

Cobb Irvin Shrewsbury

Speaking of Prussians—



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Irvin S. Cobb

«Speaking of Prussians—»

I

I believe it to be my patriotic duty as an American citizen to write what I am writing, and after it is written to endeavour to give to it as wide a circulation in the United States as it is possible to find. In making this statement, though, I am not setting myself up as a teacher or a preacher; neither am I going upon the assumption that, because I am a fairly frequent contributor to American magazines, people will be the readier or should be the readier to read what I have to say.

Aside from a natural desire to do my own little bit, my chief reason is this: Largely by chance and by accident, I happened to be one of four or five American newspaper men who witnessed at first hand the German invasion of Belgium and one of three who, a little later, witnessed some of the results of the Germanic subjugation of the northern part of France. I was inside Germany at the time the rush upon Paris was checked and the retreat from the Marne took place, thereby having opportunity to take cognisance of the feelings and sentiments and the impulses which controlled the German populace in a period of victory and in a period of reversals.

I am in the advantageous position, therefore, of being able to recount as an eyewitness – and, as I hope, an honest one – something of what war means in its effects upon the civilian populace of a country caught unawares and in a measure unprepared; and, more than that, what war particularly and especially means when it is waged under the direction of officers trained in the Prussian school.

Having seen these things, I hate war with all my heart. I am sure that I hate it with a hatred deeper than the hate of you, reader, who never saw its actual workings and its garnered fruitage. For, you see, I saw the physical side of it; and, having seen it, I want to tell you that I have no words with which halfway adequately to describe it for you, so that you may have in your mind the pictures I have in mine. It is the most obscene, the most hideous, the most brutal, the most malignant – and sometimes the most necessary – spectacle, I veritably believe, that ever the eye of mortal man has rested on since the world began, and I do hate it.

But if war had to come – war for the preservation of our national honour and our national integrity; war for the defence of our flag and our people and our soil; war for the preservation of the principles of representative government among the nations of the earth – I would rather that it came now than that it came later. I have a child. I would rather that child, in her maturity, might be assured of living in a peace guaranteed by the sacrifices and the devotion of the men and women of this generation, than that her father should live on in a precarious peace, bought and paid for with cowardice and national dishonour.

II

A few days before war was declared, an antimilitarist mass meeting was held in New York. It was variously addressed by a number of well-known gentlemen regarding whose purity of motive there could be no question, but regarding whose judgment a great majority of us have an opinion that cannot be printed without the use of asterisks. And it was attended by a very large representation of peace-loving citizens, including a numerous contingent of those peculiar patriots who, for the past two years, have been so very distressed if any suggestion of hostilities with the Central Powers was offered, but so agreeably reconciled if a break with the Allies, or any one of them, seemed a contingency.

It may have been only a coincidence, but it struck some of us as a significant fact that, from the time of the dismissal of Count Von Bernstorff onward, the average pro-peace meeting was pretty sure to resolve itself into something rather closely resembling a pro-German demonstration before the evening was over. Persons who hissed the name of our President behaved with respectful decorum when mention was made of a certain Kaiser.

However, I am not now concerned with these weird Americans, some of whom part their Americanism in the middle with a hyphen. Some of them were in jail before this little book was printed. I am thinking now of those national advocates of the policy of the turned cheek; those professional pacifists; those wavers of the olive branch – who addressed this particular meeting and similar meetings that preceded it – little brothers to the worm and the sheep and the guinea pig, all of them – who preached not defence, but submission; not a firm stand, but a complete surrender; not action, but words, words, words.

III

Every right-thinking man, I take it, believes in universal peace and realises, too, that we shall have universal peace in that fair day when three human attributes, now reasonably common among individuals and among nations, have been eliminated out of this world, these three being greed, jealousy and evil temper. Every sane American hopes for the time of universal disarmament, and meantime indulges in one mental reservation: He wants all the nations to put aside their arms; but he hopes his own nation will be the last to put aside hers. But not every American – thanks be to God! – has in these months and years of our campaign for preparedness favoured leaving his country in a state where she might be likened to a large, fat, rich, flabby oyster, without any shell, in a sea full of potential or actual enemies, all clawed, all toothed, all hungry. The oyster may be the more popular, but it is the hard-shelled crab that makes the best life-insurance risk.

And when I read the utterances of those conscientious gentlemen, who could not be brought to bear the idea of going to war with any nation for any reason, I wished with all my soul they might have stood with me in Belgium on that August day, when I and the rest of the party to which I belonged saw the German legions come pouring down, a cloud of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night, with terror riding before them as their herald, and death and destruction and devastation in the tracks their war-shod feet left upon a smiling and a fecund little land. Because I am firmly of the opinion that their sentiments would then have undergone the same instantaneous transformation which the feelings of each member of my group underwent.

