

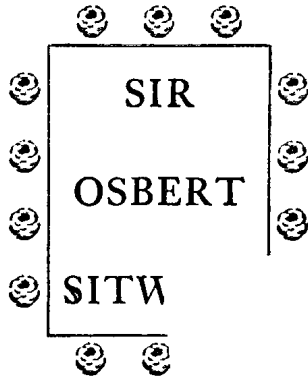
LEFT
HAND,
RIGHT
HAND!



SIR
GSEERT
SUTWELL



LEFT HAND, RIGHT HAND!



AN ATLANTIC MONTHLY PRESS BOOK

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LEFT HAND, RIGHT HAND!

Introduction

ALL works of art that are purely imaginative —
A poems, novels, stories — are pulled out of the fu-
ture as you may pluck a roasted chestnut out of
the fire, scorching your hand in the process. But
in this cruel and meaningless epoch, between the bars of
which I now write, neither past nor future seems to have any
existence; only the present which contains the dead ashes of
the past. Since the whole of life and its background is being dis-
solved to chaos before our eyes, it is impossible — because our
balance from day to day remains too precarious — to wrest a
book from the future. In consequence, I have resolved to start
the story of my life, to describe some of it, and some of those
who have figured in it.

Already the borders of the pages from which I take my
notes are stained by the cold fingers of Time and the hot
fingers of the sun — the sun of hot countries, China and Guate-
mala, Indo-China and the West Indies, Sicily and Malta and
Morocco, reminding me how long these books have been in
my possession, and that the hour has now struck for me to
start on this journey to recapture the past. Already I am near-
ing fifty and the gray hairs are beginning to show. I have
reached the watershed and can see the stream which I must
follow downhill toward the limitless ocean, cold and feature-
less. It is indeed time to begin.

No biography is easy to write and, because we know more
of ourselves than of others, autobiographies are the most deli-
cate of approach. . . . Of the kind of book that I want to
write, I will treat in a moment. But first it is necessary to ex-

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plain that I had the fortune to be born toward the sunset hour of one of the great periodic calms of history. So placid was this brief golden halt that often as a small child, passionately addicted to reading books of history, I used to wonder whether its stream had not altogether dried up. The Diamond Jubilee, the Boer War, the Edwardian Decade — none of these, viewed separately, was history; indeed the Jubilee was a sort of official celebration of its death. Nothing had happened for so long, and nothing would happen again: nothing. (But life seems static to all children, even those of the present day. Such is their innate confidence in parents that it is only necessary for the father to dismiss an aircraft, in the very act of dropping bombs, as “one of ours,” for the children immediately to believe him and regain their sense of security.) Everything was calm and still and kindly. Yet as I listened sometimes to the complacent chatter of my nurse, while she sewed new ribbons onto a new lace cap and, in my presence, talked about me to my mother’s maid over the hum of the sewing machine (I can smell the warm, oily smell of it as I write), saying how lucky I was to be an elder son of such parents, and therefore of assured prospects, growing up in a world which had improved, owing to Queen Victoria and the benevolence of all members of the British race, beyond what anyone could have expected, and held in it no possibility of deterioration even though the general progress was occasionally impeded by the spite of foreigners such as Kruger — how lucky to be born exactly then and thus, and not in any other age; at such moments a very strong doubt, arising from the wisdom of the blood, that fragile scarlet tree we carry within us, used to assail me, and I would wonder, “But am I; is it true?” prompted by a precocious spirit of contradiction which has its good as well as its bad side, being the fount of such wit as I can show.

Notwithstanding, it is to that halcyon age in which I grew up that now I turn; years in which human life had a value set upon it, inalterable as it seemed then, and when the ape,

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so cleverly fitted in just under the skin of each human being, was a secret taint of which to be ashamed, a shadow, the mere glimpse of which would frighten the bravest man, and not, as now, an ideal to be extolled and after which to struggle. Vaguely people still talked with horror of the Siege of Paris; the only thing, real thing, that had happened within memory. But that, after all, was an incident in *French* history, and, as such, perhaps should have been looked for: it had not affected us except to make rich English merchants and hotel proprietors yet, and still more justifiably, richer. It had been *dreadful*, though, everyone admitted that, and out of keeping with the times. And my Aunt Florence¹ kept, I remember, as a reminder of the depths to which human beings can come, a kind of *memento mori*, a piece — given her by a former French governess — of the bread that the people ate in the beleaguered city. Straw-colored and apparently petrified, it stood as granite, and in those days constituted the sole evidence of human cruelty. It was, I want to emphasize, necessary to remind oneself. . . . But in the years that have followed I have watched the endless massing of the apes for conflict.

