

The Shape of Things to Come (A Prophetic Vision of the Future)

An historical fiction
by H.G. Wells
(1933)

Chapter 7

The Great War of 1914-1918

There is a monstrous tedious accumulation of records concerned with the World War. The Catalogue of Historical Material stored at Atacama gives a list of 2,362,705 books and gross files, up to date, and of these over 182,000 deal exclusively or largely with the causation of the war. Nothing could bring home to the student the profound difference in mental equipment between ourselves and the men and women of that period than a visit to the long silent galleries of that great library of dead disputes and almost completely forgotten records. He will see hardly a visitor along the vistas of that shining framework of shelves; a quiet cleaner or duster perhaps will be visible, scrutinizing the condition of the material, or a young revisionist student patiently checking some current summary — or a black cat. For the rest, above, below, to right and left is a clean and luminous stillness; papers at rest.

In one large section of this sere honeycomb the student will find the records of the “war guilt controversy” that agitated the world for decades after the Peace of Versailles. Let him draw out a seat anywhere and take down a file or so at hazard and turn over its pages. He will be able to read almost all of it nowadays, whatever the original language, because practically all the collection has now been interleaved with translations into Basic English. And it will seem to him that he is reading the outpourings of lunatics, so completely have the universal obsessions of that time been exorcized since.

Had “Germany” planned the war? Was “France” the guilty party? Had “Britain” much to answer for? With difficulty will the student let down his mind into the fantastic world of extinct imaginations in which these strange personifications, as monstrous and incredible as the ancient gods of India, were treated as real and morally responsible individuals, hated, trusted, feared and loved. The war was, in immediate fact, an aimless and fruitless slaughter upon the altars of these stupendous deities, the wounding and mutilation of perhaps twenty million human beings, and a vast burning-up of material wealth. In the crazy fancy of our ancestors it was a noble and significant struggle. Happily we need not revive their craziness here. The question of “war guilt” was never settled. It ceased to be pursued, it was neglected, it floated away into the absurd, and little but those three hundred feet or so of forgotten books and gross files remain to testify to its vanished importance.

The causation of the struggle was, indeed, perfectly simple. It arose naturally and necessarily from that irregular and disproportionate growth of human appliances as compared with the extension of political and social intelligence we have already described.

The new means of communication and transport, and the new economic life which demanded the products of every zone and soil for its purposes, were necessitating the reorganization of human affairs as a World-State, and since the world was already parcelled up among sixty-odd competing sovereign governments there were only two possible courses open to mankind, either to arrange the coalescence of these governments by treaty and rational arrangements to meet the new need, or to allow a steadily intensified mutual pressure to develop into more or less thinly disguised attempts at world conquest. In the decades before the war the British, French, German, Russian, Japanese and American systems were all, as the word went then, “imperialist” — all, that is, attempting to become World-States on a planet on which obviously there was room only for one single World-State. Nothing of the sort had been apparent when the methods of European statescraft had been devised. These vaster possibilities had yawned open afterwards. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were centuries of small restricted wars for limited advantages. In the twentieth century the scale of war expanded beyond any limit and the advantages to be won by it disappeared. But the politicians and diplomatists played their time-honoured game against each other with a sort of terrified inevitability. They were driven; they had no control, or at least none of them seemed to have had the vigour and imagination to attempt a control. They were driven by the economic necessity we have explained in the previous section. They had to arm proposterously. They had to threaten. They had to go through with the business.

These forces account for the outbreak and universality of the Great War, but they do not account for its peculiar frightfulness. For that it is necessary to realize that though governments expanded only against an enormous pressure of mutual restraint, no limitations had been set to the hypertrophy of financial and industrial enterprises. These last were under the sway of a relentless and unrestrained progress; they expanded, invented, urged and sold; they brought weapons of a strange and terrible effectiveness to the settlement of what were in comparison small and antiquated disputes. To that hypertrophy of the armourer we will return presently, because the Great War was really only a first revelation of this particular disproportion between economics and politics, and the evil still went on in an exaggerated form after the formal conclusion of the struggle at the Peace of Versailles (1919). But let us first tell what needs to be known of the details of the Great War.

