

British Future Fiction

Disasters-to-come

Edited by
I. F. Clarke



ROUTLEDGE


BRITISH FUTURE FICTION

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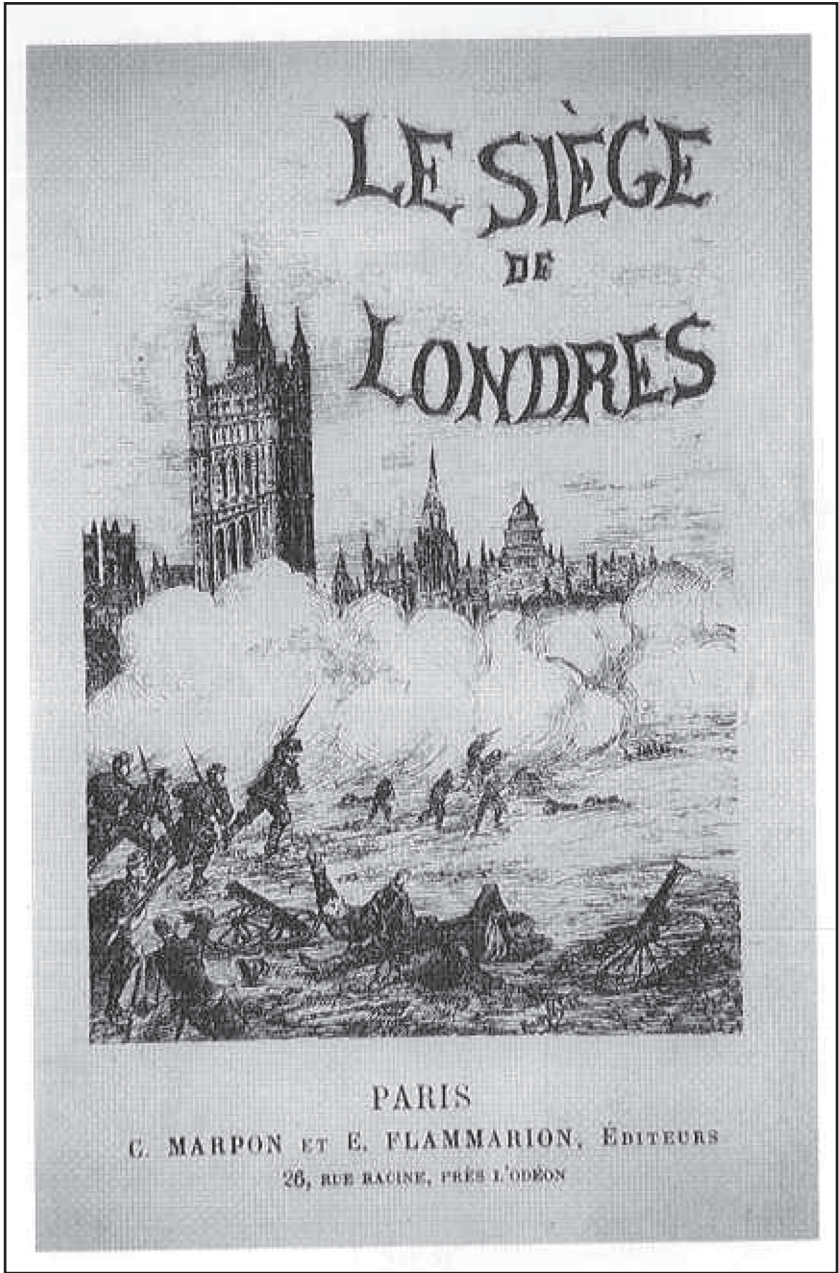
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26, RUE RACINE, PRÈS L'ODÉON

Frontispiece to the French translation of *The Siege of London*

BRITISH FUTURE FICTION

Volume 7
Disasters-to-Come

Edited by
I. F. Clarke

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2001 by Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited

Published 2016 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

British Future Fiction: 1700–1914
1. Science fiction, English
I. Clarke, I. F. (Ignatius Frederick)
823'.08762

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

British future fiction / edited by I. F. Clarke.
p.cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Science fiction, English. 2. Forecasting—Fiction. I. Clarke, I. F. (Ignatius Frederick)
PR1309.S3 B75 2000
823'.0876208–dc21
00–051036

ISBN-13: 978-1-85196-617-2 (set)

Typeset by Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited

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THE DEATH TRAP

From 1900 onwards relations between Germany and the United Kingdom moved from less than cordial to open hostility. That crucial shift in the European power system was reflected and projected in a new kind of *Zukunftskrieg* and in many tales of 'The Next Great War'. The change came rapidly. Previously writers had been in two minds about the other side in tomorrow's war. France appeared as the expected enemy in six future-war stories, and Germany in three.¹ In 1900, however, the first outright declaration of hostilities on the German side came from Dr Karl Eisenhart. The day would come, he declared in *Die Abrechnung mit England*, when the German Navy 'could take on the hated English', and he proved that hope by describing a naval war in which the Germans destroy two British fleets. On the British side the first considered and candid statement on the possibility of a war between Britain and Germany came in 1903, in Erskine Childers's classic tale *The Riddle of the Sands*. There the principal actors in the war-to-come made their first appearance: Kaiser Wilhelm II and the *Hochseeflotte*. The Emperor had announced on New Year's Day 1900 that he intended to reorganise the German Navy so that 'with its help, the German Empire shall reach the place which it has not yet attained'. Those intentions are the key to the riddle in Childers's story, since the Emperor is present on the tug when it makes the mysterious trial trip through the waterways in the gap between Langeoog and Baltrum. In one of the most telling incidents in the future-war fiction of that time Carruthers suddenly realises what is afoot:

I was assisting at an experimental rehearsal of a great scene, to be enacted, perhaps, in the near future - a scene when multitudes of sea-going lighters, carrying full loads of soldiers, not half loads of coal, should issue simultaneously, in seven ordered fleets, from seven shallow outlets, and, under escort of the Imperial Navy, traverse the North Sea and throw themselves bodily upon English shores.²

Childers had generated the German invasion myth. He presented his reasons for believing the worst by reasserting the common British expectation of German enmity - 'our great trade rival of the present, our great naval rival of the future' - and he revealed the first stages of *Die 'Offensiv-Invasion' gegen England* in a series of most convincing episodes.

The possibility of a war with Germany was made even more credit-worthy in 1904 by the swift translation of August Niemann's *Der Weltkrieg-Deutsche Träume*, published earlier in that year. The English title told readers what Germany intended - *The Coming Conquest of England*. 'The Next Great War' had begun, a fictional conflict that would see fantasy taken to the limits of the imaginable. The most extreme form was a replay of the French invasion yarns of the 1880s. Then it was the French, secretly waiting in Dover, ready to rush from their hiding places and seize the entry to the Channel Tunnel. In 1906 the hidden foes were members of 'The Secret Army in Waiting', so Walter Wood revealed in *The Enemy in our Midst*. They had mapped the whole of southern England; they knew every telephone centre and all the supply points in their designated areas; and they were controlled by a sinister figure, the director of 'The Committee of Secret Preparations'. He takes control in the fourth chapter, 'The Plan of War', assigning tasks and duties to five German officers. 'It was Captain Mahler who spoke; and, as he uttered the words, the weals on his face once more became livid.' The tell-tale sabre cut said 'German spy' to those who could read the runes. Walter Wood knew what those German waiters and bandsmen were about; but the foolish, trusting British public could not believe that it would be possible 'for aliens in its midst to be secretly armed and drilled, that stores of arms and ammunition can be got together, that with the machine-like precision of the German Army everything can be mapped out like a railway time-table'.

These stories followed on, and responded to, the steady decline in relations between the British and the Germans that began after the Entente of 1904 and the Moroccan crisis of 1905. From 1906 onwards the tally of future-war stories - British, French, and German - rose steadily: twelve in 1906, nineteen in 1907, sixteen in 1908, twenty in 1909 after the Austrian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Their titles were frank declarations of the hopes and the fears of three nations: *The Death Trap*; *The War Inevitable*; *A German Invasion*; '1906': *Der Zusammenbruch der alten Welt*; *Der deutschenglische Krieg*; *Mit deutschen Waffen über Paris nach London*; *La Guerre franc-allemande*; *Guerre maritime et sous-marine*; *Belgique Française: une guerre franco-allemande*.³ For ten years before the Sarajevo assassinations set the Schlieffen Plan in motion, the expected war raged on in fiction. Most of the medals for distinguished service go to British writers - for the largest sustained production of these stories and for the most ingenious variations on the one theme of the war with Germany.

