

# ГЕРБЕРТ УЭЛЛС

WAR AND THE FUTURE:  
ITALY, FRANCE AND  
BRITAIN AT WAR

Герберт Уэллс

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France and Britain at War**

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# H. G. Wells

## War and the Future: Italy, France and Britain at War

### THE PASSING OF THE EFFIGY

#### 1

One of the minor peculiarities of this unprecedented war is the Tour of the Front. After some months of suppressed information – in which even the war correspondent was discouraged to the point of elimination – it was discovered on both sides that this was a struggle in which Opinion was playing a larger and more important part than it had ever done before. This wild spreading weed was perhaps of decisive importance; the Germans at any rate were attempting to make it a cultivated flower. There was Opinion flowering away at home, feeding rankly on rumour; Opinion in neutral countries; Opinion getting into great tangles of misunderstanding and incorrect valuation between the Allies. The confidence and courage of the enemy; the amiability and assistance of the neutral; the zeal, sacrifice, and serenity of the home population; all were affected. The German cultivation of opinion began long before the war; it is still the most systematic and, because of the psychological ineptitude of the Germans, it is probably the clumsiest. The French *Maison de la Presse* is certainly the best organisation in existence for making things clear, counteracting hostile suggestion, the British official organisations are comparatively ineffective; but what is lacking officially is very largely made up for by the good will and generous efforts of the English and American press. An interesting monograph might be written upon these various attempts of the belligerents to get themselves and their proceedings explained.

Because there is perceptible in these developments, quite over and above the desire to influence opinion, a very real effort to get things explained. It is the most interesting and curious – one might almost write touching – feature of these organisations that they do not constitute a positive and defined propaganda such as the Germans maintain. The German propaganda is simple, because its ends are simple; assertions of the moral elevation and loveliness of Germany; of the insuperable excellences of German Kultur, the Kaiser, and Crown Prince, and so forth; abuse of the “treacherous” English who allied themselves with the “degenerate” French and the “barbaric” Russians; nonsense about “the freedom of the seas” – the emptiest phrase in history – childish attempts to sow suspicion between the Allies, and still more childish attempts to induce neutrals and simple-minded pacifists of allied nationality to save the face of Germany by initiating peace negotiations. But apart from their steady record and reminder of German brutalities and German aggression, the press organisations of the Allies have none of this definiteness in their task. The aim of the national intelligence in each of the allied countries is not to exalt one’s own nation and confuse and divide the enemy, but to get a real understanding with the peoples and spirits of a number of different nations, an understanding that will increase and become a fruitful and permanent understanding between the allied peoples. Neither the English, the Russians, the Italians, nor the French, to name only the bigger European allies, are concerned in setting up a legend, as the Germans are concerned in setting up a legend of themselves to impose upon mankind. They are reality dealers in this war, and the Germans are effigy mongers. Practically the Allies are saying each to one another, “Pray come to me and see for yourself that I am very much the human stuff that you are. Come and see that I am doing my best – and I think that is not so very bad a best...” And with that is something else still more subtle, something rather in the form of, “And please tell me what you think of me – and all this.”

So we have this curious byplay of the war, and one day I find Mr. Nabokoff, the editor of the *Retch*, and Count Alexy Tolstoy, that writer of delicate short stories, and Mr. Chukovsky, the subtle critic, calling in upon me after braving the wintry seas to see the British fleet; M. Joseph Reinach follows them presently upon the same errand; and then appear photographs of Mr. Arnold Bennett wading in the trenches of Flanders, Mr. Noyes becomes discreetly indiscreet about what he has seen among the submarines, and Mr. Hugh Walpole catches things from Mr. Stephen Graham in the Dark Forest of Russia. All this is quite over and above such writing of facts at first hand as Mr. Patrick McGill and a dozen other real experiencing soldiers – not to mention the soldiers' letters Mr. James Milne has collected, or the unforgettable and immortal *Prisoner of War* of Mr. Arthur Green – or such admirable war correspondents' work as Mr. Philip Gibbs or Mr. Washburne has done. Some of us writers – I can answer for one – have made our Tour of the Fronts with a very understandable diffidence. For my own part I did not want to go. I evaded a suggestion that I should go in 1915. I travel badly, I speak French and Italian with incredible atrocity, and am an extreme Pacifist. I hate soldiering. And also I did not want to write anything “under instruction”. It is largely owing to a certain stiffness in the composition of General Delme-Radcliffe is resolved that Italy shall not feel neglected by the refusal of the invitation from the Comando Supremo by anyone who from the perspective of Italy may seem to be a representative of British opinion. If Herbert Spencer had been alive General Radcliffe would have certainly made him come, travelling-hammock, ear clips and all – and I am not above confessing that I wish that Herbert Spencer was alive – for this purpose. I found Udine warm and gay with memories of Mr. Belloc, Lord Northcliffe, Mr. Sidney Low, Colonel Repington and Dr. Conan Doyle, and anticipating the arrival of Mr. Harold Cox. So we pass, mostly in automobiles that bump tremendously over war roads, a cloud of witnesses each testifying after his manner. Whatever else has happened, we have all been photographed with invincible patience and resolution under the direction of Colonel Barberich in a sunny little court in Udine.

My own manner of testifying must be to tell what I have seen and what I have thought during this extraordinary experience. It has been my natural disposition to see this war as something purposeful and epic, as it is great, as an epoch, as “the War that will end War” – but of that last, more anon. I do not think I am alone in this inclination to a dramatic and logical interpretation. The caricatures in the French shops show civilisation (and particularly Marianne) in conflict with a huge and hugely wicked Hindenburg Ogre. Well, I come back from this tour with something not so simple as that. If I were to be tied down to one word for my impression of this war, I should say that this war is *Queer*. It is not like anything in a really waking world, but like something in a dream. It hasn't exactly that clearness of light against darkness or of good against ill. But it has the quality of wholesome instinct struggling under a nightmare. The world is not really awake. This vague appeal for explanations to all sorts of people, this desire to exhibit the business, to get something in the way of elucidation at present missing, is extraordinarily suggestive of the efforts of the mind to wake up that will sometimes occur at a deep crisis. My memory of this tour I have just made is full of puzzled-looking men. I have seen thousands of *poilus* sitting about in cafes, by the roadside, in tents, in trenches, thoughtful. I have seen Alpini sitting restfully and staring with speculative eyes across the mountain gulfs towards unseen and unaccountable enemies. I have seen trainloads of wounded staring out of the ambulance train windows as we passed. I have seen these dim intimations of questioning reflection in the strangest juxtapositions; in Malagasy soldiers resting for a spell among the big shells they were hoisting into trucks for the front, in a couple of khaki-clad Maoris sitting upon the step of a horse-van in Amiens station. It is always the same expression one catches, rather weary, rather sullen, intuned. The shoulders droop. The very outline is a note of interrogation. They look up as the privileged tourist of the front, in the big automobile or the reserved compartment, with his officer or so in charge, passes – importantly. One meets a pair of eyes that seems to say: “Perhaps *you* understand...”

“In which case – ...?”

It is a part, I think, of this disposition to investigate what makes everyone collect “specimens” of the war. Everywhere the souvenir forces itself upon the attention. The homecoming permissionaire brings with him invariably a considerable weight of broken objects, bits of shell, cartridge clips, helmets; it is a peripatetic museum. It is as if he hoped for a clue. It is almost impossible, I have found, to escape these pieces in evidence. I am the least collecting of men, but I have brought home Italian cartridges, Austrian cartridges, the fuse of an Austrian shell, a broken Italian bayonet, and a note that is worth half a franc within the confines of Amiens. But a large heavy piece of exploded shell that had been thrust very urgently upon my attention upon the Carso I contrived to lose during the temporary confusion of our party by the arrival and explosion of another prospective souvenir in our close proximity. And two really very large and almost complete specimens of some species of *Ammonites* unknown to me, from the hills to the east of the Adige, partially wrapped in a back number of the *Corriere della Sera*, that were pressed upon me by a friendly officer, were unfortunately lost on the line between Verona and Milan through the gross negligence of a railway porter. But I doubt if they would have thrown any very conclusive light upon the war.

