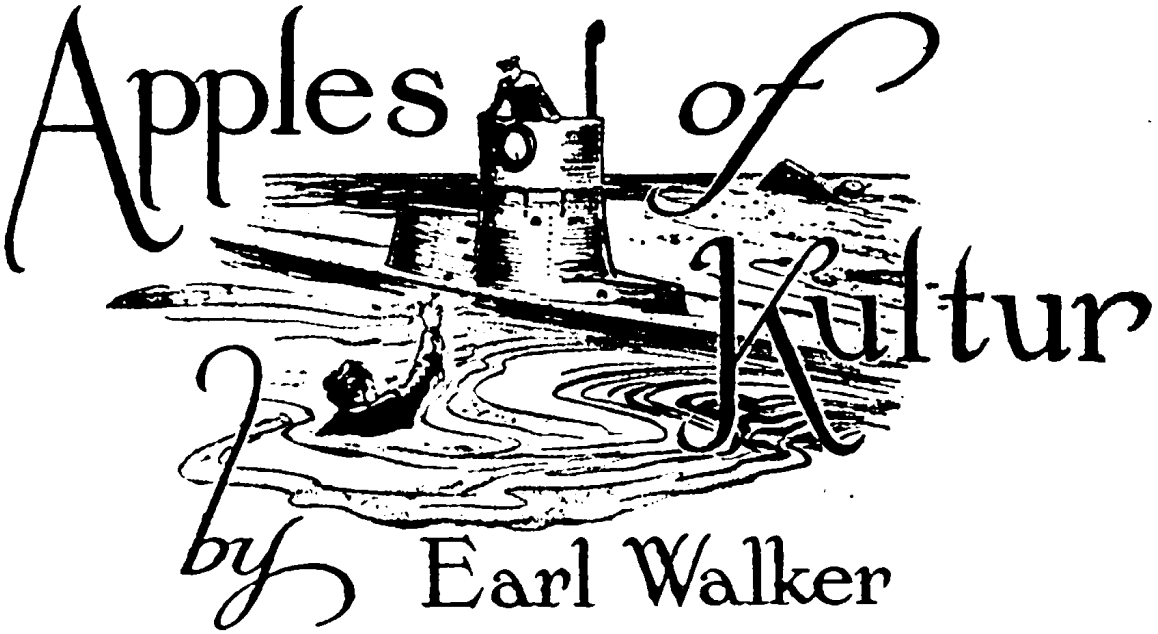
Argosy, February 9, 1918

Apples of Kultur



by Earl Walker

WHEN the Accomac began to settle in that graveyard of vessels off the southwest coast of England on the evening of February 27, 1917, and I leaped into a choppy sea swarming with over-crowded life-boats and frantic men, women, and children, my heart blessed God for the sight of a German submarine rising out of the water about three hundred yards off our port side.

A desperate hope sprang up in my breast, and I entered upon the fight for life with great determination. After eluding the arms of a sinking woman and breaking the embrace of a drowning man who had taken me unawares, I finally emerged from the mass of writhing, struggling humanity which the torpedoed vessel had cast into the water.

Scarcely had I done so when I observed the officers on the U-boat watching me through their glasses. When within speaking distance, I hailed them in German and was taken aboard.

Having recently left America, I was an object of deep interest. The officers plied me with questions. And it was during these earliest moments of my stay on the submarine that I marked a peculiarity in the manner of Captain Kline suggestive of a species of insanity well known to students of mental diseases.

Abundant opportunity for observing the tragic case was afforded during the days that followed, for from the outset I was allowed large liberties. And the discovery that I had in New York several acquaintances in common with Captain Kline and Lieutenant Wertz, both of whom had spent several years there, together with the belief they held that I was in the secret service of the Kaiser, eventually established between us a relationship so agreeable that my position was delightfully easy and pleasant.

That is, as positions on U-boats go. For one always feels that one is too large. And there is the never-ending monotony of existence—monotonous noise and sight of the ocean, continually tossing, monotonous roar and hum of machinery; monotonous sameness of faces, voices, and conversation: monotonous grinding of needles on records that weary the soul: monotonous day with its desperately regular sun, and night with its age-old stars, and moon

at its same old capers — monotony, sameness, and weariness forever and ever, with no diversion but murder!

The excitement incident upon my appearance soon subsided, and life on the submarine dropped into its accustomed routine. Everybody went about his own business, and a deep seriousness pervaded the crew. I recalled accounts I had read of the effect of the German under-sea service upon the men engaged in it, and readily understood how some might break under its strain.

Captain Kline began to move about the boat like one in a dream. There were at times, however, evidences of a struggle between his will and some idea that was apparently overpowering him. The monotonous life forced upon us was a fertile field for the development of such a malady as his, and as the days passed he seemed to grow worse.

