

Roman Rolland

ABOVE THE BATTLEFIELD.

O young men that shed your blood with so generous a joy for the starving earth! O heroism of the world! What a harvest for destruction to reap! Young men of all nations, brought into conflict by a common ideal, making enemies of those who should be brothers; all of you, marching to your death, are dear to me. Slavs, hastening to the aid of your race; Englishmen fighting for honour and right; intrepid Belgians who dared to oppose the Teutonic colossus, and defend against him the Thermopylae of the West; Germans fighting to defend the philosophy and the birthplace of Kant against the Cossack avalanche; and you, above all, my young compatriots, in whom the generation of heroes of the Revolution lives again; you, who for years have confided your dreams to me, and now, on the verge of battle, bid me a sublime farewell.

Those trivial years of scepticism and hedonism in which we in France grew up are avenged in you; your faith, which is ours, you protect from their poisonous influence; and with you that faith triumphs on the battlefield. "A war of vengeance" is the cry. Yea! vengeance, indeed; but in no

spirit of chauvinism. The vengeance of faith for egoism—the surrender of self to eternal ideas.

One of the greatest of the young French novelists writes to me:—

“What are our lives, our books, compared with the magnitude of the aim? The war of the Revolution against feudalism is beginning anew. The armies of the Republic will secure the triumph of democracy in Europe and complete the work of the Convention. We are fighting not only

for our hearths and homes, but for the awakening of liberty.”

And another, one of the first art critics of our time:—

“My friend, could you see our Army as I do you would be thrilled with admiration for our people, for this noble race. And enthusiasm, like an outburst of the Marseillaise, thrills them; heroic, earnest and even religious. I have seen the three divisions of my army corps set out; the men of active service first, young men of twenty marching with firm and rapid steps without a cry, without a gesture, like the youths of old calmly going to sacrifice. After them come the reserve men of twenty-five to thirty years, more stalwart and more determined who will reinforce the younger men and make them irresistible. We, the old men of forty, the fathers of families, come last; and we too, I assure you,

set out confidently, resolute and unwavering. I have no wish to die, but I can die now without regret; for I have lived a fortnight which would be cheap at the price of death, a fortnight which I had not dared to ask of fate. History will tell of us, for we are opening a new era in the world. We are dispelling the nightmare of the mailed fist and of armed **peace**. It will fade like a phantom before us; and the world, it seems, will breathe again. Reassure your

Viennese friend, France is not about to die; it is her resurrection which we shall see. For throughout history—Bouvines, the Crusades, Cathedrals, the Revolution—we remain the same, the knights-errant of the world, the paladins of God. I have lived long enough to see it fulfilled; and we who prophesied it twenty years ago to unbelieving ears, may rejoice to-day.”

O my friend, may nothing mar your joy! Whatever fate has in store, you have risen to the pinnacle of earthly life, and borne your country with you. And you will be victorious. Your self-sacrifice, your courage, your whole-hearted faith in your sacred cause, and the unshaken certainty that, in defending your invaded country, you are defending the liberty of the world—all this assures me of your victory, young armies of the Marne and Meuse, whose names are graven henceforth on the tablets of history. Yet even had misfortune decreed that you should be vanquished, and with you France itself, no people could have aspired to a more noble death. It would have been a fitting end to that great people of the crusades—their supreme victory. Conquerors or conquered, living or

dead, rejoice!

“A splendid thing it is to fight with clean hands and a pure heart, and to assist divine justice by giving one’s life.”

You are doing your duty, but have others done theirs? Let us be bold and proclaim the truth to the elders of these young men, to their moral guides, to their religious and secular leaders, to the churches, the great thinkers, the leaders of Socialism; these living riches, these treasures of heroism you held in your hands; for what are you squandering them? What ideal have you held up to the devotion of these youths so eager to sacrifice their all? Their mutual slaughter! A European war! A sacrilegious conflict which shows a maddened Europe ascending its funeral pyre, and, like Hercules, destroying itself with its own hands!

And thus the three greatest nations of the West, the guardians of civilisation, rush headlong to their ruin, calling in to their aid Cossacks, Turks, Japanese, Cingalese, Soudanese, Senegalese, Moroccans, Egyptians, Sikhs and Sepoys—barbarians from the poles and those from the equator, souls and bodies of all colours. It is as if the four quarters of the Roman Empire at the time of the Tetrarchy had called upon the barbarians of the whole universe for their mutual destruction.