Everywhere men have unlocked the prisoners within, and from under the disguising skins the apes have leapt joyfully out. Yet perhaps we wrong them, for they love new tricks, new ways, else would they still be monkeys: whereas the only new ideas, new things which men have proved themselves ready to regard and use without fear, are horrible methods of slaughter, ever more horrible. A new development in art, a new conception in politics, a new invention for saving human life, and hysterical fright seizes upon them; a new manner of killing, on the other hand, and an uncontrollable impulse to set it in motion descends upon them. The bomb auction to which this leads is now upon us. Tit for tat, pinch for smack, kick for pinch; “Blitz on London!” — “R.A.F. bomb Berlin!” — “Wops bomb Malta!” — “R.A.F. Raid on Syracuse!” —

¹ Her diary appeared as the second part of *Two Generations*. (Macmillan & Co., 1940.)

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“Japs Bomb Manila!” — “U.S.A. bomb Tokyo!” — so the captions run. “If Athens is bombed,” writes a correspondent, suffering from an overdose of logic, to a London paper, “why spare Rome?” Why indeed? And, so that we may in other times remember the putting of this question — for other times *will* come — let me now, in hot blood, reproduce a letter that appeared, toward the end of November, 1940, in the pages of the *Spectator*. It ought not to be forgotten.

SIR,

On reading the article by Janus against the bombing of Rome by reason of its various antiquities, I feel that I must disagree with him. Who cares whether the Forum or the Colosseum is razed to the ground? At least 90 per cent of the British working population have never seen, and have no wish to see, these two objects which are, as like as not, an eyesore. They are just there for large-stomached capitalists who go because they think it is high class. There was also a letter which advocated the bombing of Rome, but not the Vatican City. Why not? The Vatican City has done nothing to stop the war. All this blather about the Holy City, etc., is absolute trash, and it with all the rest of Rome should be visited nightly by our bombers in the same way as London is by theirs.²

But I recall with love and pride when London and Rome were sacred shrines: and as such they will rank again. One is as indestructible as the other; both are flowers of the human spirit. No night is eternal, though every night seems long.

I saw a cloud upon a hill
Anchor its shadow on a grave;
I saw a vulture, O! how still,
Upon a broken architrave.

I saw a hill within a cloud
I saw a grave within its shade,
I saw a phoenix from its shroud
Soar upward to a fiery glade.

² T. Fairless, 10 Saltwell Place, Gateshead-on-Tyne, Co. Durham.

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I saw a man with broken heart
And angels drooping broken wings,
I heard the rumble of a cart
Piled up with bodies of dead kings.

And then I saw a cloud ope wide
And out of it a white dove come,
Alighting in sweet, cooing pride
Upon the branch that rocked its home.

And then I heard a human voice
Far off, in laughter loud and free;
The phoenix cried "Rejoice! Rejoice!"
And all my soul burned inwardly.

For as she cried, the west wind blew
With force gigantic that space gives
And deep within my heart I knew
That tyrants die, but freedom lives.

.

I saw the cloud lift, drift along
To shelter all the sweltering plains
Where rose the loud triumphant song
Of broken hearts that break their chains.

I saw the vulture's scaly face
I saw it quit the architrave;
I saw the phoenix give it chase
And blossoms burst forth from the grave.