How little that is now! There is a vast literature both of fiction based on experience and of personal reminiscence about it, and some of it is admirably written; almost any of it may be read for interest and edification and hardly any of it need be read with scholarly precision. The picture of the outbreak of the war still touches us. There was a curious unconsciousness of the grossness of the menace in events, even on the part of myriads doomed to suffer and die in a few months’ time. Many of the stories told begin with a holiday party or a country-house gathering or some such bright setting. The weather that August (1914) was exceptionally fine.

The details of the struggle itself were as horrible and distressing as they were inconsequent, and there is no need whatever for anyone but the specialist to master their sequence in detail. The old-fashioned history, with its lists of names, dates, battles and so on, was designed rather to supply easily marked material for examinations than to give any sense of the historical process. Examinations have long passed out of educational practice; they have gone to join the “globes” and the abacus, the slate and the cane in the scholastic limbo, but their memory is preserved in the popular game of “examination papers”, when people write down as fast as they can and as much as they can about some suddenly selected subject.

Few of us could write even a brief account now of the World War. The names of such generals as Haig, Kitchener, French, Joffre, Foch and Ludendorff, to take names at random, and such battles as Tannenberg, the Marne, the Somme, Paschendaele, the Falkland Isles, Jutland and so forth, mean nothing and need mean nothing to the ordinary citizen to-day. He does not know whether French was really French or not, nor whether Foch was a Frenchman or a German. He inclines to the latter view. He does not know who won or lost these conflicts and he does not care. He has not even a sporting interest in it. They were not lively fights. Nearly all the commanders concerned had dull and unattractive personalities and the business was altogether too unwieldy for them. Most of their operations were densely stupid, muddled both in conception and execution. One would as soon listen to a child reciting not very accurately and at endless length the deals and tricks of some game of cards it has played, or imagines it has played, as read their memoirs — packed as they too often are with self-exculpation, personal resentments and malice. Faint, faded, immense and far-off tragedies, these struggles that were to have astounded posterity have already gone far towards complete effacement in any but a few specializing minds, are hardly more vivid now in our collective consciousness than the battles of the Peloponnesian War — or the campaigns and conquests of Tamerlane. They had nothing of the primary historical importance and strategic splendour which have restored the gigantic military conceptions of Genghis Khan to an integral place in our ordinary educational curriculum.

For the rodomontade of the conflict the curious cannot do better than glance through the eager narrative of Winston Churchill's *World Crisis*. There one finds all the stereotyped flourishes and heroisms of nineteenth-century history from the British point of view; the "drama of history" in rich profusion, centred upon one of the most alert personalities in the conflict. He displays a vigorous naïve puerility that still gives his story an atoning charm. He has the insensitiveness of a child of thirteen. His soldiers are toy soldiers and he loves to knock over a whole row of them. He enjoyed the war. He takes himself and all the now forgotten generals and statesmen of the war with a boyish seriousness. He passes grave judgments on their tragic fooleries and distributes compliments and blame, often in the most gracious manner, convinced that he is writing for a meticulously admiring and envious posterity. They would read, they would marvel. He was the sort of man who believed that when he begot children he created an audience. He was misled by the excitement of his own reading of history. He not only measures for us the enormous gulf between the mentality of his times and our own, but he enables us to bridge that gulf with an amused and forgiving sympathy.