Is our civilisation so solid that you do not fear to shake the pillars on which it rests? Can you not see that all falls in upon you if one column be shattered? Could you not have learned to love one another, or if that were impossible, at least to

tolerate the great virtues and the great vices of the others? Was it not your duty to attempt—you have never attempted it in sincerity—to settle amicably the questions which divided you—the problem of peoples annexed against their will, the equitable division of productive labour and the riches of the world? Must the stronger for ever darken the others with the shadow of his pride, and the others for ever unite to dissipate it? Is there no end to this bloody and puerile sport, in which the partners change about from century to century—no end, until the whole of humanity is exhausted thereby?

The rulers who are the criminal authors of these wars will not accept the responsibility for them—they dare not. Each one by underhand means seeks to lay the blame at the door of his adversary. The peoples who obey them submissively resign themselves with the thought that a power higher than mankind has ordered it thus. Again the venerable refrain is heard:—

“The fatality of war is stronger than our wills.” The old refrain of the herd that makes a god of its feebleness and bows down before him. Man has invented fate, that he may make it responsible for the disorders of the universe, those disorders which it was his duty to regulate. There is no fatality! The only fatality is what we desire; and more often, too, what we do not desire enough. Let each now repeat his *mea culpa*. The leaders of thought, the Church, the Labour Parties did not desire war. That may be; what then did they do to prevent it?

What are they doing to put an end to it?

They are stirring up the bonfire, each one bringing his faggot. The most striking feature in this monstrous epic, and one without any precedent, is the unanimity for war in each of the nations engaged. An epidemic of homicidal fury, which started in Tokio ten years ago, has spread like a wave and overflowed the whole world. None has escaped its contagion; no high thought has succeeded in keeping out of the reach of this scourge. A sort of demoniacal irony broods over this conflict of the nations, from which, whatever its result, only a mutilated Europe can issue. For it is not racial passion alone which is hurling millions of men blindly one against another, so that not even neutral countries remain free of the dangerous thrill, but all the forces of the spirit, of reason, of faith, of poetry, and of science, all have placed themselves at the disposal of the armies in every state. There is not one amongst the leaders of thought in each country who does not proclaim with conviction that the cause of his people is the cause of God, the cause of liberty and of human progress. And I, too, proclaim it.

Strange combats are being waged between metaphysicians, poets, historians—Eucken against Bergson; Hauptmann against Maeterlinck; Rolland against Hauptmann; Wells against Bernard Shaw. Kipling and D'Annunzio, Dehmel and de Regnier sing war hymns, Barres and Maeterlinck chant paeans of hatred. Between a fugue of Bach and the organ which thunders *Deutschland uber Alles*, Wundt, the aged philosopher of eighty-two, calls, with his quavering voice, the

students of Leipzig to the holy war. And each nation hurls at the other the name “Barbarians.”

The academy of moral science, in the person of its president Bergson, declares the struggle undertaken against Germany to be “the struggle of civilisation itself against barbarism.” German history replies with the voice of Karl Lamprecht that “this is a war between Germanism and barbarism, and the present conflict is the logical successor of those against the Huns and Turks in which Germany was engaged throughout the ages.” Science, following history into the lists, proclaims through E. Perrier, director of the Museum, member of the Academy of Sciences, that the Prussians do not belong to the Aryan race, but are descended in direct line from the men of the stone age called Allophytes, and adds, “the modern skull, resembling by its base, the best index of the strength of the appetites, the skull of the fossilized man in the Chapelle aux Saints most nearly, is none other than that of Prince Bismarck!”

But the two moral forces whose weaknesses this contagious war shows up most clearly are Christianity and Socialism. These rival apostles of religious and secular internationalism have suddenly developed into the most ardent of nationalists. Herve is eager to die for the standard of Austerlitz. The German socialists, pure trustees of the pure doctrine, support the bills of credit for the war in the

Reichstag. They place themselves at the disposal of the Prussian minister, who uses their journals to spread abroad his lies, and sends them as secret agents to attempt to pervert Italy. It was believed for a moment that two or three of them had been shot for the honour of their cause rather than take arms against their brothers. Indignant, they protest; they are all marching under arms! Liebknecht, forsooth, did not die for the cause of socialism; but Frank, the principal champion of the Franco-German union, fell under French fire, fighting in the cause of militarism. These men have courage to die for the faith of others; they have no courage to die for their own.

