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THE PERIL OF WAR:

A DISCOURSE

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BY

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THE PERIL OF WAR.

I HAD prepared for this morning the discourse you were expecting,—on Friendship. But, alas, the hour which has arrived permits me no such idyllic theme as that. There are sounds on the air not of friendship but of strife ; and however feeble one voice amid the roar of partisan passion, mine must bear testimony and protest against the wild and guilty schemes which would plunge this nation into a chaos of barbarism. While to-day the nation kneels to one who said “Blessed are the peacemakers,” its Queen is compelled to invite her subjects to rise from their knees and become peacebreakers. For the whole civilised world is at peace. The war-drum is hushed. The press had long made the Gorgon’s face so familiar a guest at every table, that overwrought horror seemed turning

to stone. From that carnage the shuddering world has emerged. Thousands are on beds of pain, binding up their fresh wounds; thousands are wandering unsheltered around their desolated homes; thousands are dropping hot tears over new-made graves. Still above all these agonies there has dawned a day of peace. It is England that is now called upon to break that peace; to blacken that sky again with the cloud and tempest of war; to renew the deadly work, that seemed closed, of strewing the earth with the dying and the dead. It is this land of culture, art, science, civilisation, which stands forth alone,—where countries we thought generations behind us in progress ask for consultation and friendliness,—this land which alone summons Europe to a war that can bring no conceivable good, nothing but the curses of agonised millions upon us.

It is to be feared we have fallen on a generation so familiar with the blessings of peace as to forget the terrible meanings of war, one which no longer recognises the fatal power of war to drag a people back under the sway of animalism. I speak to-day, and trust you will listen to what I have to say; another week, even, it may be too late, the friends of humanity may be struck dumb. A few guns fired, a single sharp engagement, a smarting defeat, and the excitement of conflict may flame through the land; a fictitious

ardour of miscalled patriotism may seize even on people of sense, pervert reason, raise the passions of the prize-ring, and the voice of conscience and reason be drowned. Before that demonic possession has replaced the healthy heart and intelligence of our country, let us, while we can, ask ourselves what war is? what we are going to war for? what is our own duty in view of this danger, and what it will continue to be should a disloyal government drag us into this barbarism?

‘The microscope reveals miniature butchery in atomies and infinitely small biters, that swim and fight in an illuminated drop of water; and the little globe is but a too faithful miniature of the large.’ When the infusoria became human bipeds—not yet men—they went on pretty much the same way, biting and devouring one another. History is mainly a record of wars, and it has bequeathed us the sorry fact that still nations devote more money to armies and navies than they do to education or the arts.

In savage and nomadic eras this was perhaps inevitable. It was natural, before civilisation advanced, that war should be normal, taking the place of law and friendly arbitrations not yet framed in fit tribunals.

It was in those days that the traditional deities were imagined—all their chiefs, gods of war, gods of the

thunderbolt, and of wrath, Indra, Mars, Jove, and Jehovah—whose breath, as his prophet said, is a stream of fire and brimstone kindling Tophet. But we have moved a long way from that fighting and scratching boyhood of the world—at least theoretically. Even the orthodox have a different idea of the figure who wields fire and brimstone, and kindles Tophet,—and they do not worship him, but view him with hostility and horror. Yet that Jehovah was only a god of war, and the breath of it is still a stream of fire and brimstone kindling Tophet. If that now sounds diabolical, it is because the sulphurous work of gunpowder is diabolical.

But let us look at a nearer time. Let us take comparatively modern English history as our mirror, and see how the national life and face are reflected in it. As late as Elizabeth's time this nation made war against the commerce of the world, and maintained as a national policy what it now calls piracy. The proverb was, "No peace beyond the line," and every sailor shipped on the buccaneer's bargain, "No prey, no pay." That was then as much patriotism as fighting Russia could be now. The celebrated Cavendish was thought a very pious Christian in his time. At the close of the 16th century (September, 1588) he wrote to Lord Hunsdon on his return from a voyage round the world: "It hath pleased Almighty God to

suffer me to circumpass the whole globe of the world, entering in at the Strait of Magellan, and returning by the Cape of Buena Esperança ; in which voyage I have either discovered or brought intelligence of all the rich places of the world which were ever discovered by any Christian. I navigated along the coast of Chili, Peru, and New Spain, where I made great spoils. I burnt and sunk 19 sail of ships, small and great. All the villages and towns I ever landed at I burned and spoiled." The good Cavendish begins his proud narrative, "It hath pleased Almighty God." But how does it strike us—with the horror of one ship going down with 300 men fresh in our minds ; how does this hero of sunken ships and burnt towns now strike our fancy ?