A less attractive spirit displays itself in the memoirs of such figures as Ludendorff, Bülow, Clemenceau, Fisher, Foch, and so through the whole category of war leaders. The war was the supreme event in the lives of most of these men and apparently they were never able to think of anything else afterwards. They had none of the recuperative innocence of Churchill, his terrier-like interest in everything. They all took to writing furiously in their declining years and no other pens could have damned them so completely. They are grown-up and yet underdeveloped persons; as adult as old chimpanzees; they cannot claim Churchill's benefit of schoolboy, and there is a real horror in their wrinkled meannesses and envies, their gross enthusiasms and their sincere bloodthirstiness and hate. Most of their mutual recriminations are too incomprehensible to be of the slightest interest now; spite and twaddle are still spite and twaddle even if drenched with blood. The most accessible sample for the contemporary reader is *The Life and Diaries of Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, Bart., G.C.B., D.S.O.*, a lean, unsightly man of infinite energy, gusto and vanity, who played a very prominent rôle in bringing about and carrying out the catastrophe. It is the latest reprint in the *Historical Documents Series*; it is richly illustrated and abundantly annotated, and with it are bound up

the brilliantly scornful criticisms of Wilson's contemporary, Sir Andrew Macphail, and Stephen Freudheim's more scientific analysis of him as the supreme type of the "soldierly mind".

For the grimmer actualities of the struggle there is a vast and sombre literature. It has been summarized in the last fifteen years by the Historical Bureau in its War Pictures for Posterity by Pen, Pencil and Camera. Everyone should turn over those strange incredible records of endurance, callousness, devotion and insane courage, to learn something of the extremes to which men and women like ourselves can be pushed by the grim forces of social compulsion.

The earlier volumes deal chiefly with the psychology of the more than half civilized citizens of the Atlantic and North European states suddenly precipitated into a maelstrom of destruction. We see the urban crowds demonstrating and cheering in the streets of the capital cities, the floods of youths coming from their work to "join up", the wonder and unimaginative fierceness and heroism of the opening stage. Then come the first contacts, villages in flames, the wild shooting of curious bystanders as spies and guerillas, realizations of horror and a wave of fear, the invaded populations in flight, black crowds with their pitiful impedimenta streaming along darkling roads, going they know not whither. The rifles and machine-guns rattle, the guns thud, and the cheering adventurousness of the advancing armies as they blunder heavily into contact passes into a phase of astounded violence and hardship. The new war was like no war that had ever been before. The French upon their eastern front went forward to the attack with immense élan, in bright uniforms and to the historical inspiration of the "Marseillaise". They were massacred. They lost a third of a million men in three weeks. The Germans poured through Belgium, more than a million strong, to be stopped and stunned with Paris almost within their grasp. The pictures show the smiling landscape of eastern Belgium, France and east Prussia in July 1914, and the same countryside a couple of months later — torn, scored and trenched, defiled with bloody heaps of litter that were once clothed bodies, an anguish of countless thousands of unclean, hungry, exhausted, cruelty-wrung human beings.

These bands of contact, these regions of filthy pain and tumult, spread. Presently there were "war zones" reaching from the North Sea to the Alps and across Eastern Europe, strange regions in which every house was a ruin, every tree a splintered trunk, where millions of crouching men went to and fro in trenches and ditches furtively like rats, and the ragged dead lay unburied. There day and night the superfluous energy of a profiteering economic system, denied all other outlet by its own preconceptions and the rigid historical traditions in which it was blinkered, blew itself away in the incessant concussions of mines, bombs and guns and a continued destruction of human life.

Presently newly invented weapons, hitherto untried, came to extend and intensify the struggle. The aeroplane, and that primitive "navigable" the Zeppelin, carried the war behind the fronts and attacked the civilian population in the cities. We see the explosive and incendiary bombs bursting into the dirty little urban homes of the time, blowing to rags the bed-ridden grandmother and the baby in the cradle; we see the panic-stricken crowds seeking the shelter of cellars and excavations and the drainlike railway "tubes" of the time. In the early stages of the air-war only explosives and inflammatory substances were used, but as the struggle progressed the art of using gas bombs developed, and an agonizing suffocation was added to the nocturnal chances of flame and explosion and death among fallen ruins for the non-combatant at home. The submarine, also, was a novelty of the Great War, and a very searching novelty. It was used first to sink fighting ships and then it was turned against all sea-going craft. We have

vivid descriptions of the sinking of the Lusitania without warning and the drowning of 1,198 men, women and children. She was, by the standards of the time, a great and luxurious ship, and a sort of symbolism was found by the writers of this period in this sudden descent from light, comfort and confidence into a desperate and hopeless struggle in the waters of the night. All the achievements of nineteenth-century civilization seemed to many to be following in the downward wake of the Lusitania.

