringing the German shore. While I was looking at their antics amongst the waves--and for all their solidity they were very elusive things in the failing light--another passenger came out on deck. This one wore a dark overcoat and a grey cap. The yellow leather strap of his binocular case crossed his chest. His elderly red cheeks nourished but a very thin crop of short white hairs, and the end of his nose was so perfectly round that it determined the whole character of his physiognomy. Indeed nothing else in it had the slightest chance to assert itself. His disposition, unlike the widower's, appeared to be mild and humane. He offered me the loan of his glasses. He had a wife and some small children concealed in the depths of the ship, and he thought they were very well where they were. His eldest son was about the decks somewhere.

"We are Americans," he remarked weightily, but in a rather peculiar tone. He spoke English with the accent of our captain's "wonderful people," and proceeded to give me the history of the family's crossing the Atlantic in a White Star liner. They remained in England just the time necessary for a railway journey from Liverpool to Harwich. His people (those in the depths of the ship) were naturally a little tired.

At that moment a young man of about twenty, his son, rushed up to us from the

fore-deck in a state of intense elation. "Hurrah," he cried under his breath. "The first German light! Hurrah!"

And those two American citizens shook hands on it with the greatest fervour, while I turned away and received full in the eyes the brilliant wink of the Borkum lighthouse squatting low down in the darkness. The shade of the night had settled on the North Sea.

I do not think I have ever seen before a night so full of lights. The great change of sea life since my time was brought home to me. I had been conscious all day of an interminable procession of steamers. They went on and on as if in chase of each other, the Baltic trade, the trade of Scandinavia, of Denmark, of Germany, pitching heavily into a head sea and bound for the gateway of Dover Straits. Singly, and in small companies of two and three, they emerged from the dull, colourless, sunless distances ahead as if the supply of rather roughly finished mechanical toys were inexhaustible in some mysterious cheap store away there, below the grey curve of the earth. Cargo steam vessels have reached by this time a height of utilitarian ugliness which, when one reflects that it is the product of human ingenuity, strikes hopeless awe into one. These dismal creations look still uglier at sea than in port, and with an added touch of the ridiculous. Their rolling waddle when seen at a certain angle, their abrupt clockwork nodding in a sea-way, so unlike the soaring lift and swing of a craft under sail, have in them something caricatural, a suggestion of a low parody directed at noble predecessors by an improved generation of dull, mechanical toilers, conceited and without grace.

When they switched on (each of these unlovely cargo tanks carried tame lightning within its slab-sided body), when they switched on their lamps they spangled the night with the cheap, electric, shop-glitter, here, there, and everywhere, as of some High Street, broken up and washed out to sea. Later, Heligoland cut into the overhead darkness with its powerful beam, infinitely prolonged out of unfathomable night under the clouds.

I remained on deck until we stopped and a steam pilot-boat, so overlit amidships that one could not make out her complete shape, glided across our bows and sent a pilot on board. I fear that the oar, as a working implement, will become presently as obsolete as the sail. The pilot boarded us in a motor-dinghy. More and more is mankind reducing its physical activities to pulling levers and twirling little wheels. Progress! Yet the older methods of meeting natural forces demanded intelligence too; an equally fine readiness of wits. And readiness of wits working in combination with the strength of muscles made a more complete man.

It was really a surprisingly small dinghy and it ran to and fro like a water-insect fussing noisily down there with immense self-importance. Within hail of us the hull of the Elbe lightship floated all dark and silent under its enormous round, service lantern; a faithful black shadow watching the broad estuary full of lights.

Such was my first view of the Elbe approached under the wings of peace ready for flight away from the luckless shores of Europe. Our visual impressions remain with us so persistently that I find it extremely difficult to hold fast to the rational belief that now everything is dark over there, that the Elbe lightship has been towed away from its post of duty, the triumphant beam of Heligoland extinguished, and the pilot-boat laid up, or turned to warlike uses for lack of its proper work to do. And obviously it must be so.

Any trickle of oversea trade that passes yet that way must be creeping along cautiously with the unlighted, war-blighted black coast close on one hand, and sudden death on the other. For all the space we steamed through that Sunday evening must now be one great minefield, sown thickly with the seeds of hate; while submarines steal out to sea, over the very spot perhaps where the insect-dinghy put a pilot on board of us with so much fussy importance. Mines; Submarines. The last word in sea-warfare! Progress--impressively disclosed by this war.

There have been other wars! Wars not inferior in the greatness of the stake and in the fierce animosity of feelings. During that one which was finished a hundred years ago it happened that while the English Fleet was keeping watch on Brest, an American, perhaps Fulton himself, offered to the Maritime Prefect of the port and to the French Admiral, an invention which would sink all the unsuspecting English ships one after another--or, at any rate most of them. The offer was not even taken into consideration; and the Prefect ends his report to the Minister in Paris with a fine phrase of indignation: "It is not the sort of death one would deal to brave men."