## 2

I avow myself an extreme Pacifist. I am against the man who first takes up the weapon. I carry my pacifism far beyond the ambiguous little group of British and foreign sentimentalists who pretend so amusingly to be socialists in the *Labour Leader*, whose conception of foreign policy is to give Germany now a peace that would be no more than a breathing time for a fresh outrage upon civilisation, and who would even make heroes of the crazy young assassins of the Dublin crime. I do not understand those people. I do not merely want to stop this war. I want to nail down war in its coffin. Modern war is an intolerable thing. It is not a thing to trifle with in this Urban District Council way, it is a thing to end forever. I have always hated it, so far that is as my imagination enabled me to realise it; and now that I have been seeing it, sometimes quite closely for a full month, I hate it more than ever. I never imagined a quarter of its waste, its boredom, its futility, its desolation. It is merely a destructive and dispersive instead of a constructive and accumulative industrialism. It is a gigantic, dusty, muddy, weedy, bloodstained silliness. It is the plain duty of every man to give his life and all that he has if by so doing he may help to end it. I hate Germany, which has thrust this experience upon mankind, as I hate some horrible infectious disease. The new war, the war on the modern level, is her invention and her crime. I perceive that on our side and in its broad outlines, this war is nothing more than a gigantic and heroic effort in sanitary engineering; an effort to remove German militarism from the life and regions it has invaded, and to bank it in and discredit and enfeeble it so that never more will it repeat its present preposterous and horrible efforts. All human affairs and all great affairs have their reservations and their complications, but that is the broad outline of the business as it has impressed itself on my mind and as I find it conceived in the mind of the average man of the reading class among the allied peoples, and as I find it understood in the judgement of honest and intelligent neutral observers.

It is my unshakeable belief that essentially the Allies fight for a permanent world peace, that primarily they do not make war but resist war, that has reconciled me to this not very congenial experience of touring as a spectator all agog to see, through the war zones. At any rate there was never any risk of my playing Balaam and blessing the enemy. This war is tragedy and sacrifice for most of the world, for the Germans it is simply the catastrophic outcome of fifty years of elaborate intellectual foolery. Militarism, Welt Politik, and here we are! What else *could* have happened, with Michael and his infernal War Machine in the very centre of Europe, but this tremendous disaster?

It is a disaster. It may be a necessary disaster; it may teach a lesson that could be learnt in no other way; but for all that, I insist, it remains waste, disorder, disaster.

There is a disposition, I know, in myself as well as in others, to wriggle away from this verity, to find so much good in the collapse that has come to the mad direction of Europe for the past half-century as to make it on the whole almost a beneficial thing. But at most I can find it in no greater

good than the good of a nightmare that awakens the sleeper in a dangerous place to a realisation of the extreme danger of his sleep. Better had he been awake – or never there. In Venetia Captain Pirelli, whose task it was to keep me out of mischief in the war zone, was insistent upon the way in which all Venetia was being opened up by the new military roads; there has been scarcely a new road made in Venetia since Napoleon drove his straight, poplar-bordered highways through the land. M. Joseph Reinach, who was my companion upon the French front, was equally impressed by the stirring up and exchange of ideas in the villages due to the movement of the war. Charles Lamb's story of the discovery of roast pork comes into one's head with an effect of repartee. More than ideas are exchanged in the war zone, and it is doubtful how far the sanitary precautions of the military authorities avails against a considerable propaganda of disease. A more serious argument for the good of war is that it evokes heroic qualities that it has brought out almost incredible quantities of courage, devotion, and individual romance that did not show in the suffocating peace time that preceded the war. The reckless and beautiful zeal of the women in the British and French munition factories, for example, the gaiety and fearlessness of the common soldiers everywhere; these things have always been there – like champagne sleeping in bottles in a cellar. But was there any need to throw a bomb into the cellar?

I am reminded of a story, or rather of the idea for a story that I think I must have read in that curious collection of fantasies and observations, Hawthorne's *Note Book*. It was to be the story of a man who found life dull and his circumstances altogether mediocre. He had loved his wife, but now after all she seemed to be a very ordinary human being. He had begun life with high hopes – and life was commonplace. He was to grow fretful and restless. His discontent was to lead to some action, some irrevocable action; but upon the nature of that action I do not think the *Note Book* was very clear. It was to carry him in such a manner that he was to forget his wife. Then, when it was too late, he was to see her at an upper window, stripped and firelit, a glorious thing of light and loveliness and tragic intensity...

The elementary tales of the world are very few, and Hawthorne's story and Lamb's story are, after all, only variations upon the same theme. But can we poor human beings never realise our quality without destruction?

### 3

One of the larger singularities of the great war is its failure to produce great and imposing personalities, mighty leaders, Napoleons, Caesars. I would indeed make that the essential thing in my reckoning of the war. It is a drama without a hero; without countless incidental heroes no doubt, but no star part. Even the Germans, with a national predisposition for hero-cults and living still in an atmosphere of Victorian humbug, can produce nothing better than that timber image, Hindenburg.

It is not that the war has failed to produce heroes so much as that it has produced heroism in a torrent. The great man of this war is the common man. It becomes ridiculous to pick out particular names. There are too many true stories of splendid acts in the past two years ever to be properly set down. The V.C.'s and the palms do but indicate samples. One would need an encyclopaedia, a row of volumes, of the gloriousness of human impulses. The acts of the small men in this war dwarf all the pretensions of the Great Man. Imperatively these multitudinous heroes forbid the setting up of effigies. When I was a young man I imitated Swift and posed for cynicism; I will confess that now at fifty and greatly helped by this war, I have fallen in love with mankind.

But if I had to pick out a single figure to stand for the finest quality of the Allies' war, I should I think choose the figure of General Joffre. He is something new in history. He is leadership without vulgar ambition. He is the extreme antithesis to the Imperial boomster of Berlin. He is as it were the ordinary common sense of men, incarnate. He is the antithesis of the effigy.

By great good luck I was able to see him. I was delayed in Paris on my way to Italy, and my friend Captain Millet arranged for a visit to the French front at Soissons and put me in charge of Lieutenant de Tessin, whom I had met in England studying British social questions long before this

war. Afterwards Lieutenant de Tessin took me to the great hotel – it still proclaims “*Restaurant*” in big black letters on the garden wall – which shelters the General Headquarters of France, and here I was able to see and talk to Generals Pelle and Castelnau as well as to General Joffre. They are three very remarkable and very different men. They have at least one thing in common; it is clear that not one of them has spent ten minutes in all his life in thinking of himself as a Personage or Great Man. They all have the effect of being active and able men doing an extremely complicated and difficult but extremely interesting job to the very best of their ability. With me they had all one quality in common. They thought I was interested in what they were doing, and they were quite prepared to treat me as an intelligent man of a different sort, and to show me as much as I could understand...

Let me confess that de Tessin had had to persuade me to go to Headquarters. Partly that was because I didn't want to use up even ten minutes of the time of the French commanders, but much more was it because I have a dread of Personages.

There is something about these encounters with personages – as if one was dealing with an effigy, with something tremendous put up to be seen. As one approaches they become remoter; great unsuspected crevasses are discovered. Across these gulfs one makes ineffective gestures. They do not meet you, they pose at you enormously. Sometimes there is something more terrible than dignity; there is condescension. They are affable. I had but recently had an encounter with an imported Colonial statesman, who was being advertised like a soap as the coming saviour of England. I was curious to meet him. I wanted to talk to him about all sorts of things that would have been profoundly interesting, as for example his impressions of the Anglican bishops. But I met a hoarding. I met a thing like a mask, something surrounded by touts, that was dully trying – as we say in London – to “come it” over me. He said he had heard of me. He had read *Kipps*. I intimated that though I had written *Kipps* I had continued to exist – but he did not see the point of that. I said certain things to him about the difference in complexity between political life in Great Britain and the colonies, that he was manifestly totally capable of understanding. But one could as soon have talked with one of the statesmen at Madame Tussaud's. An antiquated figure.

The effect of these French commanders upon me was quite different from my encounter with that last belated adventurer in the effigy line. I felt indeed that I was a rather idle and flimsy person coming into the presence of a tremendously compact and busy person, but I had none of that unpleasant sensation of a conventional role, of being expected to play the minute worshipper in the presence of the Great Image. I was so moved by the common humanity of them all that in each case I broke away from the discreet interpretations of de Tessin and talked to them directly in the strange dialect which I have inadvertently made for myself out of French, a disemvowelled speech of epicene substantives and verbs of incalculable moods and temperaments, “*Entente Cordiale*.” They talked back as if we had met in a club. General Pelle pulled my leg very gaily with some quotations from an article I had written upon the conclusion of the war. I think he found my accent and my idioms very refreshing. I had committed myself to a statement that Bloch has been justified in his theory that under modern conditions the defensive wins. There were excellent reasons, and General Pelle pointed them out, for doubting the applicability of this to the present war.