Members of the crew began to take notice of him. And there was doubtless much conjecture among them regarding the fact that, since shortly after my arrival five days before, we had remained in the same position.

On the afternoon of the sixth day I approached Lieutenant Wertz on the subject of the vessel's inactivity. He stated that the captain had orders to proceed directly off the southern coast of Ireland, and was puzzled to understand the delay. Turning again to me after a brief silence, he asked:

"Have you observed anything unusual in the conduct of Captain Kline?"

I related some of the things I had seen.

"What do you think?" he queried.

"Certainly," I replied, "it seems to be an interesting case."

"Yes," he answered, and without questioning me further, as though he appreciated my position, began talking freely of what he had observed and learned.

His impressions were about the same as mine. Moreover, he had learned from members of the crew that his superior had been recently discharged from an institution for the treatment of mental disorders. One of the men recalled, also, something of a story concerning the collapse of a lieutenant on a submarine off the southern coast of Ireland about two years before.

Lieutenant Wertz regretted exceedingly the situation, which he realized would doubtless result in his having to take over command and probably confine his chief. He regarded such action as a very serious affair, however, and had just expressed his determination to let matters drift, when Captain Kline appeared.

Suspicion flashed in the man's eyes the instant be saw us. He approached with a resoluteness born of the moment.

"Fine weather, captain." I ventured.

"Excellent, sir." he replied without looking at me, and then addressed my companion:

"Lieutenant, we continue our voyage tonight Start at sunset, heading north to west."

His decision to proceed according to orders relieved the immediate tension. But it did nothing to dissipate the uneasiness growing out of knowledge of his previous derangement and the many indications that the malady was fastening itself upon him again.

New elements, moreover, appeared to render the situation more complex. The captain's actions began to indicate that he was keenly aware of our fears and of the misgivings of the crew. He apparently realized, also, that he was being drawn again into the chasm out of which he had so recently climbed. For he began what seemed to be a determined effort to recover himself.

It looked for a time as if he were succeeding. Seemingly he emerged from the cloud that had been resting over him. He appeared to have broken the spell of the idea that had dominated him for five days; to have passed, as it were, from the realm of brooding indecision into the realm of action.

But as midnight approached our hopes began to depart. It became more and more evident that there had been no actual change, but simply a play to allay our misgivings. His desire to reestablish confidence had betrayed him into going too far. And when the poor fellow entered his cabin for the night, he had passed from the brooding of *Hamlet* to the raving of *Lear*.

When I went up on deck the next morning, I found him already out, although dawn had hardly begun to break. He merely nodded in response to my greeting, and I moved on to a position from which I could observe him.

There had been a complete transformation. The spirit of resolution and action had disappeared. He was again under the spell of the idea that seemed now to have gained almost complete ascendancy over him.

It had laid hold of nearly every faculty of his being. His attention was absorbed by it; he was keenly alert to every unusual noise, as though he expected the vessel to strike something; and his eyes, fastened upon the water ahead, strained for a glimpse of it.

Throughout the day he remained in this manner, with the exception of a few minutes spent in consulting his charts. He no longer troubled himself about any misgivings the crew might have, or appeared in the least conscious of his condition.

Once when I approached near to him, he said:

"We are headed for the place at which the biggest vessel sunk in 1915 went down."

I knew which vessel he meant. I recalled accounts of that shocking disaster, and expressed a desire to visit the historic spot.

"Did you ever hear that soldiers avoid visiting battle-fields?" he asked. "I never did. But there is more mystery in the sea than on the land. The supernatural plays a large part in the lives of seamen. We are superstitious about steering through our graveyards."

Glimmerings of light began to break upon the mysterious forces preying upon the mind of the unhappy captain. But the shadows falling across his brain continued to lengthen and darkness was gathering fast.

Members of the crew realized his condition, and cast furtive glances at him as they went about the deck. They assembled in little knots and talked in low tones. Panic began to seize them. But the lieutenant's tact prevented disorder, and by nightfall he had the situation well under control.

About midnight I was awakened and requested to visit the captain in his cabin. I found Lieutenant Wertz with him, and as I entered the lieutenant was saying:

"The loss of the Herodia was a severe blow to England."

"The log of the submarine," said the captain, after directing me to a seat, "showed exactly where the liner went down. As nearly as I can calculate, we should reach the place about thirty-three minutes after two this morning. But Herr Gundlach has come, and I will start at the beginning of my story."

Before entering upon the narrative which follows, however, the captain paused as if to collect his thoughts. We could see that he was laboring under a terrific strain. And notwithstanding the rational manner in which he had just been conversing, the expression of his eyes revealed a streak of insanity running through his mind.

