

THE ALTAR OF FREEDOM



MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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BY
MARY ROBERTS RINEHART



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THE ALTAR OF FREEDOM

Remember, boy, that behind all these men you have to do with, behind officers, and government, and people even, there is the Country Herself, your Country, and that you belong to Her as you belong to your own Mother.

The Man Without a Country.

We are virtually at war. By the time this is published, perhaps the declaration will have been made.

And even now, all over the country, on this bright spring day, there are mothers who are waiting to know what they must do. Mothers who are facing the day with heads up and shoulders back, ready to stand steady when the blow falls; mothers who shrink and tremble, but ready, too; and other mothers, who cannot find the strength to give up to the service of their country the boys who will always be little boys to them.

I love my country. There is nothing she can ask that I will not do. I am ready to live for her or die for her. Last stand of the humanities on earth, realization of a dream and fulfillment of an ideal, my home, my native land,—that is America to me. Because I am a woman, I cannot die for my country, but I am doing a far harder thing.

I am giving a son to the service of his country, the land he loves.

When I was a child, I lived on a quiet, tree-shaded street in this very city where now I am writing this. And, late in May of each year, when the ailanthus trees were in blossom, the street put up fresh curtains and red-washed the brick pavements. The cobblestones were swept, too. And then the procession came.

I was twelve, I think, before I began to get a lump in my throat as the long line of veterans went by. It was a long line then. I did not know exactly why I cried, except that those men and those tattered flags stood for something heroic and very sad. I know now, but it has taken years to put it into words, and in those years the line has shortened to a handful. Even the one-armed drummer has gone now. The street, which was rough and hard to march on in those days, has been made smooth for their feet, but few are left who can march to that quiet God's-acre on the hill above.

Now I know why, as a child, I wept. Those men had fought for something that was a part of me, like my mother, or my home: for my country.

Many years later I again saw marching men. But now the men were young, and there were no flags and no drums. They were marching into battle. And they were not fighting for my country.

But they were fighting for the ideal on which my country was founded, for humanity against oppression and cruelty, for the right of a man to labor in his own field, for the principle that honor is greater than life.

I saw them living and fighting, and I saw them dying. I saw strange nations, men of different tongues and different colors, gathered together and becoming as one, against a common foe. And then I learned this: that the world is now but one great nation, drawn close by the creed that all men are brothers; and that in the midst of that great nation of the world had broken loose something terrible, something that must be killed, or the world dies.

Once over there I saw a boy dying in a railway station. He knew two English words, so he said:—

“All right. All right.”

It was all right with him. He had done his bit, and he knew that there were others to take his place, and that the world-nation would not rest until the war-beast was chained. It was “all right.”

And so now, on the brink of war, I know it is all right with us.

We have been the melting-pot, but under the pot there has been no fire. Now the fire has come, a white flame, and we will fuse at last. But it will burn and sear. And to that, I wonder, can we say, “All right”?

War is a great adventure, the greatest adventure in the world. The adventurers go forth to battle, eyes ahead. Mostly they are boys who go, because war is the young man’s game, the young man’s call. All over Europe boys have left their homes, with a shame-faced tear or two, perhaps, but with the great adventure ahead. And they have left at home a great emptiness, a quiet that is not peace.

Then,—and very suddenly,—they have ceased to be boys on a great adventure, and are men, fighting men, patriots and soldiers. Something that had always been theirs had become a thing that had to be fought for. Not

until it was menaced had they known how dear was their country. The flag had been but a flag. It became a symbol of home.

I have lived to see my country's flag beside the altar of my church.

Men fight wars, but it is the mothers of a nation who raise the army. They are the silent patriots. Given her will, every mother in this great land would go to war, if by so doing she could keep her sons in safety. It is easier to go than to send a boy.

Yet war is not necessarily death. I try to comfort myself with this. Perhaps it will help other mothers. It is a hazard, but it is a thing of vast rewards and much cheerfulness, of democracy, of big moments and little feasts, of smiles and grumbling, of labor and rest, and of that joy in his own kind that only the boy knows. And underneath it all, buried deep and never articulate, is that feeling of doing his bit for his country, which is the foundation on which a nation rests secure.

