

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

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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,

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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

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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 the 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;

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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

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general 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 to 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

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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

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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 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

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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 hill-side 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. Very 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

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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

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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

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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 in 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

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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 upon 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 round by her right wing. At no time shall I be surprised to see a sudden lunge forward on that front, and hear of 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 the 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

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them by an abler pen than mine. I hear that Kipling is to follow me upon this round ; 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

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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 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 in the Dolomites has been perhaps the most wonderful of all these separate mountain campaigns. I went up by automobile as far as the clambering new road goes up the

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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 scree, 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 bandaged men were coming down on led mules. It was mid-August, and they were suffering from frost-bite. 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

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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.

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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 bearing barks 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. It was 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 post. 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

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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 dirompimento" 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

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to which the ordinary tourist rarely climbs, in a rarefied, chest-tightening atmosphere, with wisps of cloud 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 to 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

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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 their 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 in by sheer weight of men and guns in the centre; they lost guns and prisoners because of that 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 as Vicenza, Marostica and Bassano

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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 thing 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 strangled 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 is 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

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bear to see no more ruins unless they are the ruins of Dusseldorf, Cologne, Berlin, or such-like 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 æsthetic 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 louder scale, and disappointed me extremely.) As I sat and listened to this 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.

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I doubt if 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 has very much of the quality of a very pretty and cheerful little 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

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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 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

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have made no such deep and enduring breach as these silly, futile assassinations have done 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 against the quay. There was no competition for a potential passenger; a small boy walked down 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. . . .

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§ 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

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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 the German 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 Jugoslav riddle and of the question of post war finance. So far as the former matter goes I

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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

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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 people 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 in 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 mediæval lines, the banker has had to be suggestive and persuasive, sympathetic and help-

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ful. 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

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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 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

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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

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be favoured again, Italian and Allied enterprises blockaded and embarrassed, the good understanding of Italians and English poisoned, entirely through this organisation. . . .

The reasonable uncommercial man would like to reject all this last sort of talk as "suspicion mania." So far as the Banca Commerciale Italiana goes, I at least find that easy enough; I quote that instance simply because it is a case where suspicion has been dispelled, but in regard to a score of other business veins it is not so easy to dispel suspicion. This war has been a shock to reasonable men the whole world over. They have been forced to realise that after all a great number of Germans have been engaged in a crack-brained conspiracy against the non-German world; that in a great number of cases when one does business with a German the business does not end with the individual German. We hated to believe that a business could be tainted by German partners or German associations. If now we err on the side of over-suspicion, it is the German's little weakness for patriotic disingenuousness that is most to blame. . . .

But anyhow I do not think there is much good in a kind of witch-smelling among Italian enterprises to find the hidden German. Certain things are necessary for Italian prosperity

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and Italy must get them. The Italians want intelligent and helpful capital. They want a helpful France. They want bituminous coal for metallurgical purposes. They want cheap shipping. The French too want metallurgical coal. It is more important for civilisation, for the general goodwill of the Allies and for Great Britain that these needs should be supplied than that individual British money-owners or ship-owners should remain sluggishly rich by insisting upon high security or high freights. The control of British coal-mining and shipping in the national interests—for international interests—rather than for the creation of that particularly passive, obstructive and wasteful type of wealth, the wealth of the mere profiteer, is as urgent a necessity for the commercial welfare of France and Italy and the endurance of the Great Alliance as it is for the well-being of the common man in Britain.

§ 3

I left my military guide at Verona on Saturday afternoon and reached Milan in time to dine outside Salvini's in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, with an Italian fellow story-writer. The place was as full as ever; we had to wait for a table. It is notable that

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there were still great numbers of young men not in uniform in Milan and Turin and Vicenza and Verona; there was no effect anywhere of a depletion of men. The whole crowded place was smouldering with excitement. The diners looked about them as they talked, some talked loudly and seemed to be expressing sentiments. Newspaper vendors appeared at the intersection of the arcades, uttering ambiguous cries, and did a brisk business of flitting white sheets among the little tables.

"To-night," said my companion, "I think we shall declare war upon Germany. The decision is being made."

