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VII

HOW WE STAND NOW [1]

(*March, 1916*)

A FEW weeks ago I was giving a lecture to a certain Scandinavian society, and was asked after the lecture to sign my name in the society's book. As I looked through the names of the previous lecturers who had signed, I noticed the signature of Maximilian Harden. I inquired about his lecture—it was given before the war, in 1913—and heard that it had been splendid. It had, in the first place, lasted two hours—a dangerous excellence—and had dealt with Germany's Place in the Sun. The lecturer had explained how Germany was the first of nations in all matters that really count: first in things of the intellect, in *Wissenschaft*, science, history, theology; first socially and politically, inasmuch as her people were at once the most enlightened and most contented, the freest and best organized and most devotedly loyal; first in military power and in material and commercial progress; most of all first in her influence over the rest of the world and the magic of her incomparable *Kultur*. She needed to expand and was bound to expand, both in Europe and beyond Europe. This could be achieved without difficulty; for Europe was already half conquered, and England had been very obliging, in the matter of colonies. So far the first hour and a half; then came the climax. This expansion would be of little use if it were obtained by mere peaceful growth. Germany's power needed a stronger foundation. It must be built on a pedestal of war and "cemented with blood and iron."

This lecture, if it could be unearthed, would form a curious comment on Harden's recent utterances in favour of peace and good-will; but that is not what I wish to dwell upon. I want merely to take this doctrine as a sort of text, and carefully to consider its implications. I do not say for a moment that it is, or ever was, the doctrine of all Germany; but it is, I think, the doctrine that has prevailed. It is the doctrine of Bernhardt—a writer by no means so negligible as some critics have tried to make out. It is the doctrine of that very remarkable German Secret Paper which appears as No. 2 in the French Yellow Book. It is the doctrine of the leading German intellectuals represented by Rohrbach or by Naumann. And, what is more significant, it seems to me to be the doctrine generally held by pro-Germans in neutral countries. Such pro-Germans seldom discuss the negotiations of 1914 or the responsibility for the war. They take the bold line that Germany is the finest nation in the world, and has a right, by war or otherwise, to seize the first place. They tacitly accept the doctrine of Harden's last half-hour, except, of course, that where Harden expected to achieve his end by one short and triumphant war, they now with Dr. Rohrbach only expect to realize their full hopes "in this war, or the next, or the next, or the next after that!"

Now, what is our answer, speaking—if we can—not as indignant Britishers, but as thinking men who try to be impartial—what is our answer to Harden's claim? If Germany is really so superior to other nations,—and she can make out, or could before the war, a rather plausible case,—ought we to check her? Ought we to strengthen a comparatively backward power, like Russia, against her?

Surely our reply is quite clear. If Germany is what she claims to be, she will get her due place by normal expansion and development. If she is growing in wealth, in population, in material, intellectual, and spiritual power,—no one will say she is hampered by undue modesty or lack of advertisement,—she will inevitably gain the influence she demands; she was already gaining it. We do not stand in her way except as legitimate rivals. We have not balked her colonial expansion; we agreed with her about the Bagdad Railway. But if, to make her claim firmer, she insists on war; if she seeks to build her empire upon innocent blood, then, both as a rival nation valuing our own rights and as civilized men in the name of outraged humanity, we meet force with force. We will show this empire which demands a foundation of blood and iron, that blood at least is a slippery foundation.

So much for the first question suggested by my text; now for a second. How does the existence of this doctrine and the fact of its wide acceptance bear upon the question of Peace? Have we blundered into this war, through the folly of our Governments, with no fundamental quarrel? or are we confronted with a deliberate policy—a policy backed by an army of ten to twelve millions, which we cannot tolerate while we exist as a free nation? It seems to me clear, and ever increasingly clear, that the governing forces in Germany are fighting in the spirit of Harden's speech, to create a world-power which shall be, in the first place, hostile to ourselves, and, in the second place, based on principles which we regard as evil.