Both he and General Castelnau were anxious that I should see a French offensive sector as well as Soissons. Then I should understand. And since then I have returned from Italy and I have seen and I do understand. The Allied offensive was winning; that is to say, it was inflicting far greater losses than it experienced; it was steadily beating the spirit out of the German army and shoving it back towards Germany. Only peace can, I believe, prevent the western war ending in Germany. And it is the Frenchmen mainly who have worked out how to do it.

But of that I will write later. My present concern is with General Joffre as the antithesis of the Effigy. The effigy, as Mr. Sylvester Viereck called him, prances on a great horse, wears a Wagnerian cloak, sits on thrones and talks of shining armour and “*unser Gott*.” All Germany gloats over his Jovian domesticities; when I was last in Berlin the postcard shops were full of photographs of a

sort of procession of himself and his sons, all with long straight noses and sidelong eyes. It is all dreadfully old-fashioned. General Joffre sits in a pleasant little sitting-room in a very ordinary little villa conveniently close to Headquarters. He sits among furniture that has no quality of pose at all, that is neither magnificent nor ostentatiously simple and hardy. He has dark, rather sleepy eyes under light eyelashes, eyes that glance shyly and a little askance at his interlocutor and then, as he talks, away – as if he did not want to be preoccupied by your attention. He has a broad, rather broadly modelled face, a soft voice, the sort of persuasive reasoning voice that many Scotchmen have. I had a feeling that if he were to talk English he would do so with a Scotch accent. Perhaps somewhere I have met a Scotchman of his type. He sat sideways to his table as a man might sit for a gossip in a cafe.

“Thou Prince of Peace,  
Thou God of War,”

He is physically a big man, and in my memory he grows bigger and bigger. He sits now in my memory in a room like the rooms that any decent people might occupy, like that vague room that is the background of so many good portraits, a great blue-coated figure with a soft voice and rather tired eyes, explaining very simply and clearly the difficulties that this vulgar imperialism of Germany, seizing upon modern science and modern appliances, has created for France and the spirit of mankind.

He talked chiefly of the strangeness of this confounded war. It was exactly like a sanitary engineer speaking of the unexpected difficulties of some particularly nasty inundation. He made little stiff horizontal gestures with his hands. First one had to build a dam and stop the rush of it, so; then one had to organise the push that would send it back. He explained the organisation of the push. They had got an organisation now that was working out most satisfactorily. Had I seen a sector? I had seen the sector of Soissons. Yes, but that was not now an offensive sector. I must see an offensive sector; see the whole method. Lieutenant de Tessin must see that that was arranged...

Neither he nor his two colleagues spoke of the Germans with either hostility or humanity. Germany for them is manifestly merely an objectionable Thing. It is not a nation, not a people, but a nuisance. One has to build up this great counter-thrust bigger and stronger until they go back. The war must end in Germany. The French generals have no such delusions about German science or foresight or capacity as dominates the smart dinner chatter of England. One knows so well that detestable type of English folly, and its voice of despair: “They *plan* everything. They foresee everything.” This paralysing Germanophobia is not common among the French. The war, the French generals said, might take – well, it certainly looked like taking longer than the winter. Next summer perhaps. Probably, if nothing unforeseen occurred, before a full year has passed the job might be done. Were any surprises in store? They didn’t seem to think it was probable that the Germans had any surprises in store... The Germans are not an inventive people; they are merely a thorough people. One never knew for certain.

Is any greater contrast possible than between so implacable, patient, reasonable – and above all things *capable* – a being as General Joffre and the rhetorician of Potsdam, with his talk of German Might, of Hammer Blows and Hacking Through? Can there be any doubt of the ultimate issue between them?

There are stories that sound pleasantly true to me about General Joffre’s ambitions after the war. He is tired; then he will be very tired. He will, he declares, spend his first free summer in making a tour of the waterways of France in a barge. So I hope it may be. One imagines him as sitting quietly on the crumpled remains of the last and tawdriest of Imperial traditions, with a fishing line in the placid water and a large buff umbrella overhead, the good ordinary man who does whatever is given to him to do – as well as he can. The power that has taken the great effigy of German imperialism

by the throat is something very composite and complex, but if we personify it at all it is something more like General Joffre than any other single human figure I can think of or imagine.

If I were to set a frontispiece to a book about this War I would make General Joffre the frontispiece.

4

As we swung back along the dusty road to Paris at a pace of fifty miles an hour and upwards, driven by a helmeted driver with an aquiline profile fit to go upon a coin, whose merits were a little flawed by a childish and dangerous ambition to run over every cat he saw upon the road, I talked to de Tessin about this big blue-coated figure of Joffre, which is not so much a figure as a great generalisation of certain hitherto rather obscured French qualities, and of the impression he had made upon me. And from that I went on to talk about the Super Man, for this encounter had suddenly crystallised out a set of realisations that had been for some time latent in my mind.

How much of what follows I said to de Tessin at the time I do not clearly remember, but this is what I had in mind.

The idea of the superman is an idea that has been developed by various people ignorant of biology and unaccustomed to biological ways of thinking. It is an obvious idea that follows in the course of half an hour or so upon one's realisation of the significance of Darwinism. If man has evolved from something different, he must now be evolving onward into something sur-human. The species in the future will be different from the species of the past. So far at least our Nietzsches and Shaws and so on went right.

But being ignorant of the elementary biological proposition that modification of a species means really a secular change in its average, they jumped to a conclusion – to which the late Lord Salisbury also jumped years ago at a very memorable British Association meeting – that a species is modified by the sudden appearance of eccentric individuals here and there in the general mass who interbreed – preferentially. Helped by a streak of antic egotism in themselves, they conceived of the superman as a posturing personage, misunderstood by the vulgar, fantastic, wonderful. But the antic Personage, the thing I have called the Effigy, is not new but old, the oldest thing in history, the departing thing. It depends not upon the advance of the species but upon the uncritical hero-worship of the crowd. You may see the monster drawn twenty times the size of common men upon the oldest monuments of Egypt and Assyria. The true superman comes not as the tremendous personal entry of a star, but in the less dramatic form of a general increase of goodwill and skill and common sense. A species rises not by thrusting up peaks but by the brimming up as a flood does. The coming of the superman means not an epidemic of personages but the disappearance of the Personage in the universal ascent. That is the point overlooked by the megalomaniac school of Nietzsche and Shaw.

And it is the peculiarity of this war, it is the most reassuring evidence that a great increase in general ability and critical ability has been going on throughout the last century, that no isolated great personages have emerged. Never has there been so much ability, invention, inspiration, leadership; but the very abundance of good qualities has prevented our focusing upon those of any one individual. We all play our part in the realisation of God's sanity in the world, but, as the strange, dramatic end of Lord Kitchener has served to remind us, there is no single individual of all the allied nations whose death can materially affect the great destinies of this war.

In the last few years I have developed a religious belief that has become now to me as real as any commonplace fact. I think that mankind is still as it were collectively dreaming and hardly more awakened to reality than a very young child. It has these dreams that we express by the flags of nationalities and by strange loyalties and by irrational creeds and ceremonies, and its dreams at times become such nightmares as this war. But the time draws near when mankind will awake and the dreams will fade away, and then there will be no nationality in all the world but humanity, and no kind, no emperor, nor leader but the one God of mankind. This is my faith. I am as certain of this as I was in 1900 that men would presently fly. To me it is as if it must be so.

So that to me this extraordinary refusal of the allied nations under conditions that have always hitherto produced a Great Man to produce anything of the sort, anything that can be used as an effigy and carried about for the crowd to follow, is a fact of extreme significance and encouragement. It seems to me that the twilight of the half gods must have come, that we have reached the end of the age when men needed a Personal Figure about which they could rally. The Kaiser is perhaps the last of that long series of crowned and cloaked and semi-divine personages which has included Caesar and Alexander and Napoleon the First – and Third. In the light of the new time we see the emperor-god for the guy he is. In the August of 1914 he set himself up to be the paramount Lord of the World, and it will seem to the historian to come, who will know our dates so well and our feelings, our fatigues and efforts so little, it will seem a short period from that day to this, when the great figure already sways and staggers towards the bonfire.