I wish I could always remember these things. I have panicky times, when the sun dies for me, and my world goes black. But I am like the other mothers. I shall go through with it, and I would not have things otherwise. I would not have my son do other than he is doing. He is still in his 'teens, but he is a man, and this is his country. I have not raised him to be a shirker.

Only—this is a matter for everybody. It is not my war, or his, or the war of those other college boys who are always the first to go. Just as we all benefit by the country, so must we share—and share alike—its dangers.

Unless it is your war, this is not a democracy. If, as in the past, we have allowed the few to do our political thinking for us, as even now in the churches the few earn for all of us the right to call this a Christian land, if in this war we allow the few to fight for us, then as a nation we have died and our ideals have died with us. Though we win, if all have not borne this burden alike, then do we lose.

Sometimes, in these last troubled days, when every newsboy on the street under my window has been crying War, I cover my eyes and see that gallant little first army of England, springing to the call, and facing, without hope, the great trained German army. It was the best England had, and it is gone, almost to a man—because the mothers of England had not insisted that every man in the empire bear his share.

What if now your boy and mine could be a part of a vast trained army? His chance would be better. Better? There would be no war. You and I,

trembling for what may come, are paying the price of not having risen, an army of women, and demanded what now may come too late.

Because we did not rise this situation confronts us. For this is what a volunteer army means in this country to-day. For every high-spirited lad like yours and mine who goes out to fight, there are a hundred, a thousand, men of fighting age and strength who will not go, men who have no country, but only a refuge from the oppression of Europe.

Are we to suffer that they may live? Is this liberty of ours, this Land of the Free, without price? And will those hold it dear whom it has cost nothing?

Yet, so great is my faith in this great nation, so sure am I that the principles on which it is built are enduring, that I believe all these things will be set right in time. The one thing that matters now is to do our part, to show to the world that America still believes that there is such a thing as honor, and such a word as right.

For—and this I believe as I do in my country—we are to end this war. And that is the greatest privilege a nation of the world may have. We have sat by, through such horrors as have turned the world to blood. But now we can come in our strength, and mighty strength it will be. So rich we are! So strong! So young!

And the enemy is old—jaded and crafty and old: as old as cruelty is old. We are young and tireless and unafraid.

I have seen a sixteen-year-old Belgian sentinel keeping watch over a part of the German army, and all its science was powerless against his keen young eyes.

But we must pay the price. And the cost falls heaviest on the women.

No woman has the right to hold her son back if he desires to go to war. It is the fruition of the years in which she sought to make him a man. It is the vindication of his manhood. It is the crystallization of those very ideals which she taught him with his prayers.

I decline to believe that there are mothers who will not let their boys strike back when they are attacked.

But it is hard. Always the relation between mother and son is very close. As the boy grows up, the mother faces this, that he needs more than she can give him. He is still her world, but she is no longer his. Life calls, work and play and love, and sometimes battle. And the mother cannot hold him.

Everywhere are mothers, women who have patched small garments and tied up little wounds, who have built up a house of life out of millions of loving services, whose world has been the four walls of home.

To such women comes the call for their sons, who are still to them, though men grown, but the little boys of the stockings, and the small wounds, and Christmas trees, and the Fourth of July.

I do not fear for these women, but we cannot minimize what they do. They will send their sons, because they know that a nation is but a great home, consisting of many small ones. Homes are the units of a nation, as men are of an army. And these women know that our homes are only safe so long as the country is. They know too that peace has fled from the earth and cannot be brought back but by God and the sword.

Perhaps my own experience will be helpful. I am a home-woman, although now and then my profession has called me to strange places. Our family life has been very close. And, while I have little fear for myself, I am a coward for my children.

When, some weeks ago, war began to come close, I weakened, and I wrote my oldest son a letter. I was willing to have him do his duty, but I asked him to wait. Womanlike, I wanted time. I felt that surely this cross was not for me to bear so soon.

Then,—and may he forgive me for telling this, because of its purpose,—after a day or two, he wired, asking his father and myself if we wanted him to be a quitter.