And behold, before history had time to hatch another war of the like proportions in the intensity of aroused passions and the greatness of issues, the dead flavour of archaism descended on the manly sentiment of those self-denying words. Mankind has been demoralised since by its own mastery of mechanical appliances. Its spirit is apparently so weak now, and its flesh has grown so strong, that it will face any deadly horror of destruction and cannot resist the temptation to use any stealthy, murderous contrivance. It has become the intoxicated slave of its own detestable ingenuity. It is true, too, that since the Napoleonic time another sort of war-doctrine has been inculcated in a nation, and held out to the world.

IV.

On this journey of ours, which for me was essentially not a progress, but a retracing of footsteps on the road of life, I had no beacons to look for in Germany. I had never lingered in that land which, on the whole, is so singularly barren of memorable manifestations of generous sympathies and magnanimous impulses. An ineradicable, invincible, provincialism of envy and vanity clings to the forms of its thought like a frowsy garment. Even while yet very young I turned my eyes away from it instinctively as from a threatening phantom. I believe that children and dogs have, in their innocence, a special power of perception as far as spectral apparitions and coming misfortunes are concerned.

I let myself be carried through Germany as if it were pure space, without sights, without sounds. No whispers of the war reached my voluntary abstraction. And perhaps not so very voluntary after all! Each of us is a fascinating spectacle to himself, and I had to watch my own personality returning from another world, as it were, to revisit the glimpses of old moons. Considering the condition of humanity, I am, perhaps, not so much to blame for giving myself up to that occupation. We prize the sensation of our continuity, and we can only capture it in that way. By watching.

We arrived in Cracow late at night. After a scrambly supper, I said to my eldest boy, "I can't go to bed. I am going out for a look round. Coming?"

He was ready enough. For him, all this was part of the interesting adventure of the whole journey. We stepped out of the portal of the hotel into an empty street, very silent and bright with moonlight. I was, indeed, revisiting the glimpses of the moon. I felt so much like a ghost that the discovery that I could remember such material things as the right turn to take and the general direction of the street gave me a moment of wistful surprise.

The street, straight and narrow, ran into the great Market Square of the town, the centre of its affairs and of the lighter side of its life. We could see at the far end of the street a promising widening of space. At the corner an unassuming (but armed) policeman, wearing ceremoniously at midnight a pair of white gloves which made his big hands extremely noticeable, turned his head to look at the grizzled foreigner holding forth in a strange tongue to a youth on whose arm he leaned.

The Square, immense in its solitude, was full to the brim of moonlight. The garland of lights at the foot of the houses seemed to burn at the bottom of a

bluish pool. I noticed with infinite satisfaction that the unnecessary trees the Municipality insisted upon sticking between the stones had been steadily refusing to grow. They were not a bit bigger than the poor victims I could remember. Also, the paving operations seemed to be exactly at the same point at which I left them forty years before. There were the dull, torn-up patches on that bright expanse, the piles of paving material looking ominously black, like heads of rocks on a silvery sea. Who was it that said that Time works wonders? What an exploded superstition! As far as these trees and these paving stones were concerned, it had worked nothing. The suspicion of the unchangeableness of things already vaguely suggested to my senses by our rapid drive from the railway station was agreeably strengthened within me.

"We are now on the line A.B.," I said to my companion, importantly.

It was the name bestowed in my time on one of the sides of the Square by the senior students of that town of classical learning and historical relics. The common citizens knew nothing of it, and, even if they had, would not have dreamed of taking it seriously. He who used it was of the initiated, belonged to the Schools. We youngsters regarded that name as a fine jest, the invention of a most excellent fancy. Even as I uttered it to my boy I experienced again that sense of my privileged initiation. And then, happening to look up at the wall, I saw in the light of the corner lamp, a white, cast-iron tablet fixed thereon, bearing an inscription in raised black letters, thus: "Line A.B." Heavens! The name had been adopted officially! Any town urchin, any guttersnipe, any herb-selling woman of the market-place, any wandering Boeotian, was free to talk of the line A.B., to walk on the line A.B., to appoint to meet his friends on the line A.B. It had become a mere name in a directory. I was stunned by the extreme mutability of things. Time could work wonders, and no mistake. A Municipality had stolen an invention of excellent fancy, and a fine jest had turned into a horrid piece of cast-iron.

I proposed that we should walk to the other end of the line, using the profaned name, not only without gusto, but with positive distaste. And this, too, was one of the wonders of Time, for a bare minute had worked that change. There was at the end of the line a certain street I wanted to look at, I explained to my companion.