5

I had the experience of meeting a contemporary king upon this journey. He was the first king I had ever met. The Potsdam figure – with perhaps some local exceptions behind the Gold Coast – is, with its collection of uniforms and its pomps and splendours, the purest survival of the old tradition of divine monarchy now that the Emperor at Peking has followed the Shogun into the shadows. The modern type of king shows a disposition to intimate at the outset that he cannot help it, and to justify or at any rate utilise his exceptional position by sound hard work. It is an age of working kings, with the manners of private gentlemen. The King of Italy for example is far more accessible than was the late Pierpont Morgan or the late Cecil Rhodes, and he seems to keep a smaller court.

I went to see him from Udine. He occupied a moderate-sized country villa about half an hour by automobile from headquarters. I went over with General Radcliffe; we drove through the gates of the villa past a single sentinel in an ordinary infantry uniform, up to the door of the house, and the number of guards, servants, attendants, officials, secretaries, ministers and the like that I saw in that house were – I counted very carefully – four. Downstairs were three people, a tall soldier of the bodyguard in grey; an A.D.C., Captain Moreno, and Col. Matteoli, the minister of the household. I went upstairs to a drawing-room of much the same easy and generalised character as the one in which I had met General Joffre a few days before. I gave my hat to a second bodyguard, and as I did so a pleasantly smiling man appeared at the door of the study whom I thought at first must be some minister in attendance. I did not recognise him instantly because on the stamps and coins he is always in profile. He began to talk in excellent English about my journey, and I replied, and so talking we went into the study from which he had emerged. Then I realised I was talking to the king.

Addicted as I am to the cinematograph, in which the standard of study furniture is particularly rich and high, I found something very cooling and simple and refreshing in the sight of the king's study furniture. He sat down with me at a little useful writing table, and after asking me what I had seen in Italy and hearing what I had seen and what I was to see, he went on talking, very good talk indeed.

I suppose I did a little exceed the established tradition of courts by asking several questions and trying to get him to talk upon certain points as to which I was curious, but I perceived that he had had to carry on at least so much of the regal tradition as to control the conversation. He was, however, entirely un-posed. His talk reminded me somehow of Maurice Baring's books; it had just the same quick, positive understanding. And he had just the same detachment from the war as the French generals. He spoke of it – as one might speak of an inundation. And of its difficulties and perplexities.

Here on the Adriatic side there were political entanglements that by comparison made our western after-the-war problems plain sailing. He talked of the game of spellicans among the Balkan nationalities. How was that difficulty to be met? In Macedonia there were Turkish villages that were Christian and Bulgarians that were Moslem. There were families that changed the termination of their names from *ski* to *off* as Serbian or Bulgarian prevailed. I remarked that that showed a certain passion for peace, and that much of the mischief might be due to the propaganda of the great Powers. I have a prejudice against that blessed Whig "principle of nationality," but the King of Italy was not

to be drawn into any statement about that. He left the question with his admission of its extreme complexity.

He went on to talk of the strange contrasts of war, of such things as the indifference of the birds to gunfire and desolation. One day on the Carso he had been near the newly captured Austrian trenches, and suddenly from amidst a scattered mass of Austrian bodies a quail had risen that had struck him as odd, and so too had the sight of a pack of cards and a wine flask on some newly-made graves. The ordinary life was a very *obstinate* thing...

He talked of the courage of modern men. He was astonished at the quickness with which they came to disregard shrapnel. And they were so quietly enduring when they were wounded. He had seen a lot of the wounded, and he had expected much groaning and crying out. But unless a man is hit in the head and goes mad he does not groan or scream! They are just brave. If you ask them how they feel it is always one of two things: either they say quietly that they are very bad or else they say there is nothing the matter...

He spoke as if these were mere chance observations, but everyone tells me that nearly every day the king is at the front and often under fire. He has taken more risks in a week than the Potsdam War Lord has taken since the war began. He keeps himself acutely informed upon every aspect of the war. He was a little inclined to fatalism, he confessed. There were two stories current of two families of four sons, in each three had been killed and in each there was an attempt to put the fourth in a place of comparative safety. In one case a general took the fourth son in as an attendant and embarked upon a ship that was immediately torpedoed; in the other the fourth son was killed by accident while he was helping to carry dinner in a rest camp. From those stories we came to the question whether the uneducated Italians were more superstitious than the uneducated English; the king thought they were much less so. That struck me as a novel idea. But then he thought that English rural people believe in witches and fairies.

I have given enough of this talk to show the quality of this king of the new dispensation. It was, you see, the sort of easy talk one might hear from fine-minded people anywhere. When we had done talking he came to the door of the study with me and shook hands and went back to his desk – with that gesture of return to work which is very familiar and sympathetic to a writer, and with no gesture of regality at all.

Just to complete this impression let me repeat a pleasant story about this king and our Prince of Wales, who recently visited the Italian front. The Prince is a source of anxiety on these visits; he has a very strong and very creditable desire to share the ordinary risks of war. He is keenly interested, and unobtrusively bent upon getting as near the fighting as line as possible. But the King of Italy was firm upon keeping him out of anything more than the most incidental danger. "We don't want any historical incidents here," he said. I think that might well become an historical phrase. For the life of the Effigy is a series of historical incidents.

6

Manifestly one might continue to multiply portraits of fine people working upon this great task of breaking and ending the German aggression, the German legend, the German effigy, and the effigy business generally; the thesis being that the Allies have no effigy. One might fill a thick volume with pictures of men up the scale and down working loyally and devotedly upon the war, to make this point clear that the essential king and the essential loyalty of our side is the commonsense of mankind.

There comes into my head as a picture at the other extreme of this series, a memory of certain trenches I visited on my last day in France. They were trenches on an offensive front; they were not those architectural triumphs, those homes from home, that grow to perfection upon the less active sections of the great line. They had been first made by men who had run rapidly forward with spade and rifle, stooping as they ran, who had dropped into the craters of big shells, who had organised these chiefly at night and dug the steep ditches sideways to join up into continuous trenches. Now they were pushing forward saps into No Man's Land, linking them across, and so continually creeping

nearer to the enemy and a practicable jumping-off place for an attack. (It has been made since; the village at which I peeped was in our hands a week later.) These trenches were dug into a sort of yellowish sandy clay; the dug-outs were mere holes in the earth that fell in upon the clumsy; hardly any timber had been got up the line; a storm might flood them at any time a couple of feet deep and begin to wash the sides. Overnight they had been “strafed” and there had been a number of casualties; there were smashed rifles about and a smashed-up machine gun emplacement, and the men were dog-tired and many of them sleeping like logs, half buried in clay. Some slept on the firing steps. As one went along one became aware ever and again of two or three pairs of clay-yellow feet sticking out of a clay hole, and peering down one saw the shapes of men like rudely modelled earthen images of soldiers, motionless in the cave.

I came round the corner upon a youngster with an intelligent face and steady eyes sitting up on the firing step, awake and thinking. We looked at one another. There are moments when mind leaps to mind. It is natural for the man in the trenches suddenly confronted by so rare a beast as a middle-aged civilian with an enquiring expression, to feel oneself something of a spectacle and something generalised. It is natural for the civilian to look rather in the vein of saying, “Well, how do you take it?” As I pushed past him we nodded slightly with an effect of mutual understanding. And we said with our nods just exactly what General Joffre had said with his horizontal gestures of the hand and what the King of Italy conveyed by his friendly manner; we said to each other that here was the trouble those Germans had brought upon us and here was the task that had to be done.

Our guide to these trenches was a short, stocky young man, a cob; with a rifle and a tight belt and projecting skirts and a helmet, a queer little figure that, had you seen it in a picture a year or so before the war, you would most certainly have pronounced Chinese. He belonged to a Northumbrian battalion; it does not matter exactly which. As we returned from this front line, trudging along the winding path through the barbed wire tangles before the smashed and captured German trench that had been taken a fortnight before, I fell behind my guardian captain and had a brief conversation with this individual. He was a lad in the early twenties, weather-bit and with bloodshot eyes. He was, he told me, a miner. I asked my stock question in such cases, whether he would go back to the old work after the war. He said he would, and then added – with the events of overnight on his mind: “If A’hm looky.”