I came to my senses then, and the necessary permission to enlist was signed and sent. Then I sat down and wrote to him, and said we would stand squarely behind him in whatever he did.

Easy? It was the hardest thing I have ever done. But I am glad now. I would never have forgiven him, I think, had he failed his country. But I nearly failed him.

So I have given one son, and I stand ready to give my other two, if their country needs them, when they are old enough to go.

But I am finding some things to cheer me. There is, for instance, the knowledge that the scandals of the Southern camps during the Spanish War will not be repeated. There we lost ten boys from disease to every one killed in battle. Think of it! We learned nothing from that war, but we have learned greatly from the war in Europe. There will be no cruel and useless waste of life from disease. On the Mexican border there was practically no sickness,

although the natural conditions were in favor of it. We have sanitarians, now, and water supplies will be watched. The inoculation against typhoid, too, has eliminated the disease, both in the European armies and here. Because it is waste that we fear.

We are trying to feel, we women, that no cost is too great, if needful to preserve our country. But we will never be reconciled to waste of life through negligence. And this I promise, now. Let such negligence occur, and let me know of it, duly investigated, and I will make the press of the country ring with it, to the eternal shame of those who are responsible.

I have been to war, and I know this: that men living in fearful surroundings may be kept healthy by proper care. This care is what we demand, those of us who cannot fight, but who are bearing our own burdens, nevertheless.

One or two things have helped to make our decision hard for us. Perhaps the most important is this: there is no great hatred of the enemy, however much we abominate the things the German Government has driven an acquiescent people into doing. We all know Germans here whom we like and respect. We see them, family folk, sober and industrious and God-fearing, all about us. They are not Huns or vandals. And all the knowledge we have of a nation gone mad to order hardly counteracts the effect of the friendly human contacts of our daily lives with the Germans we know.

We forget that the German we know has come here to escape the very thing that has wrecked the old world; that in coming to this land of the free he has followed an ideal as steadily as back in the fatherland his kindred are following after the false gods of hate and war.

He is German, but he is not Prussian, although he may be Prussian-born.

Then, too, women know too much now of war to enable them to make the sacrifice easily. War has become more than a word. It is become reality, and only its horrors live for them. And so far but little emphasis has been laid on the great things for which we will fight. We talk in numbers. We stress the fine points of international law. We think of bond issues and submarines and guns—and the women sit and roll bandages and brood, and care little for all these things. Why not something of the real reason for this war, of the hatred for ruthless cruelty, the contempt for our rights, the scorn of the little nations, and of the privilege of helping to bring back to a world that is destroying itself the priceless boon of peace?

How afraid we are of airing our love of our country! How shame-facedly we rise to the national anthem! How many excuses a man will give for going to war, except the fundamental one that he loves his country and is going to stick by her though the heavens fall!

Little boys, these men of ours, hiding their deepest feelings with a gibe!

Some things we women must learn, and now is the time to learn them. Sacrifice is an old story to women. They have always known it. But not sacrifice to an abstract ideal. Sacrifice to an ideal, then,—and personal service.

And this personal service, mothers of America, is not rolling bandages for the other woman's son.

That hurts, but it is true. This is no time for evasion. And it is not because I have made my sacrifice that I say it. It is because, unless we all give, unless our army is large enough, those who have failed in their duty are sending the best youth of the country to death. It will be murder.

In return for what we give, we women of America have the right to demand certain things. First of all we can and must demand time that our boys may be trained. We have taken a long time to go into this war. And because the country would not believe that we must eventually be involved, we have lost precious years.

When, now nearly two years ago, I came back from the war in Europe, I brought with me two convictions: First, that the German Government had thrown aside its mask of law and order, and was following war along lines so atrocious that it must be checked or civilization dies. Second, after conferring with men high in the Allied Governments, that sooner or later we should inevitably find ourselves involved: it was but a matter of time.

I came home terrified. I tried to talk about it. It seemed to me that we could not sit back unarmed, with only our brave little army,—less than a single day's losses in battle over there,—and do nothing.