The ideal has been most clearly expressed in Naumann's remarkable book "Mitteleuropa," and in the immense discussion to which that book has given rise. Some German critics think that Naumann is too moderate in the East, some that he unduly neglects the colonies. But in general there emerges from the whole discussion the clear ideal of a united empire reaching from Antwerp to Bagdad, dominated, organized, permeated, and trained for war by the German General Staff, and developed economically by German trusts and cartels. It is the ideal of Rohrbach and the Intellectuals who write in *Deutsche Politik*. It is implicit in the old speeches of the Kaiser and Prince von Bülow. It is implicit equally in the recent speech of the present Chancellor, insisting that "any possible peace" must be based "on the war situation as every war map shows it to be."

The war situation on land already gives Germany her empire of *Mitteleuropa*! Her armies reach now from Antwerp to Bagdad, from Riga to the frontier of Egypt—that frontier which Rohrbach describes as "the throat of the British Empire," to be held always in Germany's grip. The colonies are gone; true. But if Germany is sufficiently strong in Europe, it is a maxim of German policy that colonies can be recovered.

A critic may say, "But this implies annexation; and the whole principle of annexation is being vigorously repudiated in Germany." Quite true. It is being repudiated; and not only by the Socialists, but by many bourgeois politicians and professors. There has been a curious unanimity, these last weeks, in the repudiation of the annexation policy. What is the explanation of a phenomenon which seems so strangely, so suspiciously, gratifying?

Remember Austria before the war! She was willing to guarantee the territorial integrity of Serbia. She did not wish to annex territory; no, she wanted a Vassal State. That is the clue to the problem why Rohrbach and Harden want no annexation, why even the Chancellor is willing to consider a policy without annexations. Germany has no need of annexations if she can end this war as a conqueror, alone and supreme against a world in arms.

The Chancellor has explained that he is content not to annex Belgium, provided he can have guarantees that Germany shall have her "*due influence in Belgium*." The same "due influence," I presume, which she now possesses in Turkey and Bulgaria, neither of which countries she has annexed. The same "due influence" which she will inevitably have, if peace is made on the basis of the present military situation, in Greece, in Rumania, in Sweden. And who imagines, after that, that Denmark or Holland can hold out? Peace on the basis of the present military situation establishes at a blow the empire of *Mitteleuropa*, and presents the professional German war-mongers with another successful war.

Let us here consider another objection. "If Germany is to gain this position by mere prestige, without any annexation," it may be suggested, "does she not clearly deserve it? Are we not wrong to object to it?" I answer, No, she does not deserve it, and we have the right to object. She claims that prestige on the ground that she has won the war; and that, we maintain, is a false ground, because she has not won the war. We mean to see whether she can win. An interesting object lesson is now being worked out before the eyes of the smaller nations, those semi-civilized Balkan and Asiatic communities who have had so little experience of honest politics and such abundant experience of international scoundrelism. They are waiting to see whether the last word of political wisdom is to be found in the way in which Germany treated Belgium, and Austria treated Serbia, and both Powers treated the unhappy Balkan States at the time of the last Balkan War. They are waiting to see whether it is safe and wise to plot evil, to lie, to prepare, to spring upon your prey; or whether the great mass of decent human society is in the long run strong enough to beat down any nation that plays the assassin against its fellows.

That is how the knowledge of this policy bears on the question of Peace. A great Scandinavian shipbuilder the other day told me that he had one word of advice, and one only, to give us about the war. "Beat Germany this time," he said, "for, if you do not, next time she will beat you."

I will ask you now to face with me a third question, suggested not so much by Harden's actual speech as by the tone of my own criticism of it. I think Harden's programme wicked; I regard the political action and the whole manner of thought of the German leaders as both treacherous and cruel; I think and speak of it with indignation, and so do you. Now, have we any right to that tone?