Service in these early submarines strained men to the breaking point. They were essentially engines of war, they had all the defects of inventions at an early stage, and none of the security and comfort of the great submarine barges that are used to-day for the Mediterranean and Atlantic Ridge mines and for general deep sea exploration. These, with their beautifully adjusted pressure systems and their limitless vertical range, are calculated rather to mislead than enlighten us as to the capabilities of the primitive submarines of the Great War. The latter were able to descend safely only to a depth of a hundred metres; below that the pressure became too much for them and their plates gave and leaked. When they leaked the salt water was apt to affect the accumulators and chlorine gas was released to torment and suffocate the crews. Below a hundred and fifty metres these fragile contrivances crumpled up altogether and were destroyed. The air in them became foul when they submerged, in spite of the compressed oxygen they carried, and the continual condensation of exhaled moisture gave them a peculiar clammy discomfort. They could move about under water for a couple of days by means of their electric batteries, but then it was necessary to come to the surface and run their oil combustion engines for some hours to recharge. Armed with guns and packed with mines, bombs, torpedoes and other explosives, they set out to harass and destroy the surface shipping of the enemy.

It was a difficult and almost fantastically dangerous task. Submerged, they were invisible, but also they were blind. Near the surface they could get a limited view of what was going on by means of a periscope. On the surface they had the range of outlook of any other surface boat, but at all the risks a surface boat must take. So under conditions of extreme discomfort and partial asphyxiation the crews of these strangely formidable and strangely fragile contrivances groped their way towards their victims. To see the quarry fairly they had to come to the surface, and that exposed them to gunfire. If their thin steel skins were pierced by a single shot they could no longer go under. Often when submerged they betrayed their whereabouts unwittingly by bubbles of gas and escapes of oil.

At first, in spite of their limitations, the submarines proved a very deadly weapon, more particularly in the hands of the Central European Powers. They destroyed a great multitude of ships and drowned many score thousands of men. Then slowly the methods used against them improved. They were hunted by a special flotilla, and among other ships by the "Q" boats, armed vessels disguised as harmless merchantmen. These lured them to the surface and then let down sham bulwarks and opened fire upon them, so that after a time they no longer dared emerge to challenge even the most harmless-looking craft. Explosive mines were moored in their possible tracks and mine-armed nets set across harbours and channels. They were also watched for by aeroplanes and special airships whose signals guided the destroyers to their quarry. Ingenious listening contrivances were invented to locate them. They were shot at on the surface, rammed, and pursued by "depth charges" which could strain their plates and disable them even when exploded scores of metres away.

Such, briefly, were the conditions of submarine warfare in the years 1917-18. And yet to the very end of the war men could be found to carry it on, to destroy and drown and be in their

turn hunted and destroyed. The building and launching of submersibles never ceased. Men went down in them to chilly confinement, to the perpetual anxiety of mine or ram, to the quivering menace of the distant depth charge, to the reasonable probability of a frightful death beyond all human aid. Few submarines returned to harbour ten times; many went out new upon their first voyage never to return. Two hundred of them were lost by the Germans alone; each loss a tragedy of anguish and dismay in the deeps. Towards the end it was claimed by their antagonists that the crews were losing morale. Once or twice an undamaged submarine that had been cornered surrendered, and the new commanders showed a growing tendency to return to port for minor repairs or other slight pretexts. But on the whole, such is the unimaginative heroic submissiveness of our species, the service was sustained. The Germans supplied most of the flesh for this particular altar; willing and disciplined, their youngsters saluted and carried their kit down the ladder into this gently swaying clumsy murder mechanism which was destined to become their coffin.

