

Wister Owen

# The Pentecost of Calamity



Owen Wister

**The Pentecost of Calamity**

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# **Wister Owen**

## **The Pentecost of Calamity**

### **THE PENTECOST OF CALAMITY**

Ever the fiery Pentecost  
Girds with one flame the countless host.

– *Emerson.*

## I

By various influences and agents the Past is summoned before us, more vivid than a dream. The process seems as magical as those whereof we read in fairy legends, where circles are drawn, wands waved, mystic syllables pronounced. Adjured by these rites, voices speak, or forms and faces shape themselves from nothing. So, through certain influences, not magical at all, our brains are made to flash with visions of other days. Is there among us one to whom this experience is unknown? For whom no particular strain of music, or no special perfume, is linked with an inveterate association? Music and perfumes are among the most potent of these evocatory agents; but many more exist, such as words, sounds, handwriting. Thus almost always, at the name of the town Cologne, the banks of the golden stream, the German Rhine, sweep into my sight as first I saw them long ago; and from a steamer's deck I watch again, and again count, a train composed of twenty-one locomotives, moving ominous and sinister on their new errand. That was July 19, 1870. France had declared war on Prussia that day. Mobilization was beginning before my eyes. I was ten.

Dates and anniversaries also perform the same office as music and perfumes. This is the ninth of June. This day, last year, I was in the heart of Germany. The beautiful, peaceful scene is plain yet. It seems as if I never could forget it or cease to love it. Often last June I thought how different the sights I was then seeing were from those twenty-one locomotives rolling their heavy threat along the banks of the Rhine. And, for the mere curiosity of it, I looked in my German diary to find if I had recorded anything on last June ninth that should be worth repeating on this June ninth.

Well, at the end of the day's jotted routine were the following sentences: "I am constantly more impressed with the Germans. They are a massive, on-going, steady race. Some unifying slow fire is at work in them. This can be felt, somehow." Such was my American impression, innocent altogether, deeply innocent, and ignorant of what the slow fire was going to become. So were the peasants and the other humbler subjects of the Empire who gave me this daily impression; they were innocent and ignorant too. Therefore is the German tragedy deeper even than the Belgian.

On June twenty-eighth I was still in the heart of Germany, but at another beautiful place, where further signs of Germany's great thrift, order and competence had met me at every turn. It was a Sunday, cloudless and hot, with the mountains full of odors from the pines. After two hours of strolling I reëntered our hotel to find a group of travelers before the bulletin board. Here we read in silence the news of a political assassination. The silence was prolonged, not because this news touched any of us nationally but because any such crime must touch and shock all thoughtful persons.

At last the silence was broken by an old German traveler, who said: "That is the match which will set all Europe in a blaze." We did not know who he was. None of our party ever knew. On the next morning this party took its untroubled way toward France, a party of innocent, ignorant Americans, in whose minds lingered no thought of the old German's remark. That evening we slept in Rheims. Our windows opened opposite the quiet cathedral. It towered far above them into the night and sky, its presence filling our rooms with a serene and grave benediction. Just to see it from one's pillow gave to one's thoughts the quality of prayer.

Two days later I took my leave of it by sitting for a silent hour alone beneath its solemn nave. I can never be too glad that I bade it this good-by. Not long afterward – only thirty-two days – we recollected the old German's remark, for suddenly it came true. He had known whereof he spoke. On August 1, 1914, Europe fell to pieces; and during August, 1915, in a few weeks from to-day, the anniversaries will begin – public anniversaries and private. These, like perfumes, like music, will waken legions of visions. The days of the calendar, succeeding one another, will ring in the memories of hundreds and thousands like bells. Each date will invest its day and the sun or the rain thereof with special, pregnant relation to the bereft and the mourning of many faiths and languages. Thus

all Europe will be tolling with memorial knells inaudible, yet which in those ears that hear them will sound louder than any noise of shrapnel or calamity.

## II

Calamity, like those far-off locomotives on the Rhine, has again rolled out of Germany on her neighbors. Yet this very Calamity it is that has given me back my faith in my own country. It was Germany at peace which shook my faith; and I must tell you of that peaceful, beautiful Germany in which I rejoiced for so many days, and of how I envied it. Then, perhaps, among some other things I hope you will see, you will see that it is Germany who is, in truth, the deepest tragedy of this war.