Future-war fiction had become a most valuable commodity for publishers and for the editors of the new mass newspapers. Harmsworth had led the way by commissioning William Le Queux to write 'The Poisoned Bullet' for *Answers* in 1894. By 1906 Harmsworth had become Baron Northcliffe and the most powerful newspaper proprietor of the pre-war period. He used his *Daily Mail* to transmit his views to the nation, especially his demands for a greater fleet and his

suspicious of German intentions. Like many of his readers he had found cause for alarm when William II made a parade visit to Tangier in March 1905; for the Emperor seemed to challenge the British and the French with his assertion that Germany had 'great and growing interests in Morocco'. Northcliffe sent for William Le Queux and ordered a full-length German invasion story. This became the serial account of *The Invasion of 1910*, which began in the *Daily Mail* on 20 March 1906 and ended on 4 July that year. Le Queux told the tale of invasion in great detail, describing actions in well-known areas of London where readers of the *Daily Mail* were thought to live. The chapter relating 'The Rain of Death', for example, began most dramatically:

Through the whole afternoon the heavy German artillery roared, belching forth their fiery vengeance upon London...Hour after hour they pounded away, until St Paneras Church was a heap of ruins and the Foundling Hospital a veritable furnace, as well as the Parcel Post offices and the University College in Gower Street. In Hampstead Road many of the shops were shattered, and in Tottenham Court Road both Maple's and Shoolbred's suffered severely, for shells bursting in the centre of the roadway had smashed every pane of glass in the front of both buildings.⁴

The story was an immense success. Sales of the *Daily Mail* rose by 80,000. The book of the serial sold close on 1,000,000 copies; and the story was translated into twenty-seven languages.⁵ The German edition, *Der Einfall der Deutschen in England*, was a shortened and improved version of the original. It was very popular with German readers, since the translator gave the final victory to the Germans.

That was the beginning of the most extraordinary phase in the evolution of future-war fiction. By 1906 the myth of 'The German Invasion' was so firmly implanted in the popular imagination that it became a suitable subject for poetry, for the stage, and for that gifted cartoonist, Heath Robinson. The first prize for inventiveness has to go to Charles Doughty, renowned traveller and self-appointed guardian of the English language. His response to the threat of a German invasion was to describe the descent of the Germans in verse: first, in the long verse drama, *The Cliffs*, in 1909 and then in an even longer narrative poem, *The Clouds* in 1912. By 1909 the invasion story had reached the London stage where Captain Guy du Maurier's play *An Englishman's Home* was the theatrical sensation of the year. It made such an impression on the editor of the *Annual Register* that it was noted in the major events of the year as 'a sensational though shortlived success (which) was achieved by "a play with a purpose" - *An Englishman's Home* - dealing with no less a matter than the invasion of England by a foreign power, whose identity was, to say the least, thinly veiled.'⁶

However, there was a funny side to the proliferation of these invasion stories - an open opposition from all who could not take the German menace as seriously as the advocates of conscription or of a bigger Navy. There were occasional satiri-

cal articles in *Punch* and one splendid send-up of the invasion story by a young man who became the best of twentieth-century humorous writers. P. G. Wodehouse had not come to fame and fortune in 1909, when he wrote *The Swoop! or, How Clarence Saved England: A Tale of the Great Invasion*, a comic inversion of all the stock elements in the tale of the German invasion. Nine invading armies storm ashore at the most improbable points on the British coast:

It seemed that while Germany was landing in Essex, a strong force of Russians, under the Grand Duke Vodkakoff, had occupied Yarmouth. Simultaneously the Mad Mullah had captured Portsmouth; while the Swiss navy had bombarded Lyme Regis, and landed troops immediately to the westward of the bathing-machines.⁷

Derision is the objective in Wodehouse's tale of the great invasion. The country is not saved by the gallant heroes of the Royal Navy, but by 'the Boy of Destiny, Clarence MacAndrew Chugwater, one of General Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts'. And derision was the objective in the eleven cartoons by Heath Robinson that began in *The Sketch* on 20 April 1910 under the heading of 'Incidents of the Coming Invasion'. The editor did not doubt that the readers would see the jokes, since he introduced the cartoons tongue in cheek: 'So many authors have described in detail the invasion of England by Germany that Mr Heath Robinson's patriotism has led him to make a thorough investigation of the subject with some remarkable results.'⁸

Heath Robinson worked his way through the stereotype situations of the German invasion stories: German spies hiding in trees in Epping Forest; German troops, disguised as tourists, in a North Sea ferry; a masked raid on Yarmouth beach. They were comic representations of the more absurd elements in the tale of the great invasion - the Army of Preparation, the secret plans of the Kaiser, sudden attacks on the Channel Fleet, ruthless German troops shooting helpless civilians. All these appear in *The Death Trap*, an extravagant tale of extraordinary brutality and chauvinistic fantasy. It ranks with William Le Queux's *The Invasion of 1910* as a rabble-rousing exercise in popular fiction for the masses. Kaiser Wilhelm II appears in the first pages as the Demon King. Let the world tremble, for his mind is set on conquering: 'Germany must increase. It is her divine duty to expand, and eventually become a world-empire; it is my heaven-sent mission to become Emperor of the West.'

Notes

1. France is the enemy in: Colonel F. N. Maude, *The New Battle of Dorking*, 1900; Anonymous, *The Sack of London in the Great French War of 1901*, 1901; Captain Cairnes, *The Coming Waterloo*, 1901; L. Tracy, *The Invaders*, 1901. The French are discovered to be constructing a secret tunnel under the Channel for the invasion of England in: F. M. Allen (E. Downey), *London's Peril*, 1900, and in M. Pemberton, *Pro Potria*, 1901. Germany is to be the enemy in: T. W. Offin, *How the Germans Took London*; A. C. Curtis, *A New*

- Trafalgar*, 1901; Anonymous (L. James), *The Boy Galloper*, 1903.
2. Erskine Childers, *The Riddle of the Sands. A Record of Secret Service* (Oxford: Oxford Popular Fiction, 1995), p. 247.
 3. A full list of the pre-1914 future wars appears in: I. F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War*, 1992.
 4. William Le Queux, *The Invasion of 1910* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1906), p. 344.
 5. N. St Barbe Slade, *The Real Le Queux* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1938), p. 195.
 6. The author was Guy du Maurier, second-in-command 3rd Battalion The Royal Fusiliers and brother of the celebrated actor-manager, Gerald du Maurier, who produced the play. It opened at Wyndham's Theatre on 27 January 1909 and was 'sold out' every night, generating immense enthusiasm, cheering audiences, queues of volunteers to join the new Territorial Army, and many notices and photographs in the weekly magazines.
 7. P. G. Wodehouse, *The Swoop; or how Clarence saved England. A Tale of the Great Invasion* (London: Alston Rivers, 1909), p. 21.
 8. William Heath Robinson (1872–1944) was a quintessential English humorist and a gifted draughtsman with a genius for absurd and fantastic designs. His popularity can be seen in the term 'Heath Robinson' which registers an impossible contraption of the most elaborate kind designed for trivial tasks - a steam-driven mechanism, for example, dedicated to extracting pips from grapes.



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THE DEATH TRAP

BY

R. W. COLE

Author of "His Other Self"

LONDON
GREENING & CO., LTD.

1907

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Part I
PROLOGUE
CHAPTER I

It was nearly midnight.

The night was dark and stormy, the wind howled, and driving rain beat against the windows of a pair-horse landau, which slowly and laboriously rolled westwards, through mud and darkness, across the Franco-German frontier. On the box were two men, wearing the greatcoats and helmets of German soldiers. Inside sat three officers of the German army, evidently high in command, but so muffled up as to be almost unrecognisable. They were stern, silent, and forbidding. One, who sat facing the horses, was a man of commanding appearance. His face was deadly pale, but every feature betokened intense ambition and selfishness, supported by unconquerable energy and resolution. His moustache was brushed away from his mouth, the ends curling upwards. He was evidently the leader of the party, to judge from the deference and respect with which the other men treated him.