This was near 300 years ago. But let us look back to the attitude of patriotism, as it was called, under a quarter of a century ago. The great Crimean War—the war against Russia—lasted about two years. For it England and France paid, in round numbers, a hundred millions of money, and burthened their people with a taxation never lifted since,—never to be lifted,—under which they now groan ; and would groan more but that a long peace has brought prosperity to sustain it. That war cost Turkey near thirty millions, and ever since she has been filching it back wherever she could find a victim at home or

abroad. Austria lost twenty millions of pounds by it, and Russia sixty millions. In a single night Russia destroyed her mighty fleet. In the course of that war England lost in round numbers 50,000 men; France, 170,000; Turkey, 80,000; Russia, 400,000; in all, 700,000 men, in the prime of life, bit the dust to rise no more; and more than 100,000 homes were plunged into mourning, poverty, desolation.

And all for what? To extort a treaty now torn up and scattered in little bits on the waters of the Black Sea,—as every treaty obtained by violence is sure to be, so soon as he who signs it under compulsion feels free enough to tear it. Just as you would treat a bargain made with a pistol at your head, was that so costly treaty dealt with; and even so will be treated any sham settlement of the Eastern Question that may now be obtained by violence.

Is all this to be repeated? And if so, will it look any better twenty-four years hence than the Crimean War does now? And three hundred years hence how will it look if a civilised people still dwells here? Precisely as we now look upon our legalised piracy of the 16th century, and upon Cavendish burning all the ships he ever saw, and all the towns and villages he ever landed at.

For Russia has done England no more wrong than those burnt towns did Cavendish. Russia has done

this country no wrong whatever, notwithstanding the insults heaped upon her by our press and ministry. No man has yet arisen to point out a single interest of this country which Russia has threatened, or a single action of her's which this country would not have done in her place. She has submitted to this nation her treaty of peace, and empowered it to raise objection to anything it pleases in that treaty. No doubt that treaty needs alteration; it was made, margined, and meant to be altered. A harder treaty Germany exacted from France, and England said not a word. But Russia plainly asked more than she means to take. When England has raised her objection and Russia has defied such objection, then, and not till then, it will be time for this country to determine whether the point is one for which it is necessary to draw the sword.

To unsheath the sword on a point not yet made; on a request not yet refused; on a matter of diplomatic form; on a demand to which England herself would never submit; that were to relapse into the war of infusoria,—law of the jungle—settlement of tooth and claw, to be unsettled by any stronger tooth and claw that may grow up.

I have not the slightest fear of war being brought on by the sober senses of this country. I have no fear that the cause of right and justice will lead to war.

But there is reason to fear that the old unfounded prejudice against Russia,—one of the superstitions not yet worn out,—may render possible that dire catastrophe. It was but the other day that the like prejudice and superstition were directed against France. In the time of Nelson Englishmen regarded Frenchmen as their natural foes. Lord Nelson said, “Wherever a Frenchman anchors his ship, there shall mine be to fight him.” It is within our memory how that feeling towards France was strong enough to line the channel coast with needless fortresses,—‘Palmerston’s follies’ they now are, for which England paid dearly,—profiting nothing—on which no one can now look but with shame. A few years after, England discovered that France was not her natural enemy but her natural friend; from that country wealth poured into its coffers, long sealed up by Hate, unsealed by Alliance; and the fortresses now remain monuments of an animosity, panic and bluster, such as one might have hoped would never recur. They are recurring. The anger against Russia is just as baseless; will in the future be remembered with equal shame. It has no foundation but in popular ignorance. The defence of Russia is no part of my case; were it ten-fold worse, then that would not justify shedding one drop of its blood or ours unnecessarily; but I have often been astounded at the ingenuity with which