To our right the unequal massive towers of St. Mary's Church soared aloft into the ethereal radiance of the air, very black on their shaded sides, glowing with a soft phosphorescent sheen on the others. In the distance the Florian Gate, thick and squat under its pointed roof, barred the street with the square shoulders of the old city wall. In the narrow, brilliantly pale vista of bluish flagstones and silvery fronts of houses, its black archway stood out small and very distinct.

There was not a soul in sight, and not even the echo of a footstep for our ears. Into this coldly illuminated and dumb emptiness there issued out of my aroused memory, a small boy of eleven, wending his way, not very fast, to a preparatory school for day-pupils on the second floor of the third house down from the Florian Gate. It was in the winter months of 1868. At eight o'clock of every morning that God made, sleet or shine, I walked up Florian Street. But of that, my first school, I remember very little. I believe that one of my co-sufferers there has become a much appreciated editor of historical documents. But I didn't suffer much from the various imperfections of my first school. I was rather indifferent to school troubles. I had a private gnawing worm of my own. This was the time of my father's last illness. Every evening at seven, turning my back on the Florian Gate, I walked all the way to a big old house in a quiet narrow street a good distance beyond the Great Square. There, in a large drawing-room, panelled and bare, with heavy cornices and a lofty ceiling, in a little oasis of light made by two candles in a desert of dusk, I sat at a little table to worry and ink myself all over till the task of my preparation was done. The table of my toil faced a tall white door, which was kept closed; now and then it would come ajar and a nun in a white coif would squeeze herself through the crack, glide across the room, and disappear. There were two of these noiseless nursing nuns. Their voices were seldom heard. For, indeed, what could they have had to say? When they did speak to me it was with their lips hardly moving, in a claustral, clear whisper. Our domestic matters were ordered by the elderly housekeeper of our neighbour on the second floor, a Canon of the Cathedral, lent for the emergency. She, too, spoke but seldom. She wore a black dress with a cross hanging by a chain on her ample bosom. And though when she spoke she moved her lips more than the nuns, she never let her voice rise above a peacefully murmuring note. The air around me was all piety, resignation, and silence.

I don't know what would have become of me if I had not been a reading boy. My prep. finished I would have had nothing to do but sit and watch the awful stillness of the sick room flow out through the closed door and coldly enfold my scared heart. I suppose that in a futile childish way I would have gone crazy. But I was a reading boy. There were many books about, lying on consoles, on tables, and even on the floor, for we had not had time to settle down. I read! What did I not read! Sometimes the elder nun, gliding up and casting a mistrustful look on the open pages, would lay her hand lightly on my head and suggest in a doubtful whisper, "Perhaps it is not very good for you to read these books." I would raise my eyes to her face mutely, and with a vague gesture of giving it up she would glide away.

Later in the evening, but not always, I would be permitted to tip-toe into the sick room to say good-night to the figure prone on the bed, which often could not

acknowledge my presence but by a slow movement of the eyes, put my lips dutifully to the nerveless hand lying on the coverlet, and tip-toe out again. Then I would go to bed, in a room at the end of the corridor, and often, not always, cry myself into a good sound sleep.

I looked forward to what was coming with an incredulous terror. I turned my eyes from it sometimes with success, and yet all the time I had an awful sensation of the inevitable. I had also moments of revolt which stripped off me some of my simple trust in the government of the universe. But when the inevitable entered the sick room and the white door was thrown wide open, I don't think I found a single tear to shed. I have a suspicion that the Canon's housekeeper looked on me as the most callous little wretch on earth.

The day of the funeral came in due course and all the generous "Youth of the Schools," the grave Senate of the University, the delegations of the Trade-guilds, might have obtained (if they cared) de visu evidence of the callousness of the little wretch. There was nothing in my aching head but a few words, some such stupid sentences as, "It's done," or, "It's accomplished" (in Polish it is much shorter), or something of the sort, repeating itself endlessly. The long procession moved out of the narrow street, down a long street, past the Gothic front of St. Mary's under its unequal towers, towards the Florian Gate.

In the moonlight-flooded silence of the old town of glorious tombs and tragic memories, I could see again the small boy of that day following a hearse; a space kept clear in which I walked alone, conscious of an enormous following, the clumsy swaying of the tall black machine, the chanting of the surpliced clergy at the head, the flames of tapers passing under the low archway of the gate, the rows of bared heads on the pavements with fixed, serious eyes. Half the population had turned out on that fine May afternoon. They had not come to honour a great achievement, or even some splendid failure. The dead and they were victims alike of an unrelenting destiny which cut them off from every path of merit and glory. They had come only to render homage to the ardent fidelity of the man whose life had been a fearless confession in word and deed of a creed which the simplest heart in that crowd could feel and understand.

It seemed to me that if I remained longer there in that narrow street I should become the helpless prey of the Shadows I had called up. They were crowding upon me, enigmatic and insistent in their clinging air of the grave that tasted of dust and of the bitter vanity of old hopes.