Their obedience brings us to one of the most fundamental lessons that the Great War has for us: the extreme slowness with which the realization of even the most obvious new conditions pierces through the swathings of habitual acceptance. Millions of human beings went open-eyed to servitude, bullying, hardship, suffering and slaughter, without a murmur, with a sort of fatalistic pride. In obedience to the dictates of the blindest prejudices and the most fatuous loyalties they did their utmost to kill men against whom they had no conceivable grievance, and they were in their turn butchered gallantly, fighting to the last. The War Pictures volumes dismay our imaginations by portraying a series of wholesale butcheries, many of them on a stupendous scale, of men who died facing their enemies. After the great slaughter of the French at the outset of the war, and a mighty killing of Russians at the Battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes, there was during what was called the deadlock period, the period of trench warfare, a diminution of the losses upon the West. Hostilities sank down to a gusty conflict of shell-fire, rifle assassinations, and raids with bombs and bludgeons. In the East, however, the Russians ran out of ammunition, and held their trenches only by a great martyrdom of men; they lost well over a million before the end of 1914, and yet they continued to obey orders. A series of minor campaigns broke out in regions remote from the main centres of contact. There is a horrible account in the Pictures of the sufferings of some thousands of British common soldiers taken prisoners at Kut, in Mesopotamia. (Their generals and other officers, however, who had arranged that particular capitulation, were honourably and comfortably entertained by their captors the Turks.) There is no effective expression of resentment by the British troops on record.

In 1916 and 1917 there were spasmodic renewals of hostilities on a large scale by the British and French in France. Newly trained British armies were made to advance in close formation by generals who, unless they were imbeciles, could have had no doubts of the fate to which they were sending their men. If they were not imbeciles then they were criminally unwilling to learn and soul-blind to suffering and waste. The mentality of these men is still a matter for discussion. The poor boys they commanded were marched forward shoulder to shoulder in successive waves of attack, and so advancing they were shot to pieces by the enemy machine-guns. Out of battalions of six or seven hundred, perhaps a hundred would struggle through the defensive fire and come to bomb-throwing, bayonet-thrusts and surrender in the German trenches. Small isolated groups of them in shell-holes and captured positions fought on for days. So perished the flower of an entire school generation, collected from hundreds of thousands of homes, more or less loved, more or less cared for and more or less educated; it had been enlisted, trained, sent out to the battlefields at enormous cost, to be left at last in the desolated spaces between the armies, lying in heaps and swathes to rot and be rat-eaten. For

months afterwards, as the photographs show, thousands of them were to be seen sprawling in formation as they fell, just as if their ranks were still waiting to leap again to the attack. But as the observer drew nearer he realized their corruption. He discovered bony hands, eyeless sockets, faces far gone in decay.

The British commander-in-chief in his despatches did not fail to extol the courage of his lost battalions and to represent this monstrous exploit as a victory. Some mile or so of ground had been gained in that July offensive and less than 12,000 prisoners had been taken. Twice as many British were left prisoners in German hands, but this the despatches ignored.

The appalling nature of this particular disaster leaked out only very slowly. The British censorship at least was efficient and the generals, however incapable in other respects, lied magnificently. The Channel crossing made it particularly easy to hide events from the British public. And it had a peculiar effect on the British troops; it gave them a feeling of being in another and a different world from "home", a war-world in which such cruel and fantastic things could be natural. This monstrous massacre was, indeed, contrived and carried through, not simply without a revolt, but with scarcely an audible protest on the part of either the parents, relations, friends or surviving comrades of those hosts of wasted victims.