Men die, even the most evil, and stupidity perishes as much as grace. By its nature, the triumph can be but temporary of ape over man. Between them Art is, and always has been, the dividing line. And for this reason, if for no other, and to show, after the manner of Disraeli, that I, too, am "on the side of the angels," I want my biography, no less than a novel or a book of travel – and, indeed, it must partake of the essence of both – to be a work of art, upon which I can expend not only

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such gifts as I possess, but the skill acquired through many years of labor at my task. I plan, if I am allowed to finish it, a book of several volumes to cover a longer span of time than is usual. The first portion will deal with many people who died before I was born, but who still influence me, perhaps, in ways I do not know as well as in ways to be recognized, for past and future both work upon the present; but the chief interest of the earlier chapters must derive from the circumstances surrounding, and the events befalling, a family which has produced three writers in a single generation — writers who are, I should say, in spite of a family likeness apparent at first sight, very dissimilar — and in the description, too, of the characters in the foreground of their young lives.

Not even the beginning of the book, however, do I wish to be written with childhood's innocent eye: for nothing can alter the fact that it is impossible again to travel into that lost kingdom. (And, as for that, just *how* innocent is the eye of childhood? My sister says, indeed, that since the publication of my novel, *Before the Bombardment*, she has never been able to look a child of between three and twelve straight in the eye again, for, to her knowledge, all the material for it, all the full characterization and detail, was gathered by myself at that age from my surroundings when at Scarborough, or from what I divined to be behind them.) Moreover, a great deal of my young life was no doubt dull, a great deal sad, but I need not inflict a repetition of these emotions, when they are trivial, upon others. Only the crucial sadness need I reproduce; for, by nature, though not sanguine, I am — or was — high-spirited. I will not, therefore, concern the reader with those parts from which I want, myself, to escape, for the aim of this book is to beguile, and not to improve, the mind. I do not pretend to tell the reader everything, only to paint for him in a setting a portrait, of which, as in a surrealist picture, many diverse incidents compose the features. I leave the skeletons in their cupboards, and the flesh in its clothing, and walk where I will.

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I claim the right, moreover, to jump forwards and look backwards as I choose.

In addition I should like to emphasize that I *want* my memories to be old-fashioned and extravagant — as they are; — I *want* this work to be as full of detail, massed or individual, as my last book, of short stories, was shorn of it — had to be shorn of it because of its form; I *want* this to be gothic, complicated in surface and crowned with turrets and with pinnacles, for that is its nature. I mean it to be full of others besides myself and my brother and sister, giving scenes and *divertissements*, crowded with people of every sort; for I have always found friends and, perhaps because of my origin, coming of a family that has lived within three miles of the room wherein I now write, for at least seven hundred years, I have never experienced that sensation of being separate from the working classes, in the way in which the city-bred, middle-class poets of the proletarian movement continually proclaim themselves to feel cut off, deploring in foot-sore meter, often very justly, their own stiff collars and priggish, coy, self-conscious silence. . . . No, we all here draw our strength from the same soil, and my friends recognize it. I do not acknowledge the barrier of the white collar. The only fence I admit is that which exists between those who create — whatever may be the form of their creation — and those who do not, who absorb (and I must remind the reader that, even as children, the *creators* tend by their nature to be set apart). Though I have loved the companionship of the clever, the beautiful, the sensitive, yet the pretentious have never pleased me, and with the simple have I often found refuge.

I have seen many people in many countries, and will write of some of them. In descriptions of persons, it is often difficult not to give offense, but I shall try for the most part to avoid it. In a former book I showed new people in lands new to me, and endeavored to evoke the age-old life of the Chinese against the threadbare golden expanse of their country: now I am

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setting myself to the task of bringing out the equal fantasy and beauty that are to be found in people and objects familiar to us from birth, these qualities being only obscured for us by their vicinity or the custom of many centuries, and to prove that English life, today and yesterday, often contains as much power and character as when Chaucer first presented it in a new language. In the book to which allusion has just been made,³ I offered, in illustration of the genius for the grotesque of the Chinese, various catalogues of the names of birds, insects, and flowers.⁴ One such list — I choose it because it is the shortest, not because it is the best — applies to the various types of goldfish bred in Peking: Red Dragon Eye, Five Color Stripes, Blue Dragon Eye, Tiger's Head, Celestial Telescope, and Toad Head. . . . But are these heraldic titles more imaginative and characteristic, more exotic, even, than Spotted Elephant, Black Arches, Purple Shades, Ground Lackey, Green Forester, Belted Beauty, White Admiral, Rosy Rustic and Light-Feathered Rustic, Crimson-Speckled Footman, Black Chestnut, November Dagger, Long-Legged Pearl, Ringed China Mark, Beautiful Pug and Beautiful Snout; these being the names of English butterflies and recently instanced for their national flavor by that most talented writer, Mr. H. E. Bates,⁵ in the columns of the *Spectator*? Full of local genius, too, are other names he gives us: Glory of Kent, Lulworth Skipper, Dover Belle, Emerald Essex, Brixton Beauty, and Cambridge Veneer; while, though less fabulous, a vein of poetic fire runs, too, through the homeliness of the following names of apples and pears that I have found in *Pomona Herefordiensis*:⁶ Forest Stire, Loan Pearmain, the Red Must,