I asked intelligently why this had not been done before. I forget the precise explanation he gave. A young soldier in uniform, who had been dining at an adjacent table and whom I had not recognised before as a writer I had met some years previously in London, suddenly joined in our conversation, with a slightly different explanation. I had been carrying on a conversation in ungainly French, but now I relapsed into English.

But indeed the matter of that declaration of war is as plain as daylight; the Italian national consciousness has not at first that direct sense of the German danger that exists in the minds of the three northern Allies. To

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the Italian the traditional enemy is Austria, and this war is not primarily a war for any other end than the emancipation of Italy. Moreover we have to remember that for years there has been serious commercial friction between France and Italy, and considerable mutual elbowing in North Africa. Both Frenchmen and Italians are resolute to remedy this now, but the restoration of really friendly and trustful relations is not to be done in a day. It has been an extraordinary misfortune for Great Britain that instead of boldly taking over her shipping from its private owners and using it all, regardless of their profit, in the interests of herself and her allies, her government has permitted so much of it as military and naval needs have not requisitioned to continue to ply for gain, which the government itself has shared by a tax on war profits. The Anglophobe elements in Italian public life have made the utmost use of this folly or laxity in relation more particularly to the consequent dearness of coal in Italy. They have carried on an amazingly effective campaign in which this inconvenience, which is due entirely to our British slackness with the individual profiteer, is represented as if it were the deliberate greed of the British state. This certainly contributed very much to fortify Italy's dis-

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inclination to slam the door on the German connection.

I did my best to make it clear to my two friends that so far from England exploiting Italy, I myself suffered in exactly the same way as any Italian, through the extraordinary liberties of our shipping interest. "I pay as well as you do," I said; "the shippers' blockade of Great Britain is more effective than the submarines'. My food, my coal, my petrol are all restricted in the sacred name of private property. You see, capital in England has hitherto been not an exploitation but a hold-up. We are learning differently now. . . . And anyhow, Mr. Runciman has been here and given Italy assurances. . . ."

In the train to Modane this old story recurred again. It is imperative that English readers should understand clearly how thoroughly these little matters have been *worked* by the enemy.

Some slight civilities led to a conversation that revealed the Italian lady in the corner as an Irishwoman married to an Italian, and also brought out the latent English of a very charming elderly lady opposite to her. She had heard a speech, a wonderful speech from a railway train, by "the Lord Runciman." He had said the most beautiful things about Italy.

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I did my best to echo those beautiful things.

Then the Irishwoman remarked that Mr. Runciman had not satisfied everybody. She and her husband had met a minister—I found afterwards he was one of the members of the late Giolotti government—who had been talking very loudly and scornfully of the bargain Italy was making with England. I assured her that the desire of England was simply to give Italy all that she needed.

"But," said the husband casually, "Mr. Runciman is a shipowner."

I explained that he was nothing of the sort. It was true that he came of a shipowning family—and perhaps inherited a slight tendency to see things from a shipowning point of view—but in England we did not suspect a man on such a score as that.

"In Italy I think we should," said the husband of the Irish lady.

§ 4

This incidental discussion is a necessary part of my impression of Italy at war. The two western allies and Great Britain in particular have to remember Italy's economic needs, and to prepare to rescue them from the blind exploitation of private profit. They have to

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remember these needs too, because, if they are left out of the picture, then it becomes impossible to understand the full measure of the risk Italy has faced in undertaking this war for an idea. With a Latin lucidity she has counted every risk, and with a Latin idealism she has taken her place by the side of those who fight for a liberal civilisation against a Byzantine imperialism.

As I came out of the brightly lit Galleria Vittorio Emanuele into the darkened Piazza del Duomo I stopped under the arcade and stood looking up at the shadowy darknesses of that great pinnacled barn, that marble bride-cake, which is, I suppose, the last southward fortress of the Franco-English Gothic.

"It was here," said my host, "that we burnt the German stuff."

"What German stuff?"

"Pianos and all sorts of things. From the shops. It is possible, you know, to buy things too cheaply—and give too much for the cheapness."