The commanders of the Russian armies in Austria, Armenia and elsewhere were announcing equally costly and heroic triumphs and the Germans and Austrians were issuing the most valiant and excessive contradictions of their claims. They, too, were losing hideously enough, though in a lesser proportion than their opponents. The next year (1917), the British, gallant and docile as ever, with only very slightly improved tactics, were going again into great offensives.

But now the French troops began to manifest a livelier intelligence. They were amidst familiar things, nearer their homes and less cut off from subversive influences than the British. A certain General Nivelle, at that time French Commander-in-Chief, made what Churchill calls an "experiment", which resulted altogether in the loss of nearly a couple of hundred thousand men. It involved the advance of masses of infantry into intense fields of fire. In an hour, said Lieutenant Ybarnegaray (in a debate in the French Chamber, June 1917), they were reduced to a crowd "running like madmen", all formations and distinctions lost. Provision had been made for less than 15,000 wounded. There were seven times as many. Most of the casualties never received the most elementary attention for three days. The result was gangrene, amputation and death for thousands. Then came the first intimation that there were limits to human obedience. A French division ordered into action to continue this futile holocaust refused to march. Churchill says this was "deeply disquieting" to the authorities, and no doubt it pained and distressed every intelligent amateur of war. This particular division was cajoled into a change of mind. It took part in the fighting, says Churchill, "without discredit", but the spirit of its resistance spread.

The next sign of sanity in this world torture was the collapse of the grotesque Russian autocracy. We have already told of the mental and moral decay of the Tzardom in our general study of the degeneration of monarchy. [Non inventus. — ED.] Abruptly this profoundly rotten government collapsed into nothing; its vast domains became a various disorder, and for some months phantom imitations of Western revolutionaries, inspired by memories of the first French revolution or by legends of British parliamentary wisdom, occupied the capital. The one certain fact in the situation was the accumulated disinclination of the Russian people for any further warfare. But this first republican government under an eloquent lawyer politician,

of no great directive force, Alexandre Kerensky, was unable either to carry on the war or to end it. A subdued but spreading clamour for “peace by negotiation” in all the combatant countries ensued, a clamour that active repression and the most rigorous concealment in the Press failed to silence. There was an attempt to call a sort of peace conference of Radicals at Stockholm, and then a second revolution in Russia which carried a small and resolute Communist organization to power — carried it to power simply and solely because there was no other organized alternative, and because it promised peace plainly and surely — peace on any terms. The Russian armies melted away at its signal; the men streamed home. The German military authorities in the East found the trenches before them undefended, and with every courtesy of war, as one soldier to another, welcomed the Russian officers of the old régime, taking refuge from the belated resentment of their own men.

In 1917 mankind seemed already to be awakening from the war-nightmare. Mutinies broke out in sixteen separate French army corps, 115 regiments were involved, divisions elected soldiers’ councils and whole regiments set out for Paris to demand a reasonable wind-up of the struggle. The one last hope of the despairing soldiers, said Pierre Laval, had been Stockholm. That disappointment had made life unbearable. But the storm abated with the entry of the United States of America into the war, and the powers in control of the Western World were still able to pursue their dreadful obsessions for another year.

War Pictures for Posterity by Pen, Pencil and Camera devotes a whole volume (xxi) to the tragedy of a special Russian infantry corps in France. Fifteen thousand Russians had been sent thither in 1916 to be equipped and armed and put into the line with the French armies. Many of these poor lads scarcely knew the difference between a Frenchman and a German, and the ostensible objects of the war were quite beyond their understanding. But they heard of the revolution in their own country and they resolved to consider their attitude with regard to it. They elected representatives and put it to the vote whether they should continue to fight, which meant for them to take part in that “experiment” of Nivelle’s known to be in preparation at the time. They chose what seemed to them the generous part and went into the battle. The French command used them ruthlessly, and nearly 6,000 were killed or wounded. The rest came out of the line and mutinied. They would fight no more. Thereupon these defenceless men were surrounded by trustworthy French troops, a great concentration of guns was assembled, fire was opened upon them suddenly and they were massacred. Horrible photographs of the details of this — photographs hidden away at the time from the authorities and brought to light later — are given in the summary already cited.