Followed a little silence. Then I tried my second stock remark for such cases. One does not talk to soldiers at the front in this war of Glory or the “Empire on which the sun never sets” or “the meteor flag of England” or of King and Country or any of those fine old headline things. On the desolate path that winds about amidst the shell craters and the fragments and the red-rusted wire, with the silken shiver of passing shells in the air and the blue of the lower sky continually breaking out into eddying white puffs, it is wonderful how tawdry such panoplies of the effigy appear. We knew that we and our allies are upon a greater, graver, more fundamental business than that sort of thing now. We are very near the waking point.

“Well,” I said, “it’s got to be done.”

“Aye,” he said, easing the strap of his rifle a little; “it’s got to be done.”

## THE WAR IN ITALY (AUGUST, 1916)

### I. THE ISONZO FRONT

1

My first impressions of the Italian war centre upon Udine. So far I had had only a visit to Soissons on an exceptionally quiet day and the sound of a Zeppelin one night in Essex for all my experience of actual warfare. But my bedroom at the British mission in Udine roused perhaps extravagant expectations. There were holes in the plaster ceiling and wall, betraying splintered laths, holes, that had been caused by a bomb that had burst and killed several people in the little square outside. Such excitements seem to be things of the past now in Udine. Udine keeps itself dark nowadays, and the Austrian sea-planes, which come raiding the Italian coast country at night very much in the same aimless, casually malignant way in which the Zeppelins raid England, apparently because there is nothing else for them to do, find it easier to locate Venice.

My earlier rides in Venetia began always with the level roads of the plain, roads frequently edged by watercourses, with plentiful willows beside the road, vines and fields of Indian corn and suchlike lush crops. Always quite soon one came to some old Austrian boundary posts; almost everywhere the Italians are fighting upon what is technically enemy territory, but nowhere does it seem a whit less Italian than the plain of Lombardy. When at last I motored away from Udine to the northern mountain front I passed through Campo-Formio and saw the white-faced inn at which Napoleon dismembered the ancient republic of Venice and bartered away this essential part of Italy into foreign control. It just gravitates back now – as though there had been no Napoleon.

And upon the roads and beside them was the enormous equipment of a modern army advancing. Everywhere I saw new roads being made, railways pushed up, vast store dumps, hospitals; everywhere the villages swarmed with grey soldiers; everywhere our automobile was threading its way and taking astonishing risks among interminable processions of motor lorries, strings of ambulances or of mule carts, waggons with timber, waggons with wire, waggons with men's gear, waggons with casks, waggons discreetly veiled, columns of infantry, cavalry, batteries *en route*. Every waggon that goes up full comes back empty, and many wounded were coming down and prisoners and troops returning to rest. Goritzia had been taken a week or so before my arrival; the Isonzo had been crossed and the Austrians driven back across the Carso for several miles; all the resources of Italy seemed to be crowding up to make good these gains and gather strength for the next thrust. The roads under all this traffic remained wonderful; gangs of men were everywhere repairing the first onset of wear, and Italy is the most fortunate land in the world for road metal; her mountains are solid road metal, and in this Venetian plain you need but to scrape through a yard of soil to find gravel.

One travelled through a choking dust under the blue sky, and above the steady incessant dusty succession of lorry, lorry, lorry, lorry that passed one by, one saw, looking up, the tree tops, house roofs, or the solid Venetian campanile of this or that wayside village. Once as we were coming out of the great grey portals of that beautiful old relic of a former school of fortification, Palmanova, the traffic became suddenly bright yellow, and for a kilometre or so we were passing nothing but Sicilian mule carts loaded with hay. These carts seem as strange among the grey shapes of modern war transport as a Chinese mandarin in painted silk would be. They are the most individual of things, all two-wheeled, all bright yellow and the same size it is true, but upon each there are they gayest of little paintings, such paintings as one sees in England at times upon an ice-cream barrow. Sometimes the picture will present a scriptural subject, sometimes a scene of opera, sometimes a dream landscape or a trophy of fruits or flowers, and the harness – now much out of repair – is studded with brass. Again and again I have passed strings of these gay carts; all Sicily must be swept of them.

Through the dust I came to Aquileia, which is now an old cathedral, built upon the remains of a very early basilica, standing in a space in a scattered village. But across this dusty space there was carried the head of the upstart Maximinus who murdered Alexander Severus, and later Aquileia brought Attila near to despair. Our party alighted; we inspected a very old mosaic floor which has been uncovered since the Austrian retreat. The Austrian priests have gone too, and their Italian successors are already tracing out a score of Roman traces that it was the Austrian custom to minimise. Captain Pirelli refreshed my historical memories; it was rather like leaving a card on Gibbon *en route* for contemporary history.

By devious routes I went on to certain batteries of big guns which had played their part in hammering the Austrian left above Monfalcone across an arm of the Adriatic, and which were now under orders to shift and move up closer. The battery was the most unobtrusive of batteries; its one desire seemed to be to appear a simple piece of woodland in the eye of God and the aeroplane. I went about the network of railways and paths under the trees that a modern battery requires, and came presently upon a great gun that even at the first glance seemed a little less carefully hidden than its fellows. Then I saw that it was a most ingenious dummy made of a tree and logs and so forth. It was in the emplacement of a real gun that had been located; it had its painted sandbags about it just the same, and it felt itself so entirely a part of the battery that whenever its companions fired it burnt a flash and kicked up a dust. It was an excellent example of the great art of camouflage which this war has developed.

I went on through the wood to a shady observation post high in a tree, into which I clambered with my guide. I was able from this position to get a very good idea of the lie of the Italian eastern front. I was in the delta of the Isonzo. Directly in front of me were some marshes and the extreme tip of the Adriatic Sea, at the head of which was Monfalcone, now in Italian hands. Behind Monfalcone ran the red ridge of the Carso, of which the Italians had just captured the eastern half. Behind this again rose the mountains to the east of the Isonzo which the Austrians still held. The Isonzo came towards me from out of the mountains, in a great westward curve. Fifteen or sixteen miles away where it emerged from the mountains lay the pleasant and prosperous town of Goritzia, and at the westward point of the great curve was Sagrado with its broken bridge. The battle of Goritzia was really not fought at Goritzia at all. What happened was the brilliant and bloody storming of Mounts Podgora and Sabotino on the western side of the river above Goritzia, and simultaneously a crossing at Sagrado below Goritzia and a magnificent rush up the plateau and across the plateau of the Carso. Goritzia itself was not organised for defence, and the Austrians were so surprised by the rapid storm of the mountains to the north-west of it and of the Carso to the south-east, that they made no fight in the town itself.

As a consequence when I visited it I found it very little injured – compared, that is, with such other towns as have been fought through. Here and there the front of a house has been knocked in by an Austrian shell, or a lamp-post prostrated. But the road bridge had suffered a good deal; its iron parapet was twisted about by shell bursts and interwoven with young trees and big boughs designed to screen the passer-by from the observation of the Austrian gunners upon Monte Santo. Here and there were huge holes through which one could look down upon the blue trickles of water in the stony river bed far below. The driver of our automobile displayed what seemed to me an extreme confidence in the margins of these gaps, but his confidence was justified. At Sagrado the bridge had been much more completely demolished; no effort had been made to restore the horizontal roadway, but one crossed by a sort of timber switchback that followed the ups and downs of the ruins.

It is not in these places that one must look for the real destruction of modern war. The real fight on the left of Goritzia went through the village of Lucinico up the hill of Podgora. Lucinico is nothing more than a heap of grey stones; except for a bit of the church wall and the gable end of a house one cannot even speak of it as ruins. But in one place among the rubble I saw the splintered top and a leg of a grand piano. Podgora hill, which was no doubt once neatly terraced and cultivated,

is like a scrap of landscape from some airless, treeless planet. Still more desolate was the scene upon the Carso to the right (south) of Goritzia. Both San Martino and Doberdo are destroyed beyond the limits of ruination. The Carso itself is a waterless upland with but a few bushy trees; it must always have been a desolate region, but now it is an indescribable wilderness of shell craters, smashed-up Austrian trenches, splintered timber, old iron, rags, and that rusty thorny vileness of man's invention, worse than all the thorns and thickets of nature, barbed wire. There are no dead visible; the wounded have been cleared away; but about the trenches and particularly near some of the dug-outs there was a faint repulsive smell...