Opposite the Chief, and on the right hand side of the carriage, was a stout, heavily-built man, with dark eyes, massive, brooding brow, and a terribly firm and cruel mouth, denoting merciless devotion to purpose. This was Prince Hohenhaus, Chancellor of the German Empire, a man hated and feared throughout Europe and the world for his subtle policy and the deadly strokes of aggression he had dealt in Bismarckian fashion at the countries standing in his way. Now his brow was sombre and lowering, for he was thinking out, by the wish of his Imperial Master, the final details of what was to be the last crowning act of Germany's career of robbery and aggression.

The third occupant of the carriage sat next the Chancellor. He was tall, thin, and clean-shaven, his eyes steel-blue, and his face seamed with a line network of lines. His lips were thin and firm, and his mouth appeared to be even more cruel than that of the Chancellor. He was Field-marshal von Prankhe, the great German strategist, of world-wide fame, on account of his vast military genius. These three men were the ruling chiefs of Germany, the skilful engineers who controlled the vast pent-up forces of the mighty German Empire; three Fates, who plotted with relentless determination the ruin of rival states.

The carriage had rumbled for miles through flying mud and blinding rain, whilst none of the three spoke. They were still silent when it crossed the frontier and entered French territory. But a few moments later, the man who faced the horses spoke.

“Yes, my mind is quite made up,” he suddenly exclaimed, in a harsh voice. “There must be no turning back now we have put our hand to the plough—no faintheartedness. I have determined to make this great venture, and I will shrink from no sacrifice to bring it to a successful conclusion. I can do nothing else; there is no other line of policy open to me.”

“There is not, Your Majesty,” assented the Chancellor.

“I have thought everything over very carefully, and I can suggest no other way out of the difficulty.”

“Wherever we go, whatever we want to do,” continued the pale man in quick, sharp sentences, “England stands in our way. She is our rival in the sea-carrying trade, in manufactures, in commerce, in empire, in everything. We can touch nothing inside or outside Europe without England interfering. If we want a country to colonise, England is there before us. We can do nothing but sit still in Europe and twiddle our thumbs as long as England dictates to the world with her fleet and her power. It is England, England everywhere. Germany cannot have a world-wide policy whilst this British Empire exists.”

“Your Majesty is right,” assented the Chancellor. “England prevents our legitimate expansion; England crushes us.”

“But the end must come,” continued the other. “My empire cannot bear the strain much longer. Its commercial prosperity is declining. Its population is too great, and there is no outlet for it in any quarter of the globe. The United States will not let us take part of South America on account of the Monroe doctrine. England has the cream of Africa and all India and Australia. England, and her yellow servant Japan, forbid the partition of China. It is England, England all over the world corking up my people in their narrow bottle, suppressing their legitimate aspirations, thwarting the mission of expansion which God has given them. But relief *must* be found somehow. The Socialists are increasing in numbers and influence. Industrial troubles accumulate daily. Sufficient food cannot be found in this barren Central Europe to support my teeming people. Germany must increase. It is her divine destiny to expand, and eventually become a world-empire; it is my Heaven-sent mission to become Emperor of the West. By the grace of God, and the power of my sword, I shall rule over the greatest and most mighty empire the world has ever seen. But what obstructs the legitimate expansion of Germany? England, always England! She throttles us; she murders us; she must be blotted out.”

While he was speaking his eyes flashed and his pale face flushed with excitement. The other two nodded in silence.

“The first thing necessary is a coalition,” he continued. “We don't require soldiers, but warships and sailors. France and Russia have plenty, Russia has already promised to join us in crushing England on condition that we give her a free hand in India and Manchuria. We can make France join by threatening war. There is nothing she dreads more than a conflict with my army. The German

army crushed her in 1870, and it could crush her as easily now. We shall have to promise her North Africa as her reward.”

“I don’t like the idea of giving up North Africa,” interrupted the Chancellor.

“We can easily repudiate that part of the bargain when England is crushed and prostrate on the ground. I have thought everything over, and success seems certain. The British Empire is merely a colossal fraud, held together by weak bonds, and ready to fall to pieces at any moment. It is even more rotten than the Roman Empire at the time of its fall. I have received secret information of vast importance regarding this terrible British navy, before which all the world trembles. The shooting is very bad, the gun sights are defective, the guns tear their rifling after a few rounds, and the armour-plating is not what it is believed to be. The British public has been deluded and defrauded for years by that delightful Unionist Government it trusts so much. Now I *know* that the ships of my navy are the soundest and best obtainable. The British Government knows nothing whatever about its numbers. I have dozens of submarines, destroyers, and torpedo-boats secretly laid up in the dockyards, and ready to be commissioned at a moment’s notice. At the present time, the private shipbuilders have battleships and cruisers ready in every detail, and it has been announced that they were built to the order of certain South American republics, I have arranged that all the finest vessels of the mercantile marine will be handed over to me in the event of war, to act as cruisers or transports. France has several powerful squadrons, and the Russian navy has vastly improved since the Russo-Japanese war. England will be without her Far Eastern and East Indian squadrons, and the great number of cruisers required to escort her food ships. British auxiliary ships cannot be mustered at a moment’s notice, for they are scattered over the globe. The French and German vessels, added to the hosts we can muster, will outnumber the British fleet by nearly two to one. We will fall on it suddenly and annihilate it, and then the load will be clear for the invasion of England.

“The fact that England is not a self-supporting country is the principal factor that will determine her fate. Five-sixths of her food is imported, and there is never sufficient in the country to last for more than six weeks. Food will go up to famine prices directly war is declared. That will not touch the rich, but will be an unbearable hardship to the masses. We shall do everything to keep food away from them. When the proper time arrives, agents of the German Government will buy up all the available supplies of wheat in Russia, Argentina, Canada, and the United States. For weeks beforehand, there will be German agents in Britain to buy up and hold under assumed names all the food they can lay hands on. When war is declared, they will be instructed to hold back all the food under their control. That will be bad enough for the British public. But when the naval crash comes, the price of food will be prohibitive to the masses. The great towns will be filled by raving, starving mobs. Maddened by hunger, they will riot and

demand peace at any price. The law-abiding, staid, and stodgy English citizen will become a lunatic when he sees his wife and family starving. What can the British Government do against vast hordes of starving savages?

“Meanwhile, my invincible army will cross the Channel, and land on the south-eastern coast of England. The wise British public has been living in a fool’s paradise as regards the possibilities of an invasion. Its Prime Ministers have cajoled it into thinking that the invasion of England is absolutely impossible. The state of the British army was bad enough then, but it has been allowed to grow worse since. It cannot muster many more than three hundred thousand all told, probably not nearly so many. The officers are very badly trained and educated. Promotion goes by petticoat influence and money. There is not even a single general fit to command a division. The physique of the rank and file is very poor. The militia and volunteers are totally inefficient. The artillery is armed with out-of-date weapons, The British magazine-rifle is much inferior to ours. The coast fortresses are not even worthy of the name; they will fall without firing a shot.

“Once the British navy is out of the way, we will prove that the theories of eminent British strategists are wrong, by landing eight hundred thousand men, with full equipment of guns and horses, in a few weeks. The road from the coast to London is quite open, and the country as defenceless as a garden. The British have only their regulars and auxiliaries to depend upon, between three and four hundred thousand altogether. They cannot obtain more soldiers, because they have no compulsory military service or universal military training. The stolid British cannot fight on empty stomachs. Even supposing the whole nation flies to arms, which is quite unlikely, of what use would it be? The British masses are quite untrained, and know nothing of soldiering. Soldiers are not made in a day, or even in a month, and by that time we shall have thrust our sword into the heart of the British Empire. Even supposing they had the men, who is to organise a huge levy? who drill the men? and where are the trained officers capable of directing a gigantic army of raw levies? Then they have not sufficient arms and ammunition. There are not half a million rifles in the country, and scarcely sufficient field-guns for the regulars. As at the time of the Boer War, their arsenals are nearly depleted of ammunition. We shall find no opposition beyond the three or four hundred thousand men of all arms. My army will surround the British army somewhere on the borders between Surrey and Kent, and annihilate it once and forever. Then we shall march on to London, and fight our way through the defenceless suburbs. If the British Government does not yield then, we shall bombard London from the suburbs, fight our way through the streets, and capture the Houses of Parliament, Government Offices, and public buildings. We shall have previously captured Chatham, Sheerness, and Woolwich. Then, with the War Office, Admiralty, Foreign Office, Bank of England, Stock Exchange, Post Office, and Houses of Parliament in our hands, the British Government will not have the power of

further resistance. The mob of starving people will insist on peace at any price, so that the horrors of invasion may cease, and they can get food.