"Let's go back to the hotel, my boy," I said. "It's getting late."

It will be easily understood that I neither thought nor dreamt that night of a

possible war. For the next two days I went about amongst my fellow men, who welcomed me with the utmost consideration and friendliness, but unanimously derided my fears of a war. They would not believe in it. It was impossible. On the evening of the second day I was in the hotel's smoking room, an irrationally private apartment, a sanctuary for a few choice minds of the town, always pervaded by a dim religious light, and more hushed than any club reading-room I have ever been in. Gathered into a small knot, we were discussing the situation in subdued tones suitable to the genius of the place.

A gentleman with a fine head of white hair suddenly pointed an impatient finger in my direction and apostrophised me.

"What I want to know is whether, should there be war, England would come in."

The time to draw a breath, and I spoke out for the Cabinet without faltering.

"Most assuredly. I should think all Europe knows that by this time."

He took hold of the lapel of my coat, and, giving it a slight jerk for greater emphasis, said forcibly:

"Then, if England will, as you say, and all the world knows it, there can be no war. Germany won't be so mad as that."

On the morrow by noon we read of the German ultimatum. The day after came the declaration of war, and the Austrian mobilisation order. We were fairly caught. All that remained for me to do was to get my party out of the way of eventual shells. The best move which occurred to me was to snatch them up instantly into the mountains to a Polish health resort of great repute--which I did (at the rate of one hundred miles in eleven hours) by the last civilian train permitted to leave Cracow for the next three weeks.

And there we remained amongst the Poles from all parts of Poland, not officially interned, but simply unable to obtain the permission to travel by train, or road. It was a wonderful, a poignant two months. This is not the time, and, perhaps, not the place, to enlarge upon the tragic character of the situation; a whole people seeing the culmination of its misfortunes in a final catastrophe, unable to trust anyone, to appeal to anyone, to look for help from any quarter; deprived of all hope and even of its last illusions, and unable, in the trouble of minds and the unrest of consciences, to take refuge in stoical acceptance. I have seen all this. And I am glad I have not so many years left me to remember that appalling feeling of inexorable fate, tangible, palpable, come after so many cruel years, a figure of dread, murmuring with iron lips the final words: Ruin--and Extinction.

But enough of this. For our little band there was the awful anguish of incertitude as to the real nature of events in the West. It is difficult to give an idea how ugly and dangerous things looked to us over there. Belgium knocked down and trampled out of existence, France giving in under repeated blows, a military collapse like that of 1870, and England involved in that disastrous alliance, her army sacrificed, her people in a panic! Polish papers, of course, had no other but German sources of information. Naturally, we did not believe all we read, but it was sometimes excessively difficult to react with sufficient firmness.

We used to shut our door, and there, away from everybody, we sat weighing the news, hunting up discrepancies, scenting lies, finding reasons for hopefulness, and generally cheering each other up. But it was a beastly time. People used to come to me with very serious news and ask, "What do you think of it?" And my invariable answer was: "Whatever has happened, or is going to happen, whoever wants to make peace, you may be certain that England will not make it, not for ten years, if necessary."

But enough of this, too. Through the unremitting efforts of Polish friends we obtained at last the permission to travel to Vienna. Once there, the wing of the American Eagle was extended over our uneasy heads. We cannot be sufficiently grateful to the American Ambassador (who, all along, interested himself in our fate) for his exertions on our behalf, his invaluable assistance and the real friendliness of his reception in Vienna. Owing to Mr. Penfield's action we obtained the permission to leave Austria. And it was a near thing, for his Excellency has informed my American publishers since that a week later orders were issued to have us detained till the end of the war. However, we effected our hair's-breadth escape into Italy; and, reaching Genoa, took passage in a Dutch mail steamer, homeward-bound from Java with London as a port of call.

On that sea-route I might have picked up a memory at every mile if the past had not been eclipsed by the tremendous actuality. We saw the signs of it in the emptiness of the Mediterranean, the aspect of Gibraltar, the misty glimpse in the Bay of Biscay of an outward-bound convoy of transports, in the presence of British submarines in the Channel. Innumerable drifters flying the Naval flag dotted the narrow waters, and two Naval officers coming on board off the South Foreland, piloted the ship through the Downs.

The Downs! There they were, thick with the memories of my sea-life. But what were to me now the futilities of an individual past? As our ship's head swung into the estuary of the Thames, a deep, yet faint, concussion passed through the air, a shock rather than a sound, which missing my ear found its way straight into my heart. Turning instinctively to look at my boys, I happened to meet my wife's

eyes. She also had felt profoundly, coming from far away across the grey distances of the sea, the faint boom of the big guns at work on the coast of Flanders--shaping the future.