"I should apologize," he began, "for inflicting upon you an account of my sorrow. Indeed, I should not trouble you at all. But I must tell some one, for it is breaking me. I am breaking, am I not? Am I not losing my reason, lieutenant? You think so. You have taken command of my vessel. Am I mad? I must be. But leave me at large, lieutenant. Do. Leave me free until to-morrow. Am I—oh, am I— am I mad?"

Overcome by the realization of his condition

and the recollections that must have come trooping into his mind, the captain rested his elbow on the table at his side and held his forehead in his hand, about as pitiable an object as a man may become. We regarded him in silence for several minutes, wondering whether he would be able to continue.

Finally he began, and with many pauses related the experiences that had unsettled him.

"On the fourth day of August, 1914." he said. "I left Katharyne, my bride of eight months, in New York, in response to the call of the Fatherland. She was to follow as soon as possible, bringing the little one with her.

"Why did I leave her? You must understand that I was a German naval officer. On reporting for duty I was assigned to the submarine service. With what enthusiasm I entered upon my duties the lieutenant will appreciate. To say I was ambitious is unnecessary. Moreover, I was aflame with the German love of Fatherland and a wild devotion to the Kaiser. And withal, my ideals of life had been well grounded in the ethics of the empire through rigorous training in Kultur.

"Ah, lieutenant, what will not Kultur make of one? Germany becomes our absorbing passion. Our one law of life is Germany first, Germany always, all for Germany—nothing can be wrong that serves the Fatherland! You don't understand? *'Deutschland, Deutschland uber Alles!'* That is the ethics of the noble German Empire.

"Trembling with excitement, I took my place at the periscope when we encountered our first victim. I was the eyes of the attack, and a wonderful feeling of elation surged through me as I rendered the Fatherland that first service. Later I stood on the bridge and watched our victims struggling in the water. Remorse began to creep upon me. I felt they had been stricken in foul play, and something condemned me.

"While I stood pondering the destruction of innocent human life, my thoughts were interrupted by the approach of my captain. Doubtless he divined beforehand that a young man would require to be fortified as he entered upon the business of slaughter. 'Splendid work,' he said. 'What?' I asked, amazed at his inhuman remark.

"Then he came very close to me and said in a voice that seemed to issue from the depths of hell:

" 'Lieutenant, the irresolute are lost. Victory comes only to the determined. Have only one will. And remember first and last how our master, Bernhardi, said *Be hard!*

"He fairly hissed the last two words. They stayed my heart, and the accumulated force of my whole training seemed to sweep into my bosom. I watched the men struggle a while and then go down, just as a well-kultured German should do. But, *mein Gott*, when I allow myself to think of it I cannot help asking, 'Is it right?' Is it right, lieutenant? Whence that protesting voice? But why moralize? One must *be hard!* Yet the apples of Kultur will surely drive me mad!

"The torpedoed vessel went down. Then out of the waves that closed over it arose the vision of an iron class. Upon it I nailed my conscience with the words of Bernhardi. It molested me little after that. For whenever a vessel disappeared, there always came up out of the water that selfsame symbol of hardness. And upon it I crucified my conscience afresh.

"In January, 1915, I received a letter from Katharyne, telling me that she had arranged passage on the Herodia, booked to sail from New York the latter part of the month.

"Did you ever have your wife coming to you after the first long separation, bringing her first baby, a wee thing you had never seen? A thousand times each day I pictured to myself the mother and our babe.

"I imagined every detail of our meeting; fancied just how she would lay the little one in my arms, and how its warm little body would

feel against my bosom. My baby was coming to me—do you understand? My baby and her mother.

"Then, a few days after the arrival of Katharyne's letter, we received orders for the commencement of the first submarine campaign of ruthlessness. The Herodia was a vessel of English registry, and I shuddered whenever I thought of what might happen to her while making her way through the English Channel and the North Sea to Amsterdam. Hated English ship that she was, I told *der Gott* to let her slip safely by the submarines.

"Orders took our boat off the southern coast of Ireland. For me it was a voyage of high anticipations commingled with haunting dread of what might happen to Katharyne and the babe.

"We had scarcely reached the place from which we were to operate when our first victim was sighted coming out of the west. She was a large liner, and a thrill swept over the crew. This was our first chance to strike English pride a telling blow. The captain ordered us to submerge, and the boat was quickly cleared for action.

"Every man fell to his task with alacrity. The flagpole was quickly taken down and the periscope elevated. Part of the bridge was folded up and fastened. The men hurriedly crawled inside and the hatch was tightly closed.