“We shall then dictate our terms of peace at London. All British colonies to be handed over to Germany, all British warships in any port to be surrendered, the payment of an indemnity of four hundred millions, the Mediterranean and Baltic to be closed to British warships, and the march of my army in triumph through London. Everything *must* succeed as I have arranged it. But very probably we shall not have to bombard London. After the first great battle, when the British army has been destroyed, the mob may make the Government surrender unconditionally. They must have food, and they will have it at any price. If the Unionist Government is turned out, as it probably will be after the first disaster, the Liberals, Irish, and Little Englanders will let all the empire go without a struggle. My scheme cannot fail to be successful. Starvation, unpreparedness, incapacity, lack of patriotism, deficient physique, and love of ease, everything will conspire to help it forward.”

“Excellent!” commented the Chancellor.

“If the British fleet is cleared away, and twenty of Your Majesty’s army corps landed,” said Prankhe, “I will guarantee to annihilate the British army in three or four weeks.”

“Good!” exclaimed the German Emperor. “But now listen again, both of you. Crushing England is only the beginning of my great scheme for founding a worldwide German Empire. When I have made terms with England, I shall seize Holland, Belgium, Denmark, and part of Austria without much difficulty. Then I shall join Russia in crashing the naval power and commerce of Japan. Germany and her Kaiser will no more brook a rival in the East than in the West. I shall make Japan keep to her island home. Then I shall attack and annex the republics of South America. If the United States has anything to say to the contrary, she will have to fight my ever-victorious fleet. No country of the earth will be able to stand against my power.”

He paused for breath, and looked at his two hearers with flashing eyes. As he finished speaking, the carriage rumbled and jolted over the rough paving-stones of the French frontier town, Rodelles. It was a little insignificant town, boasting one street and one inn. The three arbiters of the destinies of Germany and the world were silent while the carriage rolled down the street of the sleeping town. There was not a living being visible anywhere; there was no sound but the roar of wind and the patter of rain. All the inhabitants of Rodelles, at least nearly all, were sleeping the sleep of the just.

Little did the humble peasants or petty tradespeople guess that the first scene of a terrible drama would be played in their midst on that very night!

The inn was the only house in Rodelles where there appeared to be any life. There were lights at the windows and at the open doors. Evidently visitors were

expected, for a small stout man ran down the steps when the carriage approached. As it pulled up at the door, the clock of a neighbouring church tolled the hour of midnight.

“Punctual to the minute!” exclaimed the Kaiser, as he stepped to the ground. “I hope the French are here.”

The party walked into the hall, followed by the bowing landlord.

“Is the room upstairs ready?” inquired Prince Hohenhaus.

“Certainly, the room is prepared. Will the gentlemen walk upstairs?”

“Have the other gentlemen arrived?” continued the Prince. “We are about to meet some French excise officials. We anticipate smuggling trouble.”

“The other gentlemen are already upstairs. They have inquired for the German officials.”

“Are we quite alone here?”

“Quite alone. There are no other guests in the house. It has been reserved in accordance with instructions.”

“Well, to business!” exclaimed Hohenhaus, with a meaning look at his Imperial Master.

The landlord led the way up the creaking staircase. The German Emperor, carefully muffled in an overcoat, followed him, then the other two, and lastly an aide-de-camp, who had ridden on the box with the driver. The landlord opened the door and ushered in the three Germans. Then he withdrew, and the aide-de-camp closed the door and remained on guard outside.

CHAPTER II

TWO Frenchmen rose and bowed as the newcomers entered. They were Monsieur Donaine, the President of the French republic, and Monsieur Chauvier, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, The former was the first to speak.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” he said, “We are here as you desired. We have considered your proposals carefully, and regret that we cannot accept them.”

The Kaiser’s brow darkened, and his eyes flashed angrily.

“We will talk about that presently,” he exclaimed with an impatient wave of his hand. “Where are the Russians? Have they not arrived?”

“Not yet.”

“They should be here by now. They left Berlin an hour before we departed; I saw them before I started, and they accept all our proposals. India and Manchuria are to be their reward.”

As the Kaiser spoke, there was a rumbling of wheels outside, and another closed carriage was driven up to the door at a smart pace. There was a noise of shuffling feet on the pavement, and the bang of a carriage door. Then heavy footsteps were heard ascending the creaking stairs, and the aide-de-camp ush-

ered two tall bearded men into the room. These were Prince Zeidsomsky, the Russian Foreign Minister, and the Grand Duke Alexis Alexandrovitch. Bows were exchanged with the newcomers, and the door was closed. There were a few moments of intense silence, broken only by the heavy breathing of the seven men. The air seemed to be pervaded by a fearful nervous tension. At last the Kaiser advanced to the table and spoke.

"Well, gentlemen," he exclaimed abruptly as he glanced at the four statesmen with his flashing eye, "you all know my proposals?"

The Frenchmen and Russians nodded silently. Prince Hohenhaus drew apart, and looked out of the window, but von Prankhe surveyed the Frenchmen with his glittering steel-blue eyes.

"Russia agrees to everything," continued the Kaiser in a meaning voice.

"That is so," said the Grand Duke. "We assent to everything."

"And what reply does France give?" he asked sharply, turning to the two Frenchmen.

"France declines," replied the President in a voice that trembled slightly in spite of his efforts to keep it firm. "She will not act against the *entente cordiale*. She has no cause for quarrel with Great Britain, and does not wish to find one."

The air seemed surcharged with electricity as the President finished speaking.

"So those are your views?" asked the Kaiser in an icy tone.

"They are."

The Kaiser's face became whiter and whiter with savage passion.

"Now listen!" he exclaimed fiercely, as he brought his clenched fist down on the table with a bang. "Do you know what the alternative is? If you will not fight Great Britain, you will be compelled to fight the mighty German Empire. I shall make a pretext for war at a suitable time, and send my armies over the frontier. They are larger, better organised, more highly trained, and more skilfully led than yours. I shall swamp France with my soldiers. I shall crush your wretched republic once and for all time with the ever-victorious sword of my never-to-be-forgotten ancestors. What help will your England give you then? Of what use will your *entente cordiale* be? Even your friend and ally, Russia, barter you for India and Manchuria. You did not help Russia in her struggle with Japan, and she will not help you against me. Russia has been husbanding her resources, and making vast preparations for campaigns in India and Manchuria since the termination of the Russo-Japanese War. Her *amour propre* was wounded by the successes of the Japanese, and she will not rest until her army and navy have recovered her prestige. Hence she falls in with every detail of my plans, and throws France over; you may go to the dogs for what she cares. Even now she is massing vast hordes of troops in Central Asia. As usual, the inefficient and lazy British Intelligence Department knows absolutely nothing of the concentration of hostile troops on the borders of the British Empire. Directly war is declared against Great Britain,

these troops will be marched across Afghanistan; they will swamp the wretchedly-led Indian army, and take India. With her sea-power gone, England can do nothing to retrieve the disaster. She will have lost India for ever.”

The German Dictator of Europe paused a moment to take breath. Then he continued the same savage menacing language.

“If you refuse my terms, what do you suppose England can or will do to save France from my armies? She can help you on the sea; together you might destroy my navy, harass my commerce. But what of that? The conflict will be decided on land, and on French soil, and I shall dictate my terms of peace at Paris. Can England help you there? What advantage will you gain if she sends over her puny army of two or three hundred thousand men? Her army will be like a mouse between the paws of a cat. Small, ill-trained and ill-led, we shall crush the British army like matchwood. One German army can settle *that*. The rest of my armies will crush you, *you!* They will take Paris, and dictate terms of peace to your republic. One-third of France to become German territory, a huge indemnity; that is what we shall demand. Refuse it, and my armies overrun and bleed France until she yields, England may ruin our over-sea trade, but it is *you*—*you* who will have to pay the bill in money and territory. The more damage: England does to us, the more *you* pay; that is the logic of gunpowder and steel. Remember 1870! You escaped lightly then; the next time you will be crushed once and for all time! Think well before you refuse my terms. It is impossible for you to resist my mighty armies. Accept my terms, and you gain all Northern Africa, and the nightmare of British power is laid for ever. Refuse, and you seal your ruin, your utter and irretrievable ruin! You can never recover from it! Glorious France will become a feeble and insignificant republic like Switzerland; she will be the laughing-stock of Europe and the world. What country in Europe will be aide to help you? Austria? Russia can spare an army to keep her under observation. Italy? I can fight her as well as you. America only worships the dollar, and rates nothing for European politics, But if she does raise any objection, I shall bribe her with Canada.”