But I was as a voice crying in the wilderness. I was not alone, of course, in my wilderness. There were many, but the country heard us not. It listened to Belgium, and sent aid. It helped the pathetic little French orphans. It shook its head over the Roll of Honor in the "Illustrated London News," and it went to church on Sundays and thanked God that we were out of it.

An obstructive Congress, instructed from its constituencies, refused to listen to talk of preparation. The Army tried to get a hearing, and the Navy tried, but both failed. It is not the fault of the Democratic Party that we are

to-day as we are, although, insomuch as our President is head of the Army and of the Navy, it is the Democratic Party which will control the war.

It was, indeed, that staunch old Democrat, Thomas Jefferson, who said:—

“We must train and classify the whole of our male citizens and make military instruction a regular part of collegiate education. We can never be safe until this is done.”

Later on he went still further:—

“I think the truth must be obvious that we cannot be defended but by making *every* citizen a soldier.”

It is the fault of a great people who have forgotten or have never learned that the world is only one tenth as large as it was when this Republic was founded. And that, instead of being isolated from this war, the conflict is and has been from its beginning but just over the edge of the horizon.

What else must we demand, now that the war-beast is creeping closer, when his head is reared above the skyline? What else have we a right to ask, we women who cannot sit in the seats of the mighty, but to whom the nation must turn for soldiers, now and in future generations?

We can ask this: This country of ours has been hag-ridden by politics. We have the right now to demand that party lines be forgotten, and that the nation act as a whole, politically; that the best man serve, regardless of his party.

This must not be a “party” war. If any man put his party before his country, that man is a traitor. We are no longer Republican or Democrat or Progressive. We are Americans.

Not until universal service had removed the war in England from party lines was there anything adequate done. Then, and only then, did England begin to put forth her best efforts.

And this we can ask:—

This must not be a bureaucrat’s war.

Civil administration in the field has always failed. War is a highly specialized business, the most highly specialized business in the world. And we who give our best have the right to demand the best. We can have no bungling.

The English Field Marshal Wolseley, writing of our Civil War as a military expert, said: “The Northern prospects did not begin to brighten until

Mr. Lincoln, in March, 1864, with that unselfish intelligence which distinguished him, abdicated his military functions in favor of General Grant.”

War is not a thing for amateurs in high places.

If our own history means anything to us, if the tragic experience of England has taught us anything, it is that the army in the field should not be a Washington-controlled army, beyond the supplying of men, arms, and equipment.

Do you know what a company commander must do in the day's work? He must enroll and recruit his company to a strength of one hundred and fifty men. He must get them clothed, equipped, and fed, and he must keep them clothed, equipped, fed, doctored, sanitized, cheerful, and amused.

Any woman who has tried to do all of these things for one stirring lad may multiply these by a hundred and fifty, and no maternal instinct to help out, and see that the company commander has a full day even in peace times.

Then he has to drill his men, and in war he has to lead them. He must give them every chance for life if he can. He must die with them if it be necessary. But he must do with them the thing he has been assigned to do.

Is that work for the amateur?

In the Mexican and Civil Wars our professional fighters were Indian fighters and frontiersmen, splendid and hardy men accustomed to hardship. But they were not conversant with modern military methods. The result was civilian officers, taken from shops and offices, and the further result, in the Civil War, that a struggle which might have ended in a year took four.

But we did not learn anything from that lesson. For we are about to commit again the same folly, and from the same necessity.

Then, again, we have the right to demand enough time. Because we have wasted two years is no reason for hurry now, when haste means sending our boys untrained against a highly trained enemy.

Do you know that McDowell was urged to take his volunteers into action by popular clamor and against his better judgment before their three-months' enlistment expired, and that the result was the unhappy battle of Bull Run?

All this means but one thing to me, a mother. It means time to train our boys and properly equip them. And it means professional military leaders.

And this is pertinent now, because what we have done before we may do again. In the Civil War each State was called on for a certain number of regiments. Prominent men then raised these regiments, and they were officered by local civilians. That was not such a hardship then, because our boys were to face other regiments recruited and officered in the same way.