For nearly a year the French lost confidence in the morale of their own men and dared make no more great attacks, but their allies offered up another 400,000 men in the battle of Paschendaele and accounted for 300,000 Germans, and in the spring the Germans made a vast multitudinous attack in the West which succeeded at first and then collapsed, whereupon their antagonists, reinforced by new armies from America, waded back through blood to a dreadful final victory. The last nine months of the conflict saw more slaughter than any preceding year. From March 21st, 1918, to November 11th in the same year the British suffered 830,000 casualties, the French and Belgians 964,000 and the Germans 1,470,000. There were also 2,000,000 American troops brought to Europe before the end, and of these more than half were actually engaged in the fighting. Their casualties were certainly not less than 350,000. Portuguese and other contingents from the most unexpected quarters also contributed to that culminating death-roll, but it is impossible for us now to give exact numbers for these minor forces.

These are the gross figures of warfare. But *War Pictures* devotes three volumes, perhaps the most horrible of all, to the presentation of various details of the fighting in which these vast multitudes suffered and perished. These three volumes are like the microscopic slides in a specimen book of anatomy, which show us from a selected scrap of tissue the texture of the whole. Little figures stand out enlarged, chosen by the hazard that they wrote or talked or carried a camera, to represent the nameless millions who have left no record. We have accounts of men who were left to lie out for days between the lines, tortured by thirst and stifled by the stench of their own corruption, and yet who survived to tell the tale. We have the stories of men who fell into heaps of rotting dead, and lay there choking, and of men who were gassed. The tortures of gas were already many and various, and most of the mixtures then used left tormenting weaknesses in the system for the rest of life. We have descriptions of the rude surgery of the time and abstracts of the mental disorders through which minds fled from reality. There are also some dreadful pictures of mutilated men, faceless, crippled, grotesquely distorted, and an autobiography of one of the blinded (*Outstaying My Welcome*, by Fritz Schiff, 1923). Scores of thousands of unhappy fragments of humanity had to be hidden away in special institutions until they died, they were at once so terrifying and so pitiful and hopeless. The world forgot them even while they lived.

The distortion of souls was even more dreadful than the distortion of bodies. One of the most lurid items in that dreadful assemblage of realities is a lecture on the use of the bayonet, which chanced to be printed, reprinted later by anti-war propagandists and so preserved for us, delivered by a certain Sergeant-Major Franklin to some English cadets in London. To us he is incredible in his ferocity; we are almost forced to believe he was drunk or mad, until we realize from the “laughter” that punctuated his utterances, from the hearty thanks of his commanding officer, and the “three cheers” which rewarded him at the conclusion of his discourse, that he was merely expressing the spirit of war service as it was then understood.

“If you see a wounded German,” he said, “shove him out and have no nonsense about it.”

He was all against taking prisoners — and for murdering them after surrender. He told with sympathy and approval of how a corporal under him butchered a group of German boys. “Can I do these blokes in, sir?” asked the corporal, pointing to a bunch of disarmed enemies.

“Please yourself,” said the sergeant-major. . . .

When they had been “done in”, the honest corporal, a released convict from Dartmoor prison, came back to the sergeant-major very gratified and honoured, and, still in favour, discussed the technical difficulties of withdrawing a bayonet quickly in order to be ready for the “next fellow”.

That was, that is, the spirit to which war brings a human being. Sergeant-Major Franklin had his abundant equivalents in every army engaged. We are able to quote an English document, freely published. Participants in many other countries had less freedom. On the whole the English were as gentle as any other soldiers. But fear and bloodlust, it is plain, wipe out all the slowly acquired restraints and tolerance of social order very quickly and completely from any breed of men. History must not be written in pink and gilt. Prisoners and wounded were not simply neglected and ill-treated and “shoved out”. Many were actually tortured to death — either by way of reprisals or in sheer wanton cruelty. There is also a series of photographs of foully mutilated bodies, mutilated and indecently displayed while they were dying or immediately after they were dead. Those millions marched indeed right out of civilization,

right out of any sort of human life as we know it to-day, marched down to something viler than mere bestiality, when they marched into the war zone.