that nation is misrepresented to the English people. Russia is not admirably constituted; few countries are; but most of the things said against Russia, might as well be said against the North Pole. It has not a Parliament; but until it has a people what would be a Parliament? Only a powerful House of Lords, without any Commons, oppressing a powerless peasantry. If there had been a Parliament in Russia, do you suppose the nobles who must compose it would ever have emancipated their own serfs? There would have been at this moment many millions of serfs there instead of the free men and women whom an Emperor liberated against all aristocratic interest and protest, and who are the poor people we propose to call from the fields and schools where they are toiling upward to independence,—in order that English labourers, leaving *their* fields and schools may shoot at, and be shot by, them. Russia consists of a miscellaneous collection of tribes whom she has so far civilised that they have gained the feeling of nationality; and few countries can show a more steady progress. The number of her journals and magazines almost equals those of England. Her libraries are invaluable resources for the world. Several of the greatest authors belong to that country, and her artists are known through Europe for the sublimity of their creations. While Russia is supposed to be ambitious of possessing further territory—her

real distress is that she has too much territory ; she cannot fully occupy it, nor bring its produce freely into exchange ; and she would gladly exchange several districts large as England for a fresh entrance into the commerce of the world, which would redound to the benefit of mankind and her own civilisation. Is it a great and glorious part for any nation to play—most of all this nation, the pioneer of commerce—to beat back another country whenever it makes an effort to rise and participate in that commercial system which makes the civility and wealth of mankind ? Are we to go on for ever in this vicious circle of putting forward jealousy where generosity is needed ; and while leading progress on one hand, bolster up a crumbling old system on the other ?

If this be not the aim, why are we going to war ?

The *Saturday Review* of yesterday says it will be a war of 'no intelligible sense except national animosity.' The *London Times* of yesterday bases its entire leader on the notion that Russia proposed to suppress the discussion of some points of its Treaty in the Congress ; but even while that article was being set up the telegram from St. Petersburg was upsetting it by declaring that Russia did nothing of the kind, but maintained the right of the Congress to discuss what it pleased—every point—reserving her right to be bound by the discussion, or not, just as England

and other nations reserve the same right. Thus, while all are searching for the grounds of war, nobody can discover them.

With Turkey fallen beyond restoration; with the proposed new map for her rescued populations as yet unconsidered; with no British interest involved, and British honour untouched; the world would be constrained to say that for England now to break the peace would be a gratuitous wrong, a disinterested iniquity, an outbreak of criminal ferocity. But is it breaking the peace to call out a reserved army? The resignation of the Foreign Secretary answers that question. On such a step but one interpretation can be placed. Russia having carefully avoided touching any interest of this country has disappointed the partisans of war. Their only chance now is by this menace to provoke her to some aggression—to raise a panic in Russia under which she may take some step, occupy some town or position, or do something in way of defence which may be construed as aggression, and utilized here to provoke this nation in turn. The two nations would thus be set by the ears like two dogs in a ring. If these forces are called out it will be to that country as a blow in the face. Russia has faults—many faults, but whatever they may be from that day she will stand higher than her gratuitous assailant. However the fortunes of such a war may

go, England can win no real victory. Many of the brave men around us will fall; many homes will be draped in mourning; but the one solace of the fallen soldier and of the broken hearts is that their martyrdom makes for humanity, for God and the right. That solace can be theirs only if the reason and conscience of the nation are convinced that the war is clearly demanded by justice, by freedom, and humanity.

Is the projected war thus clearly and solemnly demanded? In this moment of pause before the thunderbolt is launched, ask yourselves whether it be a just, a humane thunderbolt? whether it is directed by moral principle, and aimed solely by justice? We hear something of the *prestige* of England. What is the meaning of *prestige*? It is from *prestigium*, the Latin word for a lie. We also hear loud talk of England's honour. But a nation's honour is not maintained by bloodshed; it is impaired—it is lost—by unnecessary bloodshed. We have relegated to the barbarism out of which it rose the code of the duel, with the silly notion that honour among men may depend on which can draw the other's blood. War for honour is just as foolish in a nation as between two men.

No; there is no honour involved in the case. War if undertaken at all, must be for vital national interests,

and self-defence. Otherwise it is dishonourable ; and victory does not make it less, but more dishonourable.