The Germany at peace that I saw during May and June, 1914, was, in the first place, a constant pleasure to the eye, a constant repose to the body and mind. Look where you might, beauty was in some form to be seen, given its chance by the intelligence of man – not defaced, but made the most of; and, whether in towns or in the country, a harmonious spectacle was the rule. I thought of our landscape, littered with rubbish and careless fences and stumps of trees, hideous with glaring advertisements; of the rusty junk lying about our farms and towns and wayside stations; and of the disfigured Palisades along the Hudson River. America was ugly and shabby – made so by Americans; Germany was swept and garnished – made so by Germans.

In Nauheim the admirable courtyard of the bathhouses was matched by the admirable system within. The convenience and the architecture were equally good. For every hour of the invalid's day the secret of his well-being seemed to have been thought out. On one side of the group and court of baths ran the chief street, shady and well-kempt, with its hotels and its very entertaining shops; on the other side spread a park. This was a truly gracious little region, embowered in trees, with spaces and walks and flowers all near at hand, yet nothing crowded. The park sloped upward to a terrace and casino, with tables for sitting out to eat and drink and hear the band, and with a concert hall and theater for the evening. Herein comedies and little operas and music, both serious and light, were played.

Nothing was far from anything; the baths, the doctors, the hotels, the music, the tennis courts, the lake, the golf links – all were fitted into a scheme laid out with marvelous capability. Various hills and forests, a little more distant, provided walks for those robust enough to take them, while longer excursions in carriages or motor cars over miles of excellent roads were all mapped out and tariffed in a terse but comprehensive guidebook. Such was living at Nauheim. Dying, I feel sure, was equally well arranged; it was never allowed to obtrude itself on living.

Each day began with an early hour of routine, walking and water-drinking before breakfast, amid surroundings equally well planned – an arcade inclosing a large level space, with an expanse of water, a band playing, flowers growing in the open, cut flowers for sale in the arcade and comfortable seats where the doctor permitted pausing, but no permanent settling down. Thus went the whole day. Everything was well planned and everything worked. I thought of America, where so many things look beautiful on paper and so few things work, because nobody keeps the rules. I thought of our college elective system, by which every boy was free to study what best fitted him for his career, and nearly every boy did study what he could most easily pass examinations in. There was no elective system in Nauheim. Everybody kept the rules. There was no breakdown, no failure.

Moreover, the civility of the various ministrants to the invalid, from the eminent professor-doctor down through hotel porters and bath attendants to the elevator boy, was well-nigh perfect. If you asked for something out of the routine, either it was permitted or it was satisfactorily explained why it could not be permitted. Whether at the bank, the bookshop, the hotel, the railway station or in the street, your questions were not merely understood – the Germans knew the answers to them. And every day the street was charming with fresh flowers and fresh fruit in abundance at many corners and booths – cherries, strawberries, plums, apricots, grapes, both cheap and good, as here they never are. But the great luxury, the great repose, was that each person fitted his job, did it well, took it seriously. After our American way of taking it as a joke, particularly when you fumble it, this German way was almost enough to cure a sick man without further treatment.



### III

This serenity of living was not got up for the stranger; it was not to meet his market that a complex and artificial ease had been constructed, bearing no relation to what lay beyond its limits. That sort of thing is to be found among ourselves in isolated spots, though far less perfect and far more expensive. Nauheim was merely a blossom on the general tree. It was when I began my walks in the country and found everywhere a corresponding, ordered excellence, and came to talk more and more with the peasants and to notice the men, women and children, that the scheme of Germany grew impressive to me.

So had it not been in 1870, as I looked back on my early impressions, reading them now in my maturer judgment's light. So had it not been even in 1882 and 1883, when I had again seen the country. We various invalids of Nauheim presently began to compare notes. All of us were going about the country, among the gardens and the farms, or across the plain through the fruit trees to little Friedberg on its hill – an old castle, a steep village, a clean Teutonic gem, dropped perfect out of the Middle Ages into the present, yet perfectly keeping up with the present. Many of the peasants in the plain, men and women, were of those who brought their flowers and produce to sell in Nauheim – humble people, poor in what you call worldly goods, but seemingly very few of them poor in the great essential possession.

We invalids compared notes and found ourselves all of one mind. Ten or twelve of us were, at the several hotels, acquaintances at home; every one had been struck with the contentment in the German face. Contentment! Among the old and young of both sexes this was the dominating note, the great essential possession. The question arose: What is the best sign that a government is doing well by its people – is agreeing with its people, so to speak? None of us were quite so sure as we used to be that our native formula, "Of the people, by the people, for the people," is the universal ultimate truth.