Yet into this wilderness the Italians are now thrusting a sort of order. The German is a wonderful worker, they say on the Anglo-French front that he makes his trenches by way of resting, but I doubt if he can touch the Italian at certain forms of toil. All the way up to San Martino and beyond, swarms of workmen were making one of those carefully graded roads that the Italians make better than any other people. Other swarms were laying water-pipes. For upon the Carso there are neither roads nor water, and before the Italians can thrust farther both must be brought up to the front.

As we approached San Martino an Austrian aeroplane made its presence felt overhead by dropping a bomb among the tents of some workmen, in a little scrubby wood on the hillside near at hand. One heard the report and turned to see the fragments flying and the dust. Probably they got someone. And then, after a little pause, the encampment began to spew out men; here, there and everywhere they appeared among the tents, running like rabbits at evening-time, down the hill. Soon after and probably in connection with this signal, Austrian shells began to come over. They do not use shrapnel because the rocky soil of Italy makes that unnecessary. They fire a sort of shell that goes bang and releases a cloud of smoke overhead, and then drops a parcel of high explosive that bursts on the ground. The ground leaps into red dust and smoke. But these things are now to be seen on the cinema. Forthwith the men working on the road about us begin to down tools and make for the shelter trenches, a long procession going at a steady but resolute walk. Then like a blow in the chest came the bang of a big Italian gun somewhere close at hand...

Along about four thousand miles of the various fronts this sort of thing was going on that morning...

2

This Carso front is the practicable offensive front of Italy. From the left wing on the Isonzo along the Alpine boundary round to the Swiss boundary there is mountain warfare like nothing else in the world; it is warfare that pushes the boundary backward, but it is mountain warfare that will not, for so long a period that the war will be over first, hold out any hopeful prospects of offensive movements on a large scale against Austria or Germany. It is a short distance as the crow flies from Rovereto to Munich, but not as the big gun travels. The Italians, therefore, as their contribution to the common effort, are thrusting rather eastwardly towards the line of the Julian Alps through Carinthia and Carniola. From my observation post in the tree near Monfalcone I saw Trieste away along the coast to my right. It looked scarcely as distant as Folkestone from Dungeness. The Italian advanced line is indeed scarcely ten miles from Trieste. But the Italians are not, I think, going to Trieste just yet. That is not the real game now. They are playing loyally with the Allies for the complete defeat of the Central Powers, and that is to be achieved striking home into Austria. Meanwhile there is no sense in knocking Trieste to pieces, or using Italians instead of Austrian soldiers to garrison it.

## II. THE MOUNTAIN WAR

### 1

The mountain warfare of Italy is extraordinarily unlike that upon any other front. From the Isonzo to the Swiss frontier we are dealing with high mountains, cut by deep valleys between which there is usually no practicable lateral communication. Each advance must have the nature of an unsupported shove along a narrow channel, until the whole mountain system, that is, is won, and the attack can begin to deploy in front of the passes. Geographically Austria has the advantage. She had the gentler slope of the mountain chains while Italy has the steep side, and the foresight of old treaties has given her deep bites into what is naturally Italian territory; she is far nearer the Italian plain than Italy is near any practicable fighting ground for large forces; particularly is this the case in the region of the Adige valley and Lake Garda.

The legitimate war, so to speak, in this region is a mountaineering war. The typical position is roughly as follows. The Austrians occupy valley A which opens northward; the Italians occupy valley B which opens southward. The fight is for the crest between A and B. The side that wins that crest gains the power of looking down into, firing into and outflanking the positions of the enemy valley. In most cases it is the Italians now who are pressing, and if the reader will examine a map of the front and compare it with the official reports he will soon realise that almost everywhere the Italians are up to the head of the southward valleys and working over the crests so as to press down upon the Austrian valleys. But in the Trentino the Austrians are still well over the crest on the southward slopes. When I was in Italy they still held Rovereto.

Now it cannot be said that under modern conditions mountains favour either the offensive or the defensive. But they certainly make operations far more deliberate than upon a level. An engineered road or railway in an Alpine valley is the most vulnerable of things; its curves and viaducts may be practically demolished by shell fire or swept by shrapnel, although you hold the entire valley except for one vantage point. All the mountains round about a valley must be won before that valley is safe for the transport of an advance. But on the other hand a surprise capture of some single mountain crest and the hoisting of one gun into position there may block the retreat of guns and material from a great series of positions. Mountain surfaces are extraordinarily various and subtle. You may understand Picardy on a map, but mountain warfare is three-dimensional. A struggle may go on for weeks or months consisting of apparently separate and incidental skirmishes, and then suddenly a whole valley organisation may crumble away in retreat or disaster. Italy is gnawing into the Trentino day by day, and particularly around by her right wing. At no time I shall be surprised to see a sudden lunge forward on that front, and hear a tale of guns and prisoners. This will not mean that she has made a sudden attack, but that some system of Austrian positions has collapsed under her continual pressure.

Such briefly is the *idea* of mountain struggle. Its realities, I should imagine, are among the strangest and most picturesque in all this tremendous world conflict. I know nothing of the war in the east, of course, but there are things here that must be hard to beat. Happily they will soon get justice done to them by an abler pen than mine. I hear that Kipling is to follow me upon this ground; nothing can be imagined more congenial to his extraordinary power of vivid rendering than this struggle against cliffs, avalanches, frost and the Austrian.

To go the Italian round needs, among other things, a good head. Everywhere it has been necessary to make roads where hitherto there have been only mule tracks or no tracks at all; the roads are often still in the making, and the automobile of the war tourist skirts precipices and takes hairpin bends upon tracks of loose metal not an inch too broad for the operation, or it floats for a moment over the dizzy edge while a train of mule transport blunders by. The unruly imagination of man's heart (which is "only evil continually") speculates upon what would be the consequences of one good bump from the wheel of a mule cart. Down below, the trees that one sees through a wisp of cloud

look far too small and spiky and scattered to hold out much hope for a fallen man of letters. And at the high positions they are too used to the vertical life to understand the secret feelings of the visitor from the horizontal. General Bompiani, whose writings are well known to all English students of military matters, showed me the Gibraltar he is making of a great mountain system east of the Adige.

“Let me show you,” he said, and flung himself on to the edge of the precipice into exactly the position of a lady riding side-saddle. “You will find it more comfortable to sit down.”

But anxious as I am abroad not to discredit my country by unseemly exhibitions I felt unequal to such gymnastics without a proper rehearsal at a lower level. I seated myself carefully at a yard (perhaps it was a couple of yards) from the edge, advanced on my trousers without dignity to the verge, and so with an effort thrust my legs over to dangle in the crystalline air.

“That,” proceeded General Bompiani, pointing with a giddy flourish of his riding whip, “is Monte Tomba.”

I swayed and half-extended my hand towards him. But he was still there – sitting, so to speak, on the half of himself... I was astonished that he did not disappear abruptly during his exposition...

## 2

The fighting man in the Dolomites has been perhaps the most wonderful of all these separate campaigns. I went up by automobile as far as the clambering new road goes up the flanks of Tofana No. 2; thence for a time by mule along the flank of Tofana No. 1, and thence on foot to the vestiges of the famous Castelletto.

The aspect of these mountains is particularly grim and wicked; they are worn old mountains, they tower overhead in enormous vertical cliffs of sallow grey, with the square jointings and occasional clefts and gullies, their summits are toothed and jagged; the path ascends and passes round the side of the mountain upon loose screes, which descend steeply to a lower wall of precipices. In the distance rise other harsh and desolate-looking mountain masses, with shining occasional scars of old snow. Far below is a bleak valley of stunted pine trees through which passes the road of the Dolomites.

As I ascended the upper track two bandages men were coming down on led mules. It was mid-August, and they were suffering from frostbite. Across the great gap between the summits a minute traveller with some provisions was going up by wire to some post upon the crest. For everywhere upon the icy pinnacles are observation posts directing the fire of the big guns on the slopes below, or machine-gun stations, or little garrisons that sit and wait through the bleak days. Often they have no link with the world below but a precipitous climb or a “teleferic” wire. Snow and frost may cut them off absolutely for weeks from the rest of mankind. The sick and wounded must begin their journey down to help and comfort in a giddy basket that swings down to the head of the mule track below.