I met in France lately an old friend of mine, who told me in a genial way that all such indignation was hypocrisy, pure hypocrisy. "Germany was perfectly right in all she had done, and if we had been clever enough to think of it, we would have done the same." And he challenged me with certain quotations from English and American writers, which I will put before you in a moment.

Now, we all know that our indignation is not hypocritical. Whether warranted or not, it is perfectly sincere. There is no question of that. But I wish, before answering my friend in detail, to make one frank admission. Our moral indignation is not hypocritical; but I admit that it is a dangerous state of mind. As soon as we begin to have that kind of feeling towards any national or personal enemy, a feeling of indignant scorn for some one else coupled with a conviction of our own great superiority, it is dangerous: we ought instantly to collect ourselves and bear in mind, at the least, the possibility that, "but for the grace of God, there go we and there goes Great Britain."

"If we had been clever enough, we would have done the same": let us see what, in this respect, Germany did. She forced on Europe a war that could have been easily avoided; she broke her treaty in a peculiarly treacherous way; she trampled on international law; she practised deliberate "frightfulness" on the civil population in Belgium and northern France; she twisted all the rules of war towards less chivalry and greater brutality; she slew unarmed civilians wholesale with her submarines and Zeppelins; and, if we are adding up her list of crimes, we should not forget the most widespread and ghastly of all, her deliberate starvation of Poland and her complicity in the unspeakable horrors of Armenia.

Would we, could we, as a nation, ever have done these things? No one who knows England will really argue that we would actually have done them. But let us go further. Do we habitually harbour principles and use arguments which would justify our doing such things, if circumstances tempted us that way! As a nation I am clear that we do not; but I must face some of my friend's quotations.

As for the general theory: well, our late Field Marshal, Lord Roberts, was a great and chivalrous soldier, admired and loved by his fellow countrymen. Yet it seems that in his "Message to the Nation" he definitely praises and recommends for our imitation the doctrines of General Bernhardt, and particularly admires the German Government for pouring scorn on President Taft's proposals for arbitration treaties (pp. 8, 9). Well, I confess I wish Lord Roberts had not written thus. My defence must be the rather speculative one, that I do not believe he really accepted the doctrines that he seemed to preach. At any rate, you will not find anywhere in his long military life that he practised them.

Again, when we speak of "scraps of paper," I find that a certain English soldier, a member of my own clan, too, has expressed his opinions about them even more vigorously than Dr. Bethmann-Hollweg. He is speaking of our seizure of the Danish Fleet in 1807. "Nothing has ever been done by any other nation more utterly in defiance of the conventionalities of so-called international law. We considered it advisable and necessary and expedient, and we had the power to do it; therefore we did it. Are we ashamed of it? No, certainly not. We are proud of it." The writer is Major Stewart-Murray in "The Future Peace of the Anglo-Saxons." The history, of course, is incorrect, the language is muddled; but the writer's general meaning is clear enough. And it is certainly not for him to throw stones at professed treaty-breakers.

My friend's next quotations are from Mr. Homer Lea. Now, I do not feel myself responsible for Mr. Homer Lea, because after all he is American, not English. But certainly, to judge by the quotations, his principles would warm the hearts of Attila or Admiral von Tirpitz. They would not, I think, have appealed to General Robert Lee, and I am certain would have horrified Homer. Even that most sinister sentence with which the horrors of Belgium were justified—the maxim that an invading army should "leave the women and children nothing but their eyes to weep with"—even that was not the invention of the Teuton. It was welcomed and carried into practice by them; but its invention belongs to an American general and it has been quoted with admiration by certain English writers.

Lastly, let us take two statements of what I may call the mystical creed of militarism. I want you to guess which of the two is German and which English. "War gives a biologically just decision, since its decisions arise from the very nature of things." And, again: "War is the divinely appointed means by which the environment may be readjusted till 'ethically fittest' and 'best' become synonymous." Which of those two is German? Which is the more remote from good sense? which the more characteristic in its mixture of piety and muddle-headedness? Well, I don't know what your guesses are but the first is from Bernhardt, and the second from Colonel Maude, on "War and the World's Life."