The representatives of the Prince of **Peace**—priests, pastors, bishops—have gone into battle in their thousands, to carry out, musket in hand, the Divine commands: Thou shall not kill, and Love one another. Each bulletin of victory, whether it be German, Austrian, or Russian, gives thanks to the great captain God—*unser alter Gott, notre Dieu*—as Wilhelm II or M. Arthur Meyer says. For each has his own God, and each God, whether old or young, has his Levites to defend him and destroy the God of the others.

Twenty thousand French priests are marching with the colours; Jesuits offer their services to the German armies; cardinals issue warlike mandates; and the Serb bishops of Hungary incite their faithful flocks to fight against their brothers in Greater Serbia. The newspapers report, with no expressions of astonishment, the paradoxical scene at the railway station at Pisa, where the Italian socialists cheered the young ordinands who were rejoining their regiments, all

singing the Marseillaise together. So strong the cyclone that sweeps them all before it; so feeble the men it encounters on its career—and I am amongst them.

Come, friends! Let us make a stand! Can we not resist this contagion, whatever its nature and virulence be—whether moral epidemic or cosmic force? Do we not fight against the plague, and strive even to repair the disaster caused by an earthquake? Or must we bow ourselves before it, agreeing with Luzzatti in his famous article that “In this universal disaster, patriotism alone triumphs.” Shall we say with him that it is good and reasonable that the demon of international war, which mows down thousands of beings, should be let loose, so that the great and simple truth, “love of our country,” be understood? It would seem, then, that love of our country can nourish only through the hatred of other countries and the massacre of those who sacrifice themselves in the defence of them. There is in this theory a ferocious absurdity, a neronian dilettantism which repels me in the very depths of my being. No! Love of my country does not demand that I shall hate and slay those noble and faithful souls who also love their country, but rather that I should honour them and seek to unite myself with them for our common good. You Christians will say—and in this you seek consolation for having betrayed your Master’s orders—that war exalts the virtue of sacrifice. And it is true that war has the privilege of bringing out the genius of the race in the most commonplace of hearts. It purges away, in its bath of blood, all dross and impurity; it tempers the metal of the soul; of a niggardly peasant, of a timorous citizen it can make a hero of Valmy. But is there no

better employment for the devotion of one people than the devastation of another? Can we not sacrifice ourselves without sacrificing our neighbours as well? Many of you, I know, yield your own blood more readily than you shed that of others. But this is, in its essence a weakness. For you who are undismayed by bullets and shrapnel yet tremble before the dictates of racial frenzy—that Moloch that stands higher than the Church of Christ. You Christians of to-day would not have refused to sacrifice to the gods of Imperial Rome, you are not capable of such courage! Your Pope Pius X died of grief at the outbreak of this war—so it is said The Jupiter of the Vatican hurled thunderbolts upon those inoffensive priests who believed in the noble chimaera of modernism. What did he do against those princes and those criminal rulers whose measureless ambition has given the world over to misery and death? May God inspire the new Pontiff who has just ascended the throne of St. Peter with words and deeds which will cleanse the Church from the stain of this silence.

You socialists on both sides claim to be defending liberty against tyranny—French liberty against the Kaiser, German liberty against the Czar. Would you defend one despotism against another? Unite and make war on both. There was no reason for war between the Western nations; French, English, and German, we are all brothers and do not hate one another. The war-preaching press is envenomed by a minority, a minority vitally interested in maintaining these hatreds, but our peoples, I know, ask for **peace** and liberty and that alone. The real tragedy, to one situated in the midst of the conflict

and able to look down from the high plateaus of Switzerland into all the hostile camps, is the patent fact that actually each of the nations is being menaced in its dearest possessions—in its honour, its independence, its life. Who has brought these plagues upon them? brought them to the desperate alternative of overwhelming their adversary or dying? None other than their governments, on whom, in my opinion, the guilt rests; the three rapacious eagles, the three empires, the tortuous policy of the house of Austria, the ravenous greed of Russia, the brutality of Prussia. The worst enemy of each nation is not without, but within its frontiers, and none has the courage to fight against it.

It is the monster of a hundred heads, the monster named Imperialism, the will to pride and domination, which seeks to absorb all, or subdue all, or break all, and will suffer no greatness except itself. For the Western nations Prussian imperialism is the most dangerous. Its hand uplifted in menace against Europe has forced us to join in arms against this outcome of a military and feudal caste, which is the curse not only of the rest of the world but also of Germany itself, whose entire thought it has subtly poisoned. We must destroy this first; but not this alone, the Russian autocracy too must be dealt with in the fulness of time. Every nation to a greater or less extent has an imperialism of its own, and whether it be military, financial, feudal, republican, social or intellectual, it is always the octopus sucking the best blood of Europe. Let the free men of all the countries of Europe when this war is over take up again the motto of Voltaire: *Ecrasez l'infame*.