Originally all these crests were in Austrian hands; they were stormed by the Alpini under almost incredible conditions. For fifteen days, for example, they fought their way up these screes on the flanks of Tofana No. 2 to the ultimate crags, making perhaps a hundred metres of ascent each day, hiding under rocks and in holes in the daylight and receiving fresh provisions and ammunition and advancing by night. They were subjected to rifle fire, machine-gun fire and bombs of a peculiar sort, big iron balls of the size of a football filled with explosive that were just flung down the steep. They dodged flares and star shells. At one place they went up a chimney that would be far beyond the climbing powers of any but a very active man. It must have been like storming the skies. The dead and wounded rolled away often into inaccessible ravines. Stray skeletons, rags of uniform, fragments of weapons, will add to the climbing interest of these gaunt masses for many years to come. In this manner it was that Tofana No. 2 was taken.

Now the Italians are organising this prize, and I saw winding up far above me on the steep grey slope a multitudinous string of little things that looked like black ants, each carrying a small bright yellow egg. They were mules bringing back balks of timber...

But one position held out invincibly; this was the Castelletto, a great natural fortress of rock standing out at an angle of the mountain in such a position that it commanded the

Italian communications (the Dolomite road) in the valley below, and rendered all their positions uncomfortable and insecure. This obnoxious post was practically inaccessible either from above or below, and it barred the Italians even from looking into the Val Travenanzes which it defended. It was, in fact, an impregnable position, and against it was pitted the invincible 5th Group of the Alpini. It was the old problem of the irresistible force in conflict with the immovable object. And the outcome has been the biggest military mine in all history.

The business began in January, 1916, with surveys of the rock in question. The work of surveying for excavations, never a very simple one, becomes much more difficult when the site is occupied by hostile persons with machine guns. In March, as the winter's snows abated, the boring machinery began to arrive, by mule as far as possible and then by hand. Altogether about half a kilometre of gallery had to be made to the mine chamber, and meanwhile the explosive was coming up load by load and resting first here, then there, in discreetly chosen positions. There were at the last thirty-five tons of it in the inner chamber. And while the boring machines bored and the work went on, Lieutenant Malvezzi was carefully working out the problem of "il massimo effetto di rompiimento" and deciding exactly how to pack and explode his little hoard. On the eleventh of July, at 3.30, as he rejoices to state in his official report, "the mine responded perfectly both in respect of the calculations made and of the practical effects," that is to say, the Austrians were largely missing and the Italians were in possession of the crater of the Castelletto and looking down the Val Travenanzes from which they had been barred for so long. Within a month things had been so tidied up, and secured by further excavations and sandbags against hostile fire, that even a middle-aged English writer, extremely fagged and hot and breathless, could enjoy the same privilege. All this, you must understand, had gone on at a level to which the ordinary tourist rarely climbs, in a rarefied, chest-tightening atmosphere, with wisps of clouds floating in the clear air below and club-huts close at hand...

Among these mountains avalanches are frequent; and they come down regardless of human strategy. In many cases the trenches cross avalanche tracks; they and the men in them are periodically swept away and periodically replaced. They are positions that must be held; if the Italians will not face such sacrifices, the Austrians will. Avalanches and frostbite have slain and disabled their thousands; they have accounted perhaps for as many Italians in this austere and giddy campaign as the Austrians...

### 3

It seems to be part of the stern resolve of Fate that this, the greatest of wars, shall be the least glorious; it is manifestly being decided not by victories but by blunders. It is indeed a history of colossal stupidities. Among the most decisive of these blunders, second only perhaps of the blunder of the Verdun attack and far outshining the wild raid of the British towards Bagdad, was the blunder of the Trentino offensive. It does not need the equipment of a military expert, it demands only quite ordinary knowledge and average intelligence, to realise the folly of that Austrian adventure. There is some justification for a claim that the decisive battle of the war was fought upon the soil of Italy. There is still more justification for saying that it might have been.

There was only one good point about the Austrian thrust. No one could have foretold it. And it did so completely surprise the Italians as to catch them without any prepared line of positions in the rear. On the very eve of the big Russian offensive, the Austrians thrust eighteen divisions hard at the Trentino frontier. The Italian posts were then in Austrian territory; they held on the left wing and the right, but they were driven by the sheer weight of men and guns in the centre; they lost guns and prisoners because of the difficulty of mountain retreats to which I have alluded, and the Austrians pouring through reached not indeed the plain of Venetia, but to the upland valleys immediately above it, to Asiago and Arsiero. They probably saw the Venetian plain through gaps in the hills, but they were still separated from it even at Arsiero by what are mountains to an English eye, mountains as high as Snowdon. But the Italians of such beautiful old places and Vicenza, Marostica, and Bassano

could watch the Austrian shells bursting on the last line of hills above the plain, and I have no doubt they felt extremely uneasy.

As one motors through these ripe and beautiful towns and through the rich valleys that link them – it is a smiling land abounding in old castles and villas, Vicenza is a rich museum of Palladio's architecture and Bassano is full of irreplaceable painted buildings – one feels that the things was a narrow escape, but from the military point of view it was merely an insane escapade. The Austrians had behind them – and some way behind them – one little strangulated railway and no good pass road; their right was held at Pasubio, their left was similarly bent back. In front of them was between twice and three times their number of first class troops, with an unlimited equipment. If they had surmounted that last mountain crest they would have come down to almost certain destruction in the plain. They could never have got back. For a time it was said that General Cadorna considered that possibility. From the point of view of purely military considerations, the Trentino offensive should perhaps have ended in the capitulation of Vicenza.

I will confess I am glad it did not do so. This tour of the fronts has made me very sad and weary with a succession of ruins. I can bear no more ruins unless they are the ruins of Dusseldorf, Cologne, Berlin, or suchlike modern German city. Anxious as I am to be a systematic Philistine, to express my preference for Marinetti over the Florentine British and generally to antagonise aesthetic prigs, I rejoiced over that sunlit land as one might rejoice over a child saved from beasts.

On the hills beyond Schio I walked out through the embrasure of a big gun in a rock gallery, and saw the highest points upon the hillside to which the Austrian infantry clambered in their futile last attacks. Below me were the ruins of Arsiero and Velo d'Astico recovered, and across the broad valley rose Monte Cimone with the Italian trenches upon its crest and the Austrians a little below to the north. A very considerable bombardment was going on and it reverberated finely. (It is only among mountains that one hears anything that one can call the thunder of guns. The heaviest bombardments I heard in France sounded merely like Brock's benefit on a much large scale, and disappointed me extremely.) As I sat and listened to the uproar and watched the shells burst on Cimone and far away up the valley over Castelletto above Pedescala, Captain Pirelli pointed out the position of the Austrian frontier. I doubt if the English people realise that the utmost depth to which this great Trentino offensive, which exhausted Austria, wasted the flower of the Hungarian army and led directly to the Galician disasters and the intervention of Rumania, penetrated into Italian territory was about six miles.

### III. BEHIND THE FRONT

1

I have a peculiar affection for Verona and certain things in Verona. Italians must forgive us English this little streak of impertinent proprietorship in the beautiful things of their abundant land. It is quite open to them to revenge themselves by professing a tenderness for Liverpool or Leeds. It was, for instance, with a peculiar and personal indignation that I saw where an Austrian air bomb had killed five-and-thirty people in the Piazza Erbe. Somehow in that jolly old place, a place that have very much of the quality of a very pretty and cheerful old woman, it seemed exceptionally an outrage. And I made a special pilgrimage to see how it was with that monument of Can Grande, the equestrian Scaliger with the sidelong grin, for whom I confess a ridiculous admiration. Can Grande, I rejoice to say, has retired into a case of brickwork, surmounted by a steep roof of thick iron plates; no aeroplane exists to carry bombs enough to smash that covering; there he will smile securely in the darkness until peace comes again.