In "Punch" last week there was a cartoon representing a blundering Teutonic giant with a spiked club, advancing under the motto, "*Weltmacht oder Niedergang!*" Naturally, when any person is kind enough to give the rest of the world that choice, we all unanimously say, "*Niedergang*, if you please." Yet I find in the book of a well-known and kindly and learned English writer the statement that "a choice is now given to England, a choice between the first place among nations and the last; between the leadership of the human race and the loss of empire and of all but the shadow of independence."

Of course, one sees more or less what he means; but why exaggerate? Why insist on "leadership of the human race"? Why express the policy you advocate in terms which must necessarily exasperate Russia, France, the United States, and all the other great nations? Is that the way to get allies among nations of whom each one considers itself as good as you? Is it the spirit in which to conduct decent diplomacy, the spirit in which to deal fairly and reasonably with the other members of the great fraternity of Europe?

What, then, is the answer to my friend's challenge? I confess myself still unshaken by it. We must admit that these militarists, these enthusiastic spurners of international law, these eloquent would-be torturers of civil populations, these rejecters and despisers of arbitration and peace, do exist among us; they exist among us, but, thank Heaven and our own common sense, they do not control our Government. They are not England. In Germany, they have controlled the Government. And the world has seen the fruit of their principles when carried into action, in all its horror and all its helpless futility.

Plato always insisted—you will excuse a Greek scholar for once referring to Plato—on the great complexity of human character. It is never One; it is always a mass of warring impulses; and his solution of the problem presented by that inward war was to maintain the character as an "aristocracy," in which the best forces should be uppermost and the lower ones beaten down. The same rule should apply both to the individual and to the State. I believe that—in Plato's sense of the word, which is, of course, quite different from its ordinary modern meaning—we do possess in Great Britain such an "aristocracy." Our better natures on the whole rule our public action; we give our national confidence to our better men. We have behind us a very great tradition. In peace we are the most liberal and the most merciful of all great empires; in war we have Napoleon's famous testimonial, calling us "the most consistent, the most implacable, and the most generous of his enemies." It is for us to keep up that tradition, and I believe that the men who rule us do keep it up. The main effort of the nation is high and noble, but in the strain and anxiety of this long war one becomes conscious of the struggle towards expression of something lower, something mean, angry, intemperate, hysterical, slanderous—the barbarian slaves, as Plato would put it, clamouring that the city itself shall be governed by barbarian slaves.

I take one case, not mentioning names because I do not wish to attack any individual, from the "Times" of a few days back. The children of interned aliens are fed by the Boards of Guardians on workhouse principles. With the rise of prices an increased grant was necessary, and was applied for by the Local Government Board. (It remained considerably lower than the allowance for the children of our own soldiers and sailors.) A certain Member of Parliament asked Mr. McKenna if, before sanctioning the grant, he would give due consideration to the increasingly bad conditions under which British civilians were now forced to live at Ruhleben.

Mr. McKenna: The proposals of the Local Government Board have already been approved. In their treatment of prisoners and other enemy aliens in this country, His Majesty's Government are guided by the dictates of humanity and the principles of The Hague Convention.

Another honorable Member: Before the right honorable gentleman sanctions the increase, will he ascertain what grants are being given to the children of interned British prisoners in Ruhleben?

Mr. McKenna: I do not think the two cases can be weighed one against the other. No matter what other Governments may do, this Government will continue to be actuated by the principles of humanity.

The honorable Member: How does the right honorable gentleman expect to get better treatment for British prisoners in Ruhleben if he gives everything with both hands to the children of interned Germans here?

Mr. McKenna: I do not think my honorable friend states the case quite fairly. We believe ourselves bound by certain principles—the rules of The Hague Convention. We have acted honestly and fearlessly in conformity with those rules, and I hope the House will support the Government in so doing.