“A war with Great Britain would not be popular in France now,” remarked the President, who was making a great effort to restrain his outraged feelings. “All Frenchmen would be dead against it.”

“Bah!” exclaimed the Kaiser roughly. “Of what use governing a country if you cannot bend it to your will? You have your newspapers and politicians. You must start a Press campaign against England, make out that the English are the rivals of French citizens in everything, that they are plotting a deadly blow at French independence. You must make bad feeling. Remind the French of Waterloo and Fashoda. Stir up jealousy. You can easily break up that *entente cordiale* if you try. It is easy enough to make two nations hate one another if you only go the right way to work. I have been thoroughly successful in making my people hate the English. Where there, is a will, there is a way, Monsieur le President.”

"I should like to confer with my colleague for a few minutes," said Monsieur Donaine, after considering for a moment.

The two Frenchmen withdrew to the bay window and conversed in low tones, while the Kaiser strode restlessly to and fro in front of the fireplace, and the other plenipotentiaries stood in a group at the further end of the room. Monsieur Donaine and Monsieur Chauvier looked pale and harassed as they conferred in low hurried whispers. At the end of half an hour, they again approached the table. The Kaiser paused in his restless walk and faced them, the light from the overhanging lamp illuminating his pale features and gleaming eyes.

"Well, gentlemen," he inquired, "is it peace or war between France and Germany?"

"We agree to Your Majesty's proposals," replied the President quietly.

"Good!" exclaimed the Kaiser, his eyes flashing fire.

"That seals our friendship and England's doom! The hour of England's downfall is at hand! Prince," he added, turning to his Chancellor, "be so good as to read out the Articles of the Agreement."

Prince Hohenhaus drew a folded paper from an inner pocket of his coat, and holding it up to the swinging lamp, read out the Articles in a low, clear voice. The French and Russian plenipotentiaries stood round him, hanging on each word of the terrible and wicked compact:—

Article I.—In the event of war between the German Empire and Great Britain, the French and Russian Governments agree to place the whole of their navies at the disposal of the German Government. The said Governments also agree to place at the disposal of the German Government any vessels of their mercantile marine that may be required to act as cruisers, suitable compensation to be paid to the owners.

Article II.—The French Government agrees to hire from French shipowners, and to hand over to the German Government such vessels as may be required for the transport of the German armies of invasion to England. Compensation to be paid to the owners by the German Government for all vessels used.

Article III.—The French Government agrees to permit the passage of German armies and their equipment by railway or otherwise through French territory to the French coast, for the invasion of England. The French Government will do all in its power to assist the passage of German troops along the lines of route to be hereafter selected by the German Government,

Article IV.—The French, Russian, and German Governments hereby agree that on the successful termination of the war with England, the whole of Northern Africa shall become the property of France, and that Russia shall pursue the conquest of India and Manchuria without hindrance. The said Governments also agree that all territories, other than those above-mentioned, also military

and naval effects taken from or surrendered by the British Government, shall become the property of Germany,

Article V.—The aforesaid Governments agree that in the event of an indemnity being paid by the British Government upon the conclusion of hostilities, one-fifth of such indemnity shall be paid to France, one-fifth to Russia, and the remaining three-fifths to Germany.

“That is all,” remarked the Chancellor as he finished reading.

“Now, gentlemen,” inquired the Kaiser, looking at the Russians and Frenchmen, “how do the Articles coincide with your views? I think they state our terms clearly and satisfactorily?”

“Quite so,” assented the Russian Grand Duke. “Nothing could be better from the Russian point of view. England has always been a thorn in our sides, and now we can pay off old scores by taking India. We can also have our revenge on the yellow monkeys without fear of intervention.”

“You can retake Port Arthur when you wish,” observed the Kaiser, smiling darkly. “And now, gentlemen,” he added, turning towards the Frenchmen, “are you satisfied?”

“We are,” assented the President quietly.

“Excellent!” exclaimed the Kaiser. “I have had three copies of the Agreement prepared, and, if you please, we will sign them now.”

Prince Hohenhaus took two copies from his pocket, unfolded and placed them on the table. The Grand Duke brought an inkstand from a side table. The seven men crowded round the documents under the feeble light thrown down by the swinging lamp. The all-embracing silence was only broken by their heavy breathing and the rustling of clothes. The Kaiser was deadly pale; he seized a pen, and the ink spurted up as he wrote his name

WILHELM

on each of the documents. The others signed in turn

MICHAEL ZEIDSOMSKY

PHILIPPE CHAUVIER

HENRI DONAINE

ALEXIS ALEXANDROVITCH

HOHENHAUS

The signatures were scrawled over the paper, the Kaiser’s at the top, those of thy French and Russian statesmen between, and the name of Prince Hohenhaus, that man of iron and blood, below. The still wet ink of the Kaiser’s signature gleamed balefully as a group of evil-portending comets or stars in the lamplight. His was a name that was about to weigh heavily on Europe and the world!

There was no blotting-paper in the room, Hohenhaus watched the three documents with brooding eyes till the ink was dry. Then he folded one up and handed it to the President, who placed it gingerly in his pocket. The second was

handed to the Russian Grand Duke, and the third the Chancellor pocketed with a cold smile of satisfaction.

“Now, gentlemen,” said the Kaiser, “there is nothing that need detain us further. Remember, if our navies are to be successful against England, there must be no half-hearted measures. We must put forth all the strength God has given us; bring every ship, every man into action if we are to crush the British navy. If we do not crush it,” he added, glancing meaningly at the Frenchmen and Russians, “there will be no Africa for France, nor India and Manchuria for Russia. I think we understand one another?”

The others bowed in silence.

“Stoltenberg!” cried the Emperor, raising his voice.

The door opened, and the aide-de-camp entered.

“The carriage immediately!” commanded the Kaiser.

He paced restlessly up and down the room while the two Frenchmen conferred in undertones in the window recess and the Russians commented audibly on the weather. The German Chancellor stood in the centre of the room, his arms folded over his breast where the secret treaty was hidden, frowning heavily, and lost in thought. In a few moments a rumbling of wheels was heard, and the aide-de-camp appeared at the door.

“The carriage is ready, Your Majesty.”

“Gentlemen, I wish you good-night,” said the Kaiser, turning towards the plenipotentiaries.

He left the room, followed by Prince Hohenhaus and von Prankhe. At the foot of the staircase he turned round to his Chancellor.

“At last, Prince, the dream of my life is approaching realisation,” he said in a low voice. “Germany will soon possess a world-wide Empire, on which the sun will never set. She will be the richest, the most powerful country in the world, the greatest by land and sea, the dictator of the world. She will possess an empire greater than Napoleon ever dreamed of.”

“May I be the first to congratulate Your Majesty on your success?” replied the courteous Hohenhaus.

They entered the carriage in silence, and rolled away into the darkness, back to Berlin to perfect their schemes of treachery, aggression, and conquest. The two Russians followed in another carriage, equally pleased with their night’s work. But the President of the French republic and his companion still remained conversing at the window; both looked anxious and harassed.

“We have been nicely done!” exclaimed Monsieur Chauvier. “We have played into the hands of Germany. We are her vassal, her slave, her very humble servant. We make war or peace as she dictates to us. We must do exactly as she tells us. When will this intolerable slavery end?”

“Ah, my friend,” observed the President, shrugging his shoulders, “that is the fruit of 1870; it is the legacy Napoleon III left to France.”

“But it is a shame to join Germany against England.”