"Have you ever seen a submarine when she attacks? There is nothing so terrible as a U-boat when she muffles herself for murder. Small electric bulbs dimly glow in the gloom. Shadowy forms move about with mechanical precision. The vessel fills with the smell of oil. The whirr of engines gives place to the purr of electric motors. And water, rushing into the ballast tanks, submerging the boat, creates a deafening roar.

"I stood at the periscope. The liner came onward with a steady roll—a tremendous monster, unconscious of danger and flaunting the hateful English colors. I trembled with anticipation as she swung into full starboard view. How the British would feel the blow I was about to deal their vaunted pride!

"Then my blood suddenly congealed. Great drops of sweat gathered on my brow. Was *der Gott* mocking me? I looked again to reassure myself. *Gott!* It was—the Herodia!"

Inexpressible horror was revealed in the captain's face as he paused. He was breathing hard, and his fingers writhed ceaselessly as his hands twisted each other. His eyes were bulging, and he seemed to see the whole horrible picture before him again.

"She had touched at Queenstown," he began, "instead of pursuing the more southern route, as I had supposed she would.

"But does *der Gott* always make one answer one's prayers? I had told him to let the ship slip by the submarines. But how could I? Can a German officer betray the Fatherland? My hand reached out toward the signal button in the execution of my duty. But it returned and fell at my side.

"Reeling away from the periscope. I staggered toward the captain. He sprang at me with a terrible look in his eyes. The forces of Kultur began to gather about my heart and I returned to my post. He rushed to my side and shrieked in his excitement:

" '*Mein Gott!* man, the liner is passing! What are you doing? Strike! Strike for Germany! *Be hard!*'

"My fingers fumbled at the signal button. I grew faint. Darkness closed in upon me. I remember indistinctly the noise of moving levers and the click of machinery as the torpedo leaped forth on its mission of death.

"Then came moments of harrowing suspense. The torpedo had been fired late. Maybe it would miss! Did I pray? One does not pray when *der Gott* is mocking, does one? But I hoped.

"Then a violent tossing of the submarine

told how true had been our aim. The rolling subsided. We scrambled to our feet. Pumps started driving water from the ballast tanks and the boat began to rise.

"I walked about half-crazed, wringing my hands. Then we rushed out on the bridge.

"The Herodia, like some stunned leviathan lying down, listed and lurched. Men, women, and children scrambled into overcrowded lifeboats or leaped into the sea.

"Vainly I looked for Katharyne and our babe. My heart grasped at a frail hope—maybe they had not sailed. Some one in New York might have warned the little mother.

"The stricken vessel raised her prow and plunged out of sight with a sullen roar. Lifeboats capsized. Fathers, mothers, and children struggled frantically against the waves. The boats that remained afloat made off, and the victims left behind seemed to fill the sea."

Not a muscle in the captain's body seemed to be inactive. His whole being appeared to be undergoing a terrible torture, and he became more and more excited as he continued:

'But among them I was unable to find Katharyne and the babe.

"The wretched mass of struggling, writhing, terrified humanity, cast upon the mercy of water, began to thin. Here a father, there a mother, then a child would disappear. Nearly all were struggling to reach the submarine, and suddenly I saw my wife Katharyne turn her face full upon me.

"*Gott*, what a picture! Terror and despair! Yet with one arm she struggled toward us, holding the babe, half buried in the water, with the other. I rushed toward the captain. But before I could utter a word the presence of a British destroyer was reported, and instantly came the order to dive.

"I hesitated a moment, stunned. One look from my superior and the hiss that I had heard so often sent me reeling toward the hatch.

"Again I paused to look for my wife and child. Poor Katharyne was laboring furiously to keep its tiny head above the water. I was desperate. 'The destroyer will save them,' said the captain, approaching me. And I crawled inside.

I could see them through the periscope. Have you ever seen a mother fighting to save her baby from the sea? Had you thrown them on the mercy of the waves? Were they yours? *Ach, Gott!* I live it all over again. I forget *der Gott* is mocking me. I breathe a prayer that the little mother may hold out, for the destroyer heaves in sight.

"*Ach*, what agony! I watch my loved ones abandoned to the sea and the British boat. *Gott!* Now she struggles, feeble little mother. But she grows weaker. How can she hold out? Higher and higher the water creeps about her shoulders. She raises the babe a little. Terror passes from her eyes. Her lips seem to move. Sweet resignation settles upon her face, turned heavenward. She kisses the wee face held above her and disappears. The little bundle floats. Then—*Ach, Gott! Gott!* Where were you!"

With that last terrible cry the wretched man flung himself across the table. We undertook to revive him. Then Lieutenant Wertz made an entry in the ship's log, remarking:

"It is thirty-five minutes after two. This is about where the Herodia went down."