³ *Escape with Me!* (Macmillan & Co., 1939.)

⁴ These lists were mostly culled from an enchanting book, entitled *Annual Customs and Festivals in Peking*, by Tun Lich'en, translated by Derk Bodde (Henri Vetch, Peking, 1936), and from Arlington and Lewisohn's *In Search of Old Peking*, *ibid.* 1935.

⁵ Mr. Bates kindly informs me that these names occur in Curtis's *Entomology*. He attributes to them an eighteenth-century origin.

⁶ Published in London, 1811.

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Golden Pippin, Hagloe Crab, Foxwhelp, the Best Bache, Teinton Squash, Redstreak, Old Quining, the Huffcap Pear, the Garter Apple, the Brandy or Golden Harvey, the Siberian Harvey, Cowarne Red, the Friar, Woodcock, and Yellow Elliott. These words, as I have said, are less strange in their music than the lists of butterflies, yet their sound exhales the crude, fresh scents of farm and orchard; the scent of moss rose and bedstraw and milk and blossoming fruit trees and, even, of the midden.

Again, what strange customs and ceremonies we have been privileged to see; never before, for example, has there been a period when the style in which the women of the richer classes dressed changed completely every year and, latterly, in the two decades between the wars, every three months. What fantastic, what beautiful people have been provided for us to see and know. Though Shelley and Pope and Shakespeare have long been dust, we have all of us been given the chance of passing in our own streets Yeats, than whom no human being could look more noble, with his sweeping gray-white mane, that appeared to be almost blue, and his fine and enrapt features, or of seeing the octogenarian Bernard Shaw striding down Piccadilly in all the vigor and sparkle of his unending youth. Though Cézanne and Seurat, though Schubert and Brahms, lived before we were born, we have been able to sit in the same room as Picasso and Matisse and Tchelicheff, as Ravel, Stravinsky, and Debussy. (Indeed so overcome was I as a very young man, at meeting Debussy — for whom I entertained an immense reverence and admiration — when he came to London in the summer of 1914, that I was never able afterwards even to recall what he looked like. I have no recollection of him. The intensity of the emotion killed memory.) On the stage, too, we have watched Chaliapin and Nijinsky, Karsavina and Duse; artists whose merits those of my generation must sing, whose memory they must make an effort to preserve for posterity. How often lately have I not been

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asked by those half my age in what manner Nijinsky could have surpassed the dancers of the present day, and, although I also in my youth had not believed in the superior skill of, let us say, Taglioni over Karsavina when extolled by my elders, and had been irritated at the idea of such a presumption, have yet found myself lost before these depths of tragic ignorance. . . . But these artists, or most of them, must be left to a later volume. . . .

First I must essay, in order to effect a portrait of an age and person, to show how a child of such a family as mine *should* have developed, what his background was, as well as how he *did*, in fact, evolve.

Before I begin, and all the trumpets blow, only one point remains; I must explain the title I have chosen. The whole work is called *Left Hand, Right Hand!* because, according to the palmists, the lines of the left hand are incised inalterably at birth, while those of the right hand are modified by our actions and environment, and the life we lead. But, because I phrase it after this manner — the name so perfectly expressing the purport of the book, and the sense I wish to convey — and although I believe all men, including myself, to be superstitious, do not, gentle reader, conclude that, except in so far as any attempt at divination is more apt to catch the glint of the future than if none at all were made, I accept the childish boundaries of chiromancy.

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Book One



THE
CRUEL
MONTH