I choose his incident, not from any wish to attack the honorable Members involved, one of whom I know to be a quite kindly person, but because it just illustrates my argument. It shows a bad and foolish and un-English impulse struggling to obtain power and being very properly crushed. No reasonable person really imagines that cutting down the food of these children below what the Guardians think necessary will help us in the faintest degree to win the war; and, above all, that is not the way in which Great Britain makes war,—or, please God, ever will make war,—by starving a lot of little enemy children whom we happen to have in our hands.

I wonder sometimes that people—especially people who write letters to newspapers—seem to have so little pride in their country. I suppose there is some psychological luxury in making vindictive suggestions of this kind, or in spreading wild accusations against one's leaders. But it is the sort of luxury that ought to be strictly cut down in time of war. It is misleading to other nations; and, with public servants as with others, you do not get the best work by incessant scolding. For my own part, I am more proud of Great Britain than ever in my life before, and that largely because, in spite of this froth or scum that sometimes floats on the surface, she is fundamentally true to her great traditions, and treads steadily underfoot those elements which, if they had control, would depose us from being a nation of "white men," of rulers, of gentlemen, and bring us to the level of the enemy whom we denounce or the "lesser breeds without the law."

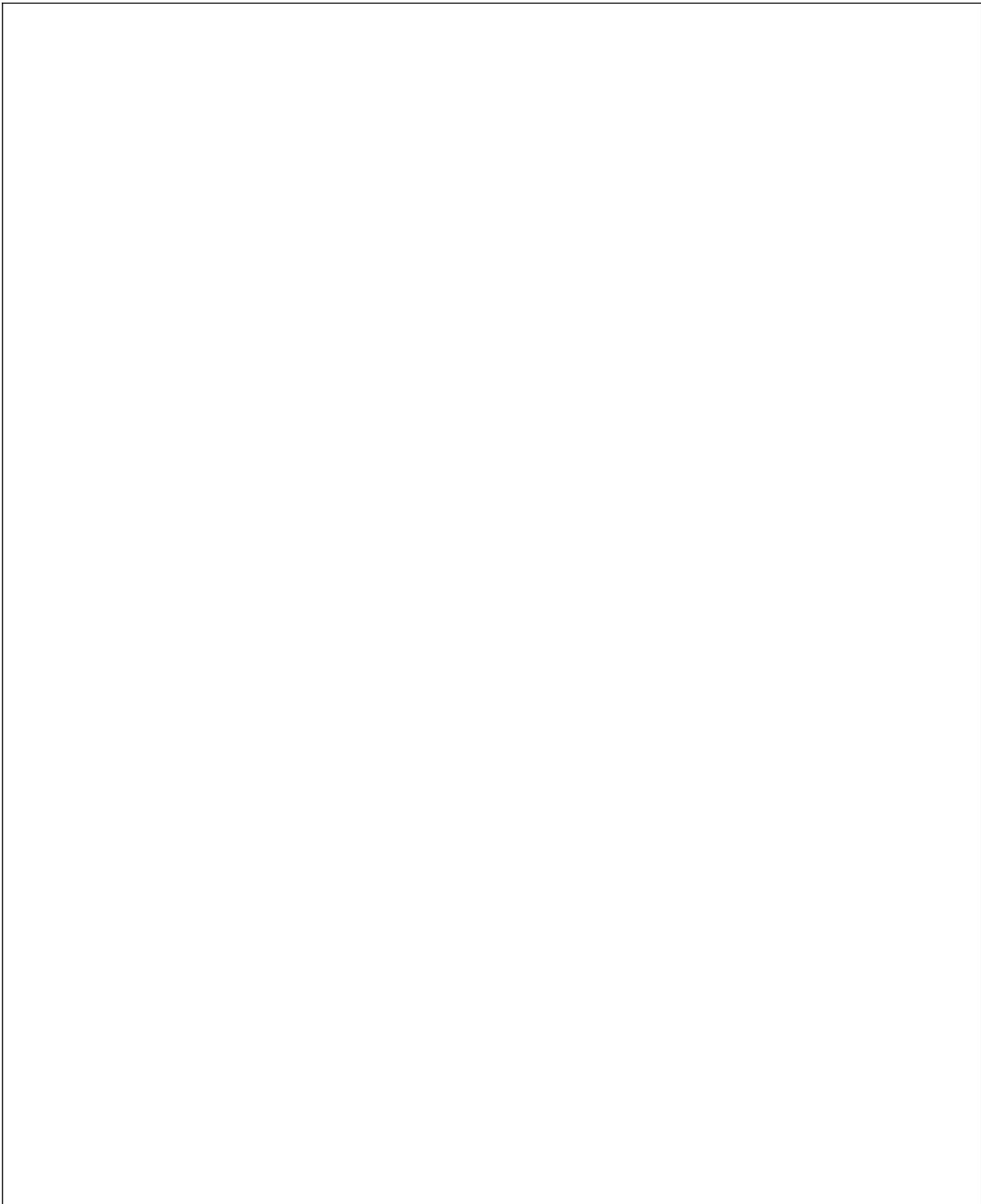
Probably many of us have learned only through this war how much we loved our country. That love depends, of course, not mainly on pride, but on old habit and familiarity, on neighbourliness and memories of childhood. Yet, mingling with that love for our old country, I do feel a profound pride. I am proud of our response to the Empire's call, a response absolutely unexampled in history, five million men and more gathering from the ends of the earth; subjects of the British Empire coming to offer life and limb for the Empire, not because they were subjects, but because they were free and willed to come. I am proud of our soldiers and our sailors, our invincible sailors! I am proud of the retreat from Mons, the first and second battles of Ypres, the storming of the heights of Gallipoli. No victory that the future may bring can ever obliterate the glory of those days of darkness and suffering, no tomb in Westminster Abbey surpass the splendour of those violated and nameless graves.