After the summer of 1918, which brought with it the certainty of ultimate defeat, the combatant energy of Germany evaporated. Everywhere there was distress and hunger due to a rigorous blockade. The discipline of the land relaxed; the country behind the front was infested by stragglers; the Higher German Command found itself now, like its antagonists, unable to rely upon the men to advance, found itself unable to rely upon their resistance to an enemy attack. They became eager to surrender — taking the off-chance of meeting experimental corporals from Dartmoor on the way.

Wherever there was still loyalty and obedience, however, men were still callously sacrificed by the Higher Command. War Pictures (vol. xxvii, 23842 et seq.) show the German machine-gunners in their pits, on the defensive against advancing British and American troops. These men allowed themselves to be drugged and chained to their weapons, and so continued to fire and kill until the attack came up to them. Then they found small mercy. They were bayoneted or their brains were beaten out. They paid for the inventions of their masters. They paid for the hatred of Germany the introduction of poison gas had evoked in every attacking army. Such residues of senseless devotion availed nothing against the massive pressures that were at last exhausting Germany. In November the Kaiser, the War Lord, was in flight; a humiliating Armistice had been concluded and the German armies were streaming home in disorder, incoherently revolutionary.

Upon that phrase, “incoherently revolutionary”, our account of the main war may very well end. Here we will only allude to the defeat and demoralization of the Italian armies after the battle of Caporetto, when 800,000 were either killed, wounded, taken prisoner, or (sensible fellows) “went home”. Nor will we describe the naval battles, of which the chief and last was Jutland. It was the last, because afterwards the German admirals were faced by the threat of mutiny if they essayed another fight. Whether it was or was not a victory for the British was never exactly determined. The controversy died out during the Polish wars.

The War Pictures volumes give many photographs and accounts of these naval encounters. We have, for example, a whole series of snapshots of a British cruiser in the Battle of Jutland, the Defence steaming at full-speed-ahead to attack and finish up a smashed and sinking German battleship, the Wiesbaden. The onrush of that fierce mechanism is terrific. It seems invincible and overpowering. It has an undeniable splendour. Then suddenly a series of blinding flashes show the Defence has been hit by the fire of some other German battleship coming to the help of her sister ship, and in a moment she has blown up and gone; she is no more than a mounting unfolding column of smoke and flying fragments, including, we realize with an effort, the torn and scalded bodies of eight hundred men. Then a welter of littered tumbled water. . . .

There is no end to the multitude of such pictures.

But let us return to our phrase “incoherently revolutionary”. That is the key to the whole human situation at that time. The distaste for the war throughout the world was enormous, if not in its opening phases, then certainly before the second year was reached. It bored; it disgusted. Its events had none of the smashing decisiveness that seizes the imagination. Even the great naval battle of Jutland was, from the point of view of spectacle, a complete failure. None the less, for a very simple reason a comparatively small minority of resolutely

belligerent persons was able to keep this vast misery going. On the one hand the war was in accordance with the ruling ideas of the time, while on the other the hundreds of millions whose astonishment and dismay deepened daily, as horror unfolded beyond horror, had no conception of any alternative pattern of life to which they could turn as a refuge from its relentless sequences.

To cry "End the war" ended nothing, because it gave no intimations of what had to replace belligerent governments in the control of human affairs. The peace the masses craved for was as yet only a featureless negative. But peace must be a positive thing, designed and sustained, for peace is less natural than warfare. We who have at last won through to the Pax Mundi know how strong and resolute, how powerfully equipped and how vigilant, the keepers of the peace must be.