“It is. But what could we do? What this German pig says is true, England can only help us with her fleet; she would be of no use on land with her wretched army. If she only had a million soldiers, I would not have signed that treaty. But what would you? We must think only of our country, and put aside all foolish sentiment about the *entente cordiale*. The German army is much larger and better prepared for war than ours. A month after the declaration of war, the Kaiser would be at Paris. The longer we resist, the more he swamps us with his soldiers. I shudder to think what the end might be. France, our fair country, trampled beneath the iron heel of the invader; her manhood ruthlessly slaughtered, her cities and towns in ruins, her capital in the hands of the enemy, a huge sum of money and her fairest provinces torn from her as the price of a disgraceful peace. That German fiend is not indulging in mere idle threats. He knows he can do all this, and he *will* do it if we do not yield to his terms.”

“But our friend, England?”

“I think England can take care of herself. Remember, we have not to send an army over to England, we have only to light her on the sea. Our friend William will do all the lighting on land with his soldiers and guns.”

“And will swallow up the British army as a cat would devour a mouse.”

“He will swallow it up, and more besides. The military capacity of his generals is immense, and the hatred of the Germans for the English exceedingly bitter. But England possesses immeasurable material resources.”

“What is the use of material resources when the invader has his hand on her capital? The Kaiser knows the English. What great leader have they, what statesman who is equal to the most dangerous crisis that has ever faced the British Empire? Their Cabinet Ministers are but mountebanks, good at talking, debating, and deluding, but they have not statesmen or men of action. Who will come forward and save his country from the jaws of the German lion? Bah! they won't even consent to universal military service to place their country in safety. Very few will enrol their names when war is declared. The starving degenerate English will prefer food and a shameful peace to a vast shadowy empire which few of them have seen, and none can comprehend. The Unionist Ministry will fall at the news of the first disaster, and a Liberal Government will take its place. You know what that means. The Conservatives are inefficient frauds, but the Liberals are traitors. You know their views. Little Englandism, no Empire, Home Rule for every country and every parish, every one equal, and themselves the chiefs. No drastic line of policy to be taken, but every one to do as he likes; no interference with the liberty of the subject. Oh, I know them all! They will sacrifice anything to keep in power. Meanwhile, Germany knocks their empire to pieces.”

“But the end will not be then,” replied the President. “You forget one very important factor in the case, the British public, the great body of people that does all the work and pays all the taxes. Will it consent to lose its empire, its heritage of the past, without an effort?”

“Bosh!” exclaimed Monsieur Chauvier. “The British public is an idle, pleasure-loving, and degenerate body of people, incapable of sacrifice or effort, living only for sport and pleasure. It would rather win an international football match than a battle against the Germans. What will the British do when their army is gone and their leaders are paralysed by incapacity?”

“Ah, my friend, wait and see,” replied the President. “Now for Paris.”

The two Frenchmen re-entered their carriage, and rolled away in the darkness, *en route* for the railway station and their capital.¹

CHAPTER III

It was the first week in May. London palpitated with the wild energy of pleasure-seeking and money-making. The season was in full swing, and promised to be one of the most successful on record. The English commercial world was uplifted on a wave of prosperity, and money was plentiful. Everyone was happy and contented, for all shared in the good times. And now all the rich magnates, the Princes of Money, the Pillars of Commerce, the High Priests of the Golden Calf, were concentrating in London. They invaded the capital with their wives, daughters, and money-bags. In their case, to wish was to have, and any pleasure, any whim, even admittance to the Holy of Holies of Royalty, could be bought by signing a substantial cheque. The women of the money-bags mingled with the women of the aristocracy in the dazzling stream of fashion, spending their days and nights in a ceaseless whirl of gaiety.

London throbbed with excitement, throwing her tentacles of madness and pleasure far out into the suburbs. Drawing-room succeeded drawing-room, levies flashed out into gorgeous military and naval display. Bemedalled and beribboned military heroes in full dress, gold-laced and jewelled, drove through the gaping crowd to bask in the sunshine of Royalty. The park was crowded every afternoon with splendid equipages. The scarlet livery of Royalty flitted hither and thither amidst the bows and smiles of adulant fashion. There was the champing of bits, the steady and continuous prancing of horses, the rumbling of wheels, a never-ending procession of rank and beauty. And above the whirr of wheels and the crunch of gravel floated the incessant chirp and chatter of society women. Every mind was given up to the luxury of the hour, thinking of nothing else, stagnating in the plethora of luxury. Every nerve of society tingled with enjoyment, but more healthy energies slumbered. It was the very apotheosis of sloth and selfishness.

The political world likewise enjoyed itself without hindrance. The Conservatives were in power, and had a majority of nearly one hundred and fifty. Debates were a farce, for the Opposition could not oppose effectively, and was only capable of obstruction. Its weakness reacted upon the Government. The latter, sure of its majority, unlikely to be superseded since there had only recently been an election, and without an efficient rival, became more incapable and inefficient every day. Most of the Cabinet Ministers were scattered over the four quarters of the globe. The Prime Minister was in Scotland playing golf. The Secretary for War was staying in Egypt for the benefit of his health. The first Lord of the Admiralty was touring in Italy with his wife and family. The Secretary for India was at Monte Carlo in search of rest and pleasure. The Home Secretary had gone to Paris for a few days. The Foreign Secretary was staying in London to hold a reception of diplomats, and then intended to seek quiet and recreation in a motor-car trip across Europe. It was quite safe to go; irksome duties would be satisfactorily carried out by under-secretaries and permanent heads. Like master, like man. The rank and file of the parliamentary body preferred open air and pleasure to the stuffy atmosphere of St Stephen's. Many were slack in their attendance to duty, scarcely ever going to vote or debate. A small body of members was always kept handy by vigilant Whips, those strange watch-dogs of the Government, to turn the tables should the Opposition suddenly try to snatch a majority. That power must be held at all costs was the only motto of these depositaries of the nation's trust.

The foreign outlook was as unruffled as the domestic. There was no war nor rumour of war to disturb the minds of statesmen, and there were no outstanding questions or complications. The tone of foreign newspapers was most friendly. Never before had England and English statesmen been so popular abroad. There was even a talk of the Emperor of Germany paying a visit to Windsor in the autumn to shoot pheasants with the British Sovereign. The English newspapers were delighted with this satisfactory state of things, and put it down to the diplomatic genius of Lord Mornhaven, the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Some fanatical writers, ever ready to jump at hasty conclusions, even went so far as to think that the age of universal peace was dawning at last. They talked of still further cutting down the expenses of the navy, and having less ambitious ship-building programmes. The army had been allowed to fall into a very low state through a long series of years, and was even worse than at the time of the Boer War. Men who tried to awaken the nation to its very dangerous condition and bring forward projects for universal military training were treated as alarmists, or laughed at as lunatics. It had become an axiom of Government that there must be no interference with the liberty of the subject. Besides, there was no time for universal military training in this mad race for wealth and enjoyment. The Brit-

ish youth could not spare time for drilling and rifle shooting. It was too much engrossed with its cricket and football, and other amusements.

And so London romped and danced in joy on the edge of a precipice, whilst Berlin prepared, Paris watched, and St Petersburg smiled craftily. A vast, thick, and impenetrable curtain was thrown over the continent of Europe. No unauthorised eye could pierce it. Light-hearted England did not care to know what was going on so far away, took no interest in the preparations or ambitions of foreign nations. But behind that impenetrable screen was the din of preparation, the shaping of metal into cannon, the forging of shot, the grim and determined preparation for a war of extermination. And silently, behind the shelter of that screen, the master minds of Europe perfected the details of a vast organisation, determined that their infamous plot should succeed, cost what it might. There were only eight men who understood fully what these vast preparations meant. German newspapers had been strictly censored for years, and nothing leaked out. Everything had been forced to fever point, not all at once, but gradually, by a very genius for subtlety. The news that German armouries were working at high pressure did not disturb England, for had they not always done so? So carefully was the fateful secret guarded, that there was no hint at complications in the daily Press. Even had a warning been given, it would have been treated as an alarmist rumour. It required a great disaster to rouse sleeping England from her dangerous slumbers.

The day of Lord Mornhaven's great diplomatic reception drew near. British shipping circles read with great satisfaction that there was a crisis in the German shipping trade, it was announced that many of the leading steamboat companies found themselves on the verge of bankruptcy, and had laid up their largest and fastest steamers. Others found freights did not pay, and withdrew their vessels to await hotter times. But there was a great boom in British shipping, and British vessels were scattered to the ends of the earth, loaded with full cargoes. British shipbuilders likewise flourished. Many battleships, cruisers, torpedo-boats, and destroyers, ordered by Russia, Turkey, and the South American republics, had recently been delivered, also many million tons of steam coal. More orders arrived, and the northern building yards were jubilant. Work was so abundant, that scarcely an engineer was unemployed. The British artisan was greatly pleased with himself, for he was working overtime, and his pockets were full of generous wages. But he had really given his life's blood for his labour and had worked for the ruin of England.