When the war is over! The evil is done now, the torrent let

loose and we cannot force it back into its channel unaided. Moreover crimes have been committed against right, attacks on the liberties of peoples and on the sacred treasuries of thought which must and will be expiated. Europe cannot pass over unheeded the violence done to the noble Belgian people the devastation of Malines and Louvain, sacked by modern Tillys. But in the name of heaven let not these crimes be expiated by similar crimes. Let not the hideous words “vengeance” and “retaliation” be heard; for a great nation does not revenge itself, it reestablishes justice. But let those in whose hands lies the execution of justice show themselves worthy of her to the end.

It is our duty to keep this before them; nor will we be passive and wait for the fury of this conflict to spend itself. Such conduct would be unworthy of us who have such a task before us. Our first duty then, all over the world, is to insist on the formation of a moral High Court, a tribunal of consciences, to watch and pass impartial judgment on any violations of the laws of nations. And since committees of enquiry formed by belligerents themselves would be always suspect, the neutral countries of the old and new world must take the initiative and form a tribunal such as was suggested by Mr. Prenant, professor of medicine at Paris, and taken up enthusiastically by M. Paul Seippel in the *Journal de Geneve*.

“They should produce men of some worldly authority, and of proved civic morality to act as a commission of enquiry, and to follow the armies at a little distance. Such an organisation would complete and solidify the Hague Court, and prepare indisputable documents for the necessary work of justice.”

The neutral countries play too modest a role. In the face of unbridled force they are inclined to believe that opinion is defeated in advance, and the majority of thinkers in all countries share their pessimism. There is a lack of courage here as well as of clear thinking. For just at this time the power of opinion is immense. The most despotic of governments, even though marching to victory, trembles before public opinion and seeks to propitiate it. Nothing shows this more clearly than the efforts of both parties engaged in war, of their ministers, chancellors, sovereigns, of the Kaiser himself turned journalist, to justify their own crimes, and denounce the crimes of their adversary at the invisible tribunal of humanity. Let this invisible tribunal be seen at last, let us venture to constitute it. Ye know not your power, O ye of little faith! If there be a risk, will you not take it for the honour of humanity? What is the value of life when you have saved it at the price of all that is worth living for? *Et propter vitam, vivendi perdere causas.*

But for us, the artists and poets, priests and thinkers of all countries remains another task. Even in time of war it remains a crime for the finer spirits to compromise the integrity of their thought; it is shameful to see it serving the passion of a puerile, monstrous policy of race, a policy scientifically absurd,—since no country possesses a race wholly pure. Such a policy, as Renan points out in his great letter to Strauss, “can only lead to zoological wars, wars of extermination, similar to those in which various species of rodents and carnivorous beasts fight for their existence. This would be the end of that

fertile admixture called humanity, composed as it is of such various necessary elements.” Humanity is a symphony of great collective souls; and he who understands and loves it only by destroying a part of those elements, proves himself a barbarian and shows his idea of humanity to be no better than the idea of order another held in Warsaw.

For the finer spirits of Europe there are two dwellingplaces; our earthly fatherland, and that other City of God.

Of the one we are the guests, of the other the builders. To the one let us give our lives and our faithful hearts; but neither family, friend nor fatherland, nor aught that we love has power over the spirit, which is the light. It is our duty to rise above tempests, and thrust aside the clouds which threaten to obscure it; to build higher and stronger, dominating the injustice and hatred of nations, the walls of that city wherein the souls of the whole world may assemble.

I feel here how the generous heart of Switzerland is thrilled, divided between sympathies for the various nations, and lamenting that it cannot choose freely between them, nor even express itself. I understand how great its torment must be; but I know that this is salutary. It will rise thence to that superior joy of a harmony of races, which may be a noble example for the rest of Europe. It is the duty of Switzerland now to stand in the midst of the tempest, like an island of justice and of **peace**, where, as in the great monasteries of the early middle

ages, the spirit may find a refuge from unbridled force; where the fainting swimmers of all nations, those who are weary of hatred, may persist, in spite of all the wrongs they have seen and suffered, in loving all men as their brothers.