Even when most just, War is the worst necessity. There is, indeed, much to be said for the Quaker maxim that 'the worst peace is better than the best war.' Whatever its motive the method is savage, and it recoils terribly—more on the victor than the vanquished. When all the church-bells of the Prince of Peace are ringing out glory for successful slaughter, that is the very moment for fear. The professional slayers of men are not the wisest nor the best ; but war brings them all to the surface, and victory holds them there. Trade is thrown out of its normal channels, and never gets back into them again. It is a flood in one direction ; all the other channels left dry to make it. The late war in America was as necessary, just, and humane as a war could be ; but the demoralisation of the country has been fearful, and prevails to this day. The successful generals were made civil rulers, and corruption crept through every branch of government. The sudden wealth of inflated paper led to extravagance and luxury among people who did not know how soon their wealth might turn to rags again. The attempt to support such style, and meet the increased prices it entailed, brought on speculative bubbles,—sham railways, pretentious schemes of men who would

not return to the humble honest business they followed before the war; and the inevitable result came,—financial collapse, chronic depression, and ruin of labourers: all traceable to the war, just and necessary as it seemed, and sanctified though it was by the emancipation of four million slaves.

If in the proposed war with Russia England should be victorious, it will still go very deep into her life. Without allies, alone, fighting on a foreign soil, it will be no short and sharp affair,—no two-years affair like the last; unless the conditions alter it must necessarily be a steady draught upon this country for many years, her men and resources, to slowly waste away while they lay waste the strength and resources of another nation. By that process a few will be enriched, many pauperised. It will be a field-day for speculators, the millenium of adventurers. When it is over, if it ever is, the nation will be ruled by epaulettes and uniforms. Statesmanship will be nowhere. All of our internal reforms will be set back many years. They who talk about woman and her claims will be asked whether women can fight. The labourers turned aside from many employments will seek them again to find them dried up. All this has happened in America through four years of war, and it can happen here. And no conceivable outcome of a war which can only leave the Eastern Question just where it found it, can com-

pensate for even a small part of the sufferings and demoralisations it must entail.

It is a much easier thing to unloose that demon than to chain him up again. In the last century Vandreuil brought from America to France a famous Indian Chief who had been fighting for the French. He was presented to the King, and when he came into the royal presence the Sagamore lifted up his hand, and said, "This hand has slain 150 of your Majesty's enemies in the territories of New England." This so pleased the King that he knighted the Chief on the spot, and ordered a pension of eight livres a day to be paid him during life. On the Sagamore's return to New England he was so impressed by the popularity of his deeds of slaughter among the French, that he set about murdering everybody he met. After he had gone on adorning a state of peace with the arts of killing which had gained him knighthood and fortune, his neighbours combined against him, and he was forced to flee the country. That Indian may be regarded as a sort of incarnation of the war-spirit. Its knighthood and glory are won by wholesale killing; the more people killed the more the bells peal, and thanksgivings go up to Heaven; it is the grand apotheosis of ferocity. But when once the arts of peace have been superseded by the arts of bloodshed; when a generation has learned the black lesson that glorifies strife;

think you it will be easy to unlearn all that, and recur to the old standards of peaceful heroism and the humble conflict with human evil and sorrow? War, like the wild Sagamore, returns to peace knighted and pensioned for ferocity: that is its ideal of glory,—military manners, military education, military government. Which all mean a nation set back many years on the path of progress, and every rusty weapon in its ancient constitution polished and turned against its new and nobler aims.

I have now uttered my faith and feeling in this momentous matter. They are such as have been awakened within me by the low thunders on our horizon of what may be presently a black cloud shrouding the heavens and sending its bolts down upon us. At such an hour the grand watchword of your fathers sounds out again—‘England expects every man to do his duty.’ It was the watchword of battle; it is to-day the watchword of a nobler battle, a battle against war; a battle to defend the hearts and homes of England against the threatened ravages of a war without cause, necessity, or justice.

I have looked on the face of war. That monster with its snaky locks and fiery blood-shot eyes and harpy claws, I have seen passing over fair fields and leaving its footprints, in burning villages, dying men, weeping women and children. The same fearful

phantom now rises again, girt round with skulls, claws
 reeking with blood; it asks to lead this great nation
 on that track of desolation. To that invitation, I
 for one feel bound to say *No!*

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