The crisis in the German shipbuilding trade spread to France. The northern French ports were filled with a host of vessels unable to find cargo. But the officers and crews were still maintained by the owners, for the Government suddenly came to the rescue, and insisted that indigent sailors should not be thrown on the overcrowded labour market. It was argued that the carrying trade was of national importance, and must be helped through its crisis by a generous subsidy.

The German Government followed suit, and hosts of vessels were laid up in the northern ports, furnished with a full complement of seamen, but—empty.

It was night in London, and the reception at the Foreign Minister's was at the height of its dazzling glory. Lord and Lady Mornhaven stood side by side at the head of a magnificent marble staircase, whilst an endless procession of gorgeous princes, peers, ambassadors, and foreign attachés filed past. The uniforms were dazzling, the jewels magnificent. The great reception rooms looked like huge flower-beds of gorgeous blossoms always moving, arranging in groups, breaking up, and re-arranging. There was the hushed murmur of deep bass voices, the soft ripple of woman's laughter, everywhere the perfect breeding and calm self-possession of the well-drilled *crème de la crème* of society. All the great personages of London were gathered in those lofty rooms. But the air was pervaded by a sense of expectation. Many eyes continually glanced towards the grand staircase. Suddenly a carriage rolled up to the door; rows of bowing footmen lined the vestibule. The air became electric with excitement; whispers passed from room to room.

"The King!"

The Sovereign slowly ascended the staircase with his Consort. He exchanged salutations with his host and hostess, and then mingled with the guests, the most striking figure in that room of striking personages. But another great personality who compelled attention entered at that moment. Count Meldvier, the German ambassador, had a tall and imposing figure, a dome-shaped forehead, aquiline nose, piercing eyes, and a most inscrutable *ensemble* of features. He bowed over Lady Mornhaven's hand, glanced into Lord Mornhaven's face with eyes that searched his very soul, and passed on, suave, smiling, and impassive, he walked from group to group, always calm and impenetrable, talking trivialities to the men, jesting with pretty women, always witty and agreeable. He appeared to be all things to all men, and as versatile as his august master. One moment he discussed Aldershot and a new weapon with a British general, the next he argued about submarines with a vice-admiral, and a minute later asked the Archbishop's views concerning a new philanthropic undertaking.

"Charming man! Most delightful! How well informed!" were the whispered comments that followed in his wake. Only once did his immobile features betray any expression, and that was when he met Count Emsdorff, the Russian ambassador, in a secluded corner, and had a few moments' whispered conversation with him. What would that brilliant assemblage have thought had it read what was at the back of those two men's minds?

"To-morrow!" was the last word Count Meldvier whispered to the Russian. Then he turned away and amused a well-known beauty with stories about Hungary.

Meanwhile, the brilliant assemblage played at its gorgeous game, eating, drinking, laughing, and talking, ignorant of the terrific thunderbolt about to fall on Great Britain, forgetful that fine feathers do not make fine birds, ignorant that gorgeous uniforms and sparkling orders do not make up for inefficiency and incapacity, lost in the glare and glitter of whirling gaiety, and unthinking of its doom.

CHAPTER IV

THE long and complex preparations that had been secretly going forward on the Continent were now completed. Everything was ready for the terrible steel fist to throw off its innocent glove, and smite down the British Empire with disaster after disaster. And behind all these armed myriads, trains of artillery and mighty ironclads was the mainspring of this vast machine, the terrible and inflexible Imperial Will, lusting for conquest and empire, burning to strike down its commercial rival, hating it with a bitter and deadly hatred. The owner of that will had only to sign his name, and the crash would follow.

Lord Mornhaven received Count Emsdorff in private on the morning following his official reception. The Russian stated that he had very important business to discuss with his lordship, business that would not admit of a moment's delay. The Minister for Foreign Affairs smiled at his visitor's set, stern face. What, he wondered, could be this terribly urgent matter? Then he was told briefly, and without comment, that Russia demanded at once that Russian warships should be allowed to pass out of the Black Sea. Mornhaven was quite startled out of his usual diplomatic reserve, and stared aghast.

"Quite impossible," he replied tersely. "His Majesty's Government cannot even discuss this question."

"My Imperial Master insists," continued the Russian.

He had received orders to bring about a sharp crisis and diplomatic rupture as rapidly as possible. England must have no time to make preparations and set her house in order; she must be attacked while asleep, and struck down before she could recover. Emsdorff had also received orders how to act in the unlikely event of the Black Sea matter being conceded by a pusillanimous Government. He had had an interview with the Kaiser when away on leave a month previously. He was to demand next the evacuation of Egypt by the British troops. If that were conceded, he must raise a dispute concerning fishing rights in the North Sea. Every contingency, however remote, had been provided for by the Supreme Intelligences that watched like evil Fates behind the scenes at Berlin. He had been ordered to fix a quarrel on to Great Britain by any means. War must be declared jointly by Russia, Germany, and France within forty-eight hours of the presentation of the first demand. Delay at this juncture was absolutely fatal

to Germany, and might entail the ruin of all her plans. She must strike swiftly if she wished for success. Her most brilliant and subtle diplomat was entrusted with this delicate task.

“Is that your last word on the subject?” inquired the Count.

“I have nothing further to say.”

The Count's face wore its usual impassivity, but he was inwardly pleased at the success of the interview. The prelude of the mighty drama had begun, but as yet there was no mention of war. Mornhaven had no thought of war, and did not even telegraph the matter to his Chief, who was then in Scotland. The Russian retired, and cipher messages flashed to St Petersburg, Berlin, and Paris. There was a clicking of telegraph needles spelling out infamous orders, and the meeting of stern-featured cold-eyed men in council. Then everything was ready for the second verse of the prelude to be spoken. Late the same evening the ambassadors of France, Germany, and Russia called on Lord Mornhaven, and presented a joint note to the effect that England must give way in the Black Sea matter. The Foreign Secretary was surprised at this insistence on renewing a discussion he thought already closed. He gave an emphatic refusal, but promised to refer the matter to the Premier. There was still no sign of the terrific storm that was about to burst over England. The ambassadors retired, but remained in secret conclave throughout the night. Again the telegraph needles clicked. The next morning the Prime Minister, who was playing golf on certain famous Scotch golf links, received a detailed account of the affair by wire. He emphatically endorsed the refusal given by Lord Mornhaven, and promptly returned to his golf, thinking no more of the matter. His decision was notified to the representatives of France, Germany, and Russia by Lord Mornhaven.

The crisis had now become very grave, but no one in England had the least idea of the gravity of the situation. Again the telegraph needles clicked, and there was a prolonged conference of the Higher Powers at Berlin. Nothing further happened for hours. Lord Mornhaven, who hated London, ran down to his country seat in Warwickshire for a few days. He made light of the crisis, and thought he could do business as well there as in Town.

London danced and frivelled with her usual vigour and *sang-froid*, unheeding the storm that was silently and swiftly brewing. A brilliant drawing-room was held that evening, and surpassed all others in magnificence. In Scotland Mr Reydleigh, the Premier, was still deeply engaged in golf. So lightly did he regard the diplomatic incident, that he continued playing the game throughout the afternoon. Later in the day, he left his hotel without giving any address, and went to dine and sleep with the Duke of Drumsgig, who lived some miles away, and had private golf links on his estate. The next morning there was to be a match between the Premier and a provisional named Smith on one side, and

Lord Dumanby and O'Tara on the other. Lord Dumanby was chief of the Army Council, and one of the very best golfers in England.

It was delightfully refreshing on the cool Scotch moor after stuffy London. The players reached the first teeing ground at 10.30. A brilliant house-party, including several ladies with cameras and numerous golf enthusiasts, accompanied the players. Mr Reydleigh drove off first. There was a hum of approval as the ball rose into the air, sailed lightly over dangerous bunkers, and trickled almost on to the putting green. Several fair camerists snapped the Premier as he bent forward and watched the passage of his ball through the air.

"Capital, sir!" said Smith. "That was a champion drive."