Speaking for myself, I confess that, until that summer day of the year 1914, I had thought – such infrequent times as I gave the subject any thought at all – that for us to spend our money on heavy guns and an augmented navy, for us to dream of compulsory military training and a larger standing army, would be the concentrated essence of economic and national folly.

I remember when Colonel Roosevelt – then, I believe, President Roosevelt – delivered himself of the doctrine of the Big Stick, I, being a good Democrat, regarded him as an incendiary who would provoke the ill will of great Powers, which had for us only kindly feeling, by the shaking in their faces of an armed fist. I remember I had said to myself, as, no doubt, most Americans had said to themselves:

"We are a peaceful nation; not concerned with dreams of conquest. We have the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans for our protection. We are not going to make war on anybody else. Nobody else is going to make war on us. War is going out of fashion all over the planet. A passion for peace is coming to be the fashion of the world. The lion and the lamb lie down together."

Well, the lion and the lamb did lie down together – over there in Europe; and when the lion rose, a raging lion, he had the mangled carcass of the lamb beneath his bloodied paws. And it was on the day when I first saw the lion, with his jaws adrip, coming down the highroads, typified in half a million fighting men – men whose sole business in life was to fight, and who knew their business as no other people ever have known it – that in one flash of time I decided I wanted my country to quit being lamb-like, not because the lion was a pleasing figure before mine eyes, but because for the first time I realised that, so long as there are lions, sooner or later must come oppression and annihilation for the nation which persists in being one of the lambs.

As though it happened yesterday, instead of thirty months ago, I can recreate in my mind the physical and the mental stage settings of that moment. I can shut my eyes and see the German firing squad shooting two Belgian civilians against a brick wall. I can smell the odours of the burning houses. Yes, and the smell of the burning flesh of the dead men who were in those houses. I can hear the sound of the footsteps of the fleeing villagers and the rumble of the tread of the invaders going by so countless, so confidently, so triumphantly, so magnificently disciplined and so faultlessly equipped.

Most of all, I can see the eyes and the faces of sundry German officers with whom I spoke. And when I do this I see their eyes shining with joy and their faces transfigured as though by a splendid vision; and I can hear them – not proclaiming the justice of their cause; not seeking excuse for the reprisals they had ordered; not, save for a few exceptions among them, deploring the unutterable misery and suffering their invasion of Belgium had wrought; not concerned with the ethical rights of helpless and innocent noncombatants – but proud and swollen with the thought that, at every onward step, ruthlessness and determination and being ready had brought to them victory, conquest, spoils of war. Why, these men were like beings from another world – a world of whose existence we, on this side of the water, had never dreamed.

And it was then I promised myself, if I had the luck to get back home again with a whole skin and a tongue in my head and a pen in my hand, I would in my humble way preach preparedness for America; not preparedness with a view necessarily of making war upon any one else, but preparedness with a view essentially of keeping any one else from making war upon us without counting the risks beforehand.

In my own humble and personal way I have been preaching it. In my own humble and personal way I am preaching it right this minute. And if my present narrative is so very personal it is because I know that the personal illustration is the best possible illustration, and that one may drive home his point by telling the things he himself has seen and felt better than by dealing with the impressions and the facts which have come to him at secondhand.

Also, it seems to me, since the break came, that now I am free to use weapons which I did not feel I had the right to use before that break did come. Before, I was a newspaper reporter, engaged in describing what I saw and what I heard – not what I suspected and what I feared. Before, I was a neutral citizen of a neutral country.

I am not a neutral any more. I am an American! My country has clashed with a foreign Power, and the enemy of my country is my enemy and deserving of no more consideration at my hands than he deserves at the hands of my country. Moreover, I aim to try to show, as we go along, that any consideration of mercy or charity or magnanimity which we might show him would be misinterpreted. Being what he is he would not understand it. He would consider it as an evidence of weakness upon our part. It is what he would not show us, and if opportunity comes will not show us, any more than he showed it to Belgium or to France, or to Edith Cavell, or to those women and those babies on the *Lusitania*.

He did not make war cruel – it already was that; but he has kept it cruel. War with him is not an emotional pastime; not a time for hysterical lip service to his flag; not a time for fuss and feathers. And, most of all, it is to him not a time for any display of mawkish, maudlin forbearance to his foe