All over Venetia the Austrian seaplanes are making the same sort of idiot raid on lighted places that the Zeppelins have been making over England. These raids do no effective military work. What conceivable military advantage can there be in dropping bombs into a marketing crowd? It is a sort of anti-Teutonic propaganda by the Central Powers to which they seem to have been incited by their own evil genius. It is as if they could convince us that there is an essential malignity in Germans, that until the German powers are stamped down into the mud they will continue to do evil things. All of the Allies have borne the thrusting and boasting of Germany with exemplary patience for half a century; England gave her Heligoland and stood out of the way of her colonial expansion, Italy was a happy hunting ground for her business enterprise, France had come near resignation on the score of Alsace-Lorraine. And then over and above the great outrage of the war come these incessant mean-spirited atrocities. A great and simple wickedness it is possible to forgive; the war itself, had it been fought greatly by Austria and Germany, would have made no such deep and enduring breach as these silly, futile assassinations have down between the Austro-Germans and the rest of the civilised world. One great misdeed is a thing understandable and forgivable; what grows upon the consciousness of the world is the persuasion that here we fight not a national sin but a national insanity; that we dare not leave the German the power to attack other nations any more for ever...

Venice has suffered particularly from this ape-like impulse to hurt and terrorise enemy non-combatants. Venice has indeed suffered from this war far more than any other town in Italy. Her trade has largely ceased; she has no visitors. I woke up on my way to Udine and found my train at Venice with an hour to spare; after much examining and stamping of my passport I was allowed outside the station wicket to get coffee in the refreshment room and a glimpse of a very sad and silent Grand Canal. There was nothing doing; a black despondent remnant of the old crowd of gondolas browsed dreamily among against the quay to stare at me the better. The empty palaces seemed to be sleeping in the morning sunshine because it was not worth while to wake up...

2

Except in the case of Venice, the war does not seem as yet to have made nearly such a mark upon life in Italy as it has in England or provincial France. People speak of Italy as a poor country, but that is from a banker's point of view. In some respects she is the richest country on earth, and in the matter of staying power I should think she is better off than any other belligerent. She produces food in abundance everywhere; her women are agricultural workers, so that the interruption of food production by the war has been less serious in Italy than in any other part of Europe. In peace time, she has constantly exported labour; the Italian worker has been a seasonal emigrant to America, north and south, to Switzerland, Germany and the south of France. The cessation of this emigration has given her great reserves of man power, so that she has carried on her admirable campaign with less

interference with her normal economic life than any other power. The first person I spoke to upon the platform at Modane was a British officer engaged in forwarding Italian potatoes to the British front in France. Afterwards, on my return, when a little passport irregularity kept me for half a day in Modane, I went for a walk with him along the winding pass road that goes down into France. "You see hundreds and hundreds of new Fiat cars," he remarked, "along here – going up to the French front."

But there is a return trade. Near Paris I saw scores of thousands of shells piled high to go to Italy...

I doubt if English people fully realise either the economic sturdiness or the political courage of their Italian ally. Italy is not merely fighting a first-class war in first-class fashion but she is doing a big, dangerous, generous and far-sighted thing in fighting at all. France and England were obliged to fight; the necessity was as plain as daylight. The participation of Italy demanded a remoter wisdom. In the long run she would have been swallowed up economically and politically by Germany if she had not fought; but that was not a thing staring her plainly in the face as the danger, insult and challenge stared France and England in the face. What did stare her in the face was not merely a considerable military and political risk, but the rupture of very close financial and commercial ties. I found thoughtful men talking everywhere I have been in Italy of two things, of the Jugo-Slav riddle and of the question of post war finance. So far as the former matter goes, I think the Italians are set upon the righteous solution of all such riddles, they are possessed by an intelligent generosity. They are clearly set upon deserving Jugo-Slav friendship; they understand the plain necessity of open and friendly routes towards Roumania. It was an Italian who set out to explain to me that Fiume must be at least a free port; it would be wrong and foolish to cut the trade of Hungary off from the Mediterranean. But the banking puzzle is a more intricate and puzzling matter altogether than the possibility of trouble between Italian and Jugo-Slav.

I write of these things with the simplicity of an angel, but without an angelic detachment. Here are questions into which one does not so much rush as get reluctantly pushed. Currency and banking are dry distasteful questions, but it is clear that they are too much in the hands of mystery-mongers; it is as much the duty of anyone who talks and writes of affairs, it is as much the duty of every sane adult, to bring his possibly poor and unsuitable wits to bear upon these things, as it is for him to vote or enlist or pay his taxes. Behind the simple ostensible spectacle of Italy recovering the unredeemed Italy of the Trentino and East Venetia, goes on another drama. Has Italy been sinking into something rather hard to define called "economic slavery"? Is she or is she not escaping from that magical servitude? Before this question has been under discussion for a minute comes a name – for a time I was really quite unable to decide whether it is the name of the villain in the piece or of the maligned heroine, or a secret society or a gold mine, or a pestilence or a delusion – the name of the *Banca Commerciale Italiana*.

Banking in a country undergoing so rapid and vigorous an economic development as Italy is very different from the banking we simple English know of at home. Banking in England, like land-owning, has hitherto been a sort of hold up. There were always borrowers, there were always tenants, and all that had to be done was to refuse, obstruct, delay and worry the helpless borrower or would-be tenant until the maximum of security and profit was obtained. I have never borrowed but I have built, and I know something of the extreme hauteur of property of England towards a man who wants to do anything with land, and with money I gather the case is just the same. But in Italy, which already possessed a sunny prosperity of its own upon mediaeval lines, the banker has had to be suggestive and persuasive, sympathetic and helpful. These are unaccustomed attitudes for British capital. The field has been far more attractive to the German banker, who is less of a proudly impassive usurer and more of a partner, who demands less than absolute security because he investigates more industriously and intelligently. This great bank, the Banca Commerciale Italiana, is a bank of the German type: to begin with, it was certainly dominated by German directors; it was a bank of stimulation, and its activities interweave now into the whole fabric of Italian commercial life. But it has already liberated

itself from German influence, and the bulk of its capital is Italian. Nevertheless I found discussion ranging about firstly what the Banca Commerciale essentially *was*, secondly what it might *become*, thirdly what it might *do*, and fourthly what, if anything, had to be done to it.

It is a novelty to an English mind to find banking thus mixed up with politics, but it is not a novelty in Italy. All over Venetia there are agricultural banks which are said to be “clerical.” I grappled with this mystery. “How are they clerical?” I asked Captain Pirelli. “Do they lend money on bad security to clerical voters, and on no terms whatever to anti-clericals?” He was quite of my way of thinking. “*Pecunia non olet*,” he said; “I have never yet smelt a clerical fifty lira note.”... But on the other hand Italy is very close to Germany; she wants easy money for development, cheap coal, a market for various products. The case against the Germans – this case in which the Banca Commerciale Italiana appears, I am convinced unjustly, as a suspect – is that they have turned this natural and proper interchange with Italy into the acquisition of German power. That they have not been merely easy traders, but patriotic agents. It is alleged that they used their early “pull” in Italian banking to favour German enterprises and German political influence against the development of native Italian business; that their merchants are not bona-fide individuals, but members of a nationalist conspiracy to gain economic controls. The German is a patriotic monomaniac. He is not a man but a limb, the worshipper of a national effigy, the digit of an insanely proud and greedy Germania, and here are the natural consequences.

The case of the individual Italian compactly is this: “We do not like the Austrians and Germans. These Imperialisms look always over the Alps. Whatever increases German influence here threatens Italian life. The German is a German first and a human being afterwards... But on the other hand England seems commercially indifferent to us and France has been economically hostile...”

“After all,” I said presently, after reflection, “in that matter of *Pecunia non olet*; there used to be fusses about European loans in China. And one of the favourite themes of British fiction and drama before the war was the unfortunate position of the girl who accepted a loan from the wicked man to pay her debts at bridge.”

“Italy,” said Captain Pirelli, “isn’t a girl. And she hasn’t been playing bridge.”

I incline on the whole to his point of view. Money is facile cosmopolitan stuff. I think that any bank that settles down in Italy is going to be slowly and steadily naturalised Italian, it will become more and more Italian until it is wholly Italian. I would trust Italy to make and keep the Banca Commerciale Italiana Italian. I believe the Italian brain is a better brain than the German article. But still I heard people talking of the implicated organisation as if it were engaged in the most insidious duplicities. “Wait for only a year or so after the war,” said one English authority to me, “and the mask will be off and it will be frankly a ‘Deutsche Bank’ once more.” They assure me that then German enterprises will be favoured again, Italian and Allied enterprises blockaded and embarrassed, the good understanding of Italians and English poisoned, entirely through this organisation...

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