The Premier adjusted his pince-nez, and beamed indulgently on the spectators. Another ball was teed up, and Lord Dumanby sent it singing away into space. But it rose too high, and dropped very near to a difficult bunker. Eventually it rolled into the hole after four strokes, whilst the Premier's ball required only three. There was a chorus of approval from the ladies.

"One up," remarked Mr Reydleigh.

Smith drove off from the next teeing ground, but the ball fell into a bunker some distance from the green. The Premier was standing over it with a cleek, and looking towards the green, when a telegraph boy, carrying an orange envelope, crossed his line of sight.

"Tell that boy to move out of the way!" he commanded.

Someone shouted to the post-office messenger, who made a wide detour, and approached the group of spectators from behind.

"A telegram for Mr Reydleigh," he said. "It is marked 'Most important.'"

"A telegram on important business for you, Mr Reydleigh," said the Duchess, addressing the Premier.

But the latter was intently addressing his ball.

"Important business will have to wait now," he said jocosely. He deftly hit the ball out of the bunker, and sent it rolling on to the green.

"Splendid!" cried the assembled golfers.

The Premier tried to look modest, and the game continued. A second telegraph boy appeared with another orange envelope, and approached the group of ladies and gentlemen.

"He says he ain't to be disturbed," whispered the first boy.

Both boys followed the players round the links, and took great interest in the progress of the match. A few moments later a special Government messenger arrived with a long white envelope.

"A most important despatch, sir," he whispered, approaching the Premier, who was intently eyeing his opponent's ball.

"Take it away! Don't bother me now; I *must* win this match!" replied Mr Reydleigh testily.

Another telegraph boy arrived, and yet another. Evidently something very important was happening in the political world. Then Mr Reydleigh's private secretary came upon the scene.

"A very serious crisis has happened," he said respectfully. "It requires your immediate attention."

He whispered something into the Premier's ear.

"That's all moonshine and bluff," replied the latter. "I shan't be bothered now. Take it away."

The game continued, and the Duke of Drumsgig prevented anyone disturbing his distinguished guest further. More messengers arrived. There was a whispering amongst the telegraph boys, but the elder messengers looked annoyed. The private secretary was very white and anxious whilst precious moments were wasted in the pursuit of this idle game.

It was the Premier's turn to drive off. Completely absorbed in the game, he gave the ball a long address, and sent it soaring away with a masterly stroke. There was another chorus of approval. The players hurried after the ball, followed by the spectators and an ever-increasing train of messengers and telegraph boys. But the Premier gave not a thought to public business; his colossal cheek was sublime and awful! He hit the small white ball over the turf, while the fate of the mighty British Empire trembled in the balance. Never before in the annals of history had such daring effrontery been seen; never had there been such an example of sublime impertinence. It was magnificent, terrible! There was something diabolical in this complete neglect of duty, this utter disregard of a tremendous trust!

The golf sticks clicked as they hit the small white balls over a sandy bunker. The long train of interested spectators, messengers leading their horses, and telegraph boys wheeling red bicycles followed the players round the links. No one guessed the immense importance of the messages enclosed in the orange and white envelopes. All were intent on the game, except the messengers, who had orders to deliver their missives into the Premier's hands.

The game continued. The two small white balls soared through the air, jumped bunkers, trickled over greens. At last the fifteenth hole was reached. The Premier played the final stroke, and the ball rolled over the smooth turf into the hole.

"Mr Reydleigh wins by one hole!" exclaimed the excited spectators.

"An excellent game!" declared the two professionals.

Gorgeous footmen approached with trays of refreshments. The Premier took a sandwich and a glass of champagne; the ladies selected ices and sponge cakes. The messengers and telegraph boys still waited at a respectful distance. One of the former, bolder than the rest, ventured to present his envelop. The Premier took it nonchalantly, and languidly adjusting his pince-nez, glanced at its contents. Suddenly he became deadly pale.

“Good God, look at this!” he exclaimed, sinking on to a heap of sand. “It can’t be true. It’s an ultimatum.”

The secretary was at his side in a moment. He glanced at the message, and then snatched the other envelopes from the messengers and telegraph hoys who crowded round. The envelopes were hastily torn open, the contents unfolded, and spread before Mr Reydleigh.

“What *does* all this mean?” inquired the latter helplessly, his face ghastly white, his hands trembling.

Some of the sheets fell to the ground from his nerveless fingers. The secretary had the presence of mind to draw him away from the inquisitive group of spectators. Then he glanced hastily at the sheaf of papers.

“Well?” inquired the Premier who had devoted his whole career to adapting parliamentary tactics to the end of keeping himself and his party in power, and knew nothing of foreign politics or ambitions.

“This means war,” replied the secretary laconically.

“But I can’t understand this haste. There is no time given.”

“What I have expected for years has come to pass. Germany has sprung a surprise upon us. War with her was bound to come soon. England is her rival everywhere. She has completed her preparations, and now tries to fasten a quarrel on to us by making impossible demands. She gives us little time, so that we can’t prepare. It is a complete surprise.”

“But only forty-eight hours! There is no precedent for such quick action.”

“Exactly so,” said the secretary, smiling coldly, “Those who wish to surprise, don’t give long notice.”

The Premier pulled himself together with an effort.

“We must start for London at once,” he said. “Order a special train.”

The Prime Minister and his secretary hurried off to the Duke’s mansion, and were quickly driven thence to the railway station. During the drive to the station, the secretary wrote out telegram after telegram on a knee-pad. A sheaf of wires was handed in at the railway office. A leviathan locomotive tore southwards with the train bearing the Premier and his secretary. Three times the express stopped on its way south, and bundles of telegrams were handed out. When it drew up at Euston in the early morning, Lord Mornhaven was awaiting its arrival, and drove with his chief to Downing Street.

“Where are the others?” asked the Premier abruptly, as the brougham rolled under the station arch,

“They have been directed to meet you at Downing Street. The French, German, and Russian ambassadors left London last night by the boat train.”

“Are the departmental offices at work?”

“No; your wires arrived too late for anything to be done last night. All the clerks and most of the heads had already left.”

The Premier covered his face with his hands and groaned.

“Nearly twenty-four hours late.”

“We could not find out where you were for a long time.”

When Mr Reydleigh arrived at his official residence, he found only six Cabinet Ministers, two members of the Committee of Defence, and three members of the Army Council awaiting him. Everything was in a fearful muddle, which the absentees intensified. Of the huge Reydleigh Cabinet, nearly two-thirds of the members were absent, a truly right honourable conduct! Everyone was white and anxious.

“This is terrible,” muttered the Premier, sinking into a chair. “I thought they knew their duty better than to desert their country thus.”

As he spoke, an official hurried into the room.

“All the wires to the Continent are cut!” he exclaimed.

The Premier bit his lip, and looked helplessly at his colleagues. But almost immediately another telegram was handed to him.

“Good heavens!” he ejaculated, turning whiter still. “This is positively awful!”

“What?” cried everyone at once.

The Cabinet Ministers rose and crowded round their Chief.

“The Suez Canal is blocked in two places,” continued the latter. “Two German colliers of over ten thousand tons have sunk, apparently by accident. Of course it was done to prevent our warships passing through.”

“Of course,” echoed the others.

The Premier crunched the message in his hand, and pulled himself together for action. The truncated Cabinet immediately met, and it was decided to fill up vacancies with under-secretaries. Then the Committee of National Defence quickly issued the most necessary orders, and the Army Council ordered the mobilisation of the army. Telegrams were sent off to all absent officials and members of Parliament, commanding immediate attendance to duty. But nearly half of these had taken advantage of the serenity of home and international politics to leave London and seek amusement all over the globe. Of all the telegrams despatched so hurriedly, very few ever reached their destination. Thus the majority of the nominal heads of the Government was entirely cut off from its sphere of operations. Never before had a Government been caught so ill-prepared for war. The German Government had played a splendid *coup d'état*, and played it well.

A little scene with only one actor was enacted on the Scotch golf links soon after the Premier had won his historic match and hurried away. The great German financier, Herr Scheintz, who had once tried to corner the wheat market, was a guest of the Duke of Drumsgig, and had watched the match with a cold and evil smile. After the Premier had departed, he loitered behind the other guests. A crunched-up piece of pinkish paper caught his eye. He spread it out and read:—