I am proud of our men in the workshop and the factory, proud of our men and almost more proud of our women—working one and all day after day, with constant overtime and practically no holidays, for the most part demanding no trade safeguards and insisting on no conditions, but giving freely to the common cause all that they have to give.

I am proud of our political leaders and civil administrators, proud of their resource, their devotion, their unshaken coolness, their magnanimity in the face of intrigue and detraction, their magnificent interpretation of the nation's will. I do not seek to palliate mistakes or deprecate criticism, so long as it is honest and helpful criticism. But, when almost every morning and evening newspapers professing to be patriotic pour in their attacks on these men who are bearing our burden,—attacks which will wither away and vanish with our first big victory,—I will venture to state one humble citizen's opinion: that, whether you look at the Head of the Government or whether you look at the great Secretaryships and Administrative Offices, from the beginning of the war till now, I doubt if at any previous period of English history you will find a nation guided by such a combination of experience, high character, and commanding intellectual power.

A few days ago I was in France in the fire-zone. I had been at a field dressing-station, which had just evacuated its wounded and dead, and was expecting more; and, as evening was falling, full of the uncanny strain of the whole place and slightly deafened with the shells, I saw a body of men in full kit plodding their way up the communication trenches to take their place in the front line. I was just going back myself, well out of the range of guns, to a comfortable tea and a peaceful evening; and there, in trench after trench, along all the hundred miles of our front, day after day, night after night, were men moving heavily up to the firing-line, to pay their regular toll of so many killed and so many wounded, while the war drags on its weary length. I suddenly wondered in my heart whether we or our cause or our country is worth that sacrifice; and, with my mind full of its awfulness, I answered clearly, Yes. Because, while I am proud of all the things I

have mentioned about Great Britain, I am most proud of the clean hands with which we came into this contest, proud of the Cause for which with clear vision we unsheathed our sword, and which we mean to maintain unshaken to the bitter or the triumphant end.



FOOTNOTES:

[\[1\]](#) Address to the Fight for Right League.

[End of *How We Stand Now*, by Gilbert Murray]