But surely we will not do this now. I protest. I want the best, not only for my son, but for all the sons who are so valiantly offering themselves. I cannot stand back silent, with the memories I have of what war is, with the death and misery and wanton destruction of Flanders before me, with the scar of the iron heel of Germany on my heart. *I protest.*

The Plattsburg idea has borne abundant fruit. It has shown three things:
—

1st. That individual training cannot be had in less than several months of field service.

2d. That organization cannot be had even in so short a time.

3d. That professional leadership is necessary as opposed to officers appointed from civil life at the outbreak of hostilities.

You who considered prayerfully the best doctor for your child when he was ill, are you going now to place his life in unskilled hands?

This morning I stopped at one of the recruiting stations and talked to the clear-eyed young soldier on duty.—They are a fine lot, this little regular army of ours. I like to talk to them. They look me in the eye. Do you remember teaching your little boys to face the world, head up?—This young soldier had been seven years in the army. He had one more year, and unless there was a war, he was going to quit then. He liked it, but he had done his bit. No, there were not many men applying. Yes, he guessed we should need all we could get.

Then he gave me this appeal to the young patriots of the country, flaming now with the fire of that highest emotion of all, love of country:—

“Men wanted under thirty-five years of age, for the United States Army. Special inducements to Pharmacists, Musicians, Bandsmen, Electricians, Clerks, Bakers, Cooks, Barbers, Teamsters, Carpenters, Blacksmiths, Horseshoers, and other Mechanics.”

God of our fathers! Not special inducements to Patriots, Men who love their country, Men who believe in liberty, Men who hate cruelty, Men who would avenge Belgium, Free Men, Fighting Men!

And, farther down, it is not, “Come and do your bit,” “Your country calls you,” or “Save the Flag.” It offers, forsooth, “a chance to see the world.” Those are the very words!

So to-day we are on the edge of war, or at war. And we ask, not for boys of fire and steel, but cooks and teamsters and blacksmiths.

But the American boy has imagination, if our War Department has not. And he is coming, in his thousands and tens of thousands.

Nothing can hold him back,—not danger, not inadequate preparation, not anything under the blue sky where once he sailed his kites and sent up his Fourth-of-July rockets. Not even the mother he loves.

What are we going to do, then, we mothers, when the tumult and the shouting have died, and the long wait comes? We will pray. The churches of France are full of kneeling women. And we will work.

There is no spectacular work for mothers in a war. They cannot drive ambulances, or guide aeroplanes, although they are capable of doing both. There will be no need of the wig-wagging that some women are so painfully learning! But they will work for the Red Cross, and they will make up such little packets as only mothers can make,—toothbrushes and chocolates and fresh socks and gingerbread, and a Bible and playing-cards and cigarettes.

And in between times, they will wait, in that quiet that is not peace.

That is what millions of women are doing just now, while you are reading this.

There are two wars being waged to-day. One is the war of hate, and one is the war of love. And this last is the bitter war, because it is being fought in women’s hearts, between their fears and their patriotism. I know.

And because fear is evil, it will go down to defeat. Women are brave, and mothers are the bravest of all women, for they have faced the Gethsemane of child-bearing. They will not weaken now.

Napoleon said, “Give me the mothers of France, and I will make France.”

So this is how I see the situation to-day, as it affects me and others like me. If I believe in my country, as God knows I do, if I love it, and that too He knows, I must do my little part, my bit.

This the country must know: that women are ready to do their part. Else we are not free women, but slaves. And this the country must know, too: that the women demand that it do its part.

The best of preparation, of skill, of guidance, of every sort of provision, is what we require and will have.

We will not fail America. Let it not fail us.

But she will not. America, last stand of the humanities on earth, realization of a dream and fulfillment of an ideal, our home, our native land, we mothers stand ready.

More than fifty-two years ago an American woman received this letter. It was written to one mother, but it belongs to all mothers, everywhere in the world, who have seen their sons go forth to war and leave behind them those empty places in the heart that are never filled:—

EXECUTIVE MANSION, *November 21, 1864.*

DEAR MADAM: I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

(Signed) ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Altar of Freedom* by Mary Roberts Rinehart]