Twice two is four, wherever you go; this is as certain in Berlin as it is at Washington or in the cannibal islands. But, until mankind grows uniform, can government be treated as you treat mathematics? Until mankind grows uniform, will any form of government be likely to fit the whole world like a glove? So long as mankind continues as various as men's digestions, better to look at government as if it were a sort of diet or treatment. How is the government agreeing with its people? This is the question to ask in each country. And what is the surest sign? Could any sign be surer than the general expression, the composite face of the people themselves? This goes deeper than skyscrapers and other material aspects.

I had sailed away from skyscrapers and limited expresses; from farmers sowing crops wastefully; from houses burned through carelessness; from forests burned through carelessness; from heaps of fruit rotting on the ground in one place and hundreds of men hungry in another place. I had sailed away from the city face and the country face of America, and neither one was the face of content. They looked driven, unpeaceful, dissatisfied. The hasty American was not looking after his country himself, and nobody was there to make him look after it while he rushed about climbing, climbing – and to what? A higher skyscraper. It was very restful to come to a place where the spirit of man was in stable equilibrium; where man's lot was in stable equilibrium; where never a schoolboy had been told he might become President and every schoolboy knew he could not be Emperor.

The students on a walking holiday from their universities often wandered singing through Nauheim. Somewhat Tyrolese in get-up, sometimes with odd, Byronic collars, too much open at the neck, they wore their knapsacks and the caps that showed their guild. They came generally in the early morning while the invalids were strolling at the Sprudel. The sound of their young voices singing in part-chorus would be heard, growing near, passing close, then dying away melodiously among the trees.

A single little sharp discord vibrated through all this German harmony one day when I learned that in the Empire more children committed suicide than in any other country.

But soon this discord was lost amid the massive Teutonic polyphony of well-being. Of this well-being knowledge was enlarged by excursions to various towns. To Worms, for instance, that we might see the famous Luther Monument. Part of the journey thither lay through a fine forest. This the city of Frankfurt-am-Main owns and has forested for seven hundred years; using the wood all the time, but so wisely that the supply has maintained itself against the demand. I thought of our own forests, looted and leveled, and of ourselves boasting our glorious future while we obliterated that future's resources. Frankfurt was there to teach us better, had we chosen to learn.

## IV

In Frankfurt-am-Main was born one of the three supreme poets since Greece and Rome – Goethe – from whom I shall quote more than once; but Frankfurt has present glories that I saw. It is one of many beautifully governed German cities. I grew even fond of its Union Station, since through this gate I entered so often the pleasures and edifications of the town. The trains were a symbol of the whole Empire. About a mile north of Nauheim the railroad passes under a bridge and curves out of sight. The four-fifteen was apt to be my express to Frankfurt. I would stand on the platform, watch in hand, looking northward for my train. At four-eleven the bridge was invariably an empty hole. Invariably at four-twelve the engine filled the hole; then the train glided in quietly, and smoothly glided on, almost punctual to the second. So did the other trains.

The conductors were officials of disciplined courtesy and informed minds. They appeared at the door of your compartment, erect, requesting your ticket in an established formula. If you asked them something they told you correctly and with a Teutonic adequacy that was grave, but not gruff. Once only in a score of journeys did I encounter bad manners. Now I should never choose these admirable conductors for companions, but as conductors they were superior to the engaging fellow citizen who took my ticket down in Georgia and, when I asked did his train usually make its scheduled connection at Yemassee Junction, cried out with contagious mirth:

"My Lawd, suh, 'most nevah!"

In these German trains another little discord jarred with some regularity: the German passengers they brought from Berlin, or were taking back to Berlin, were of a heavy impenetrable rudeness – quite another breed than the kindly Hessians of Frankfurt.

We know the saying of a floor – that it is so clean "you could eat your dinner off it." All the streets of Frankfurt, that I saw, were clean like this. The system of street cars was lucid – and blessedly noiseless! – and their conductors informed with the same adequate gravity I have already noted.

I found that I developed a special affection for Route 19, because this took me from the station to the opera house. But all routes took one to and through aspects of municipal perfection at which one stared with envy as one thought of home.

Oh, yes! Frankfurt is a name to me compact with memories – memories of clean streets; of streets full of by-passers who could direct you when you asked your way; of streets empty of beggars, empty of all signs of desolate, drunken or idle poverty; of streets bordered by substantial stone dwellings, with fragrant gardens; of excellent shops; the streets full of prosperous movement and bustle; an absence of rags, a presence of good stout clothes; a people of contented faces, whether they talked or were silent – the same firm and broad contentment, like a tree deep-rooted, in the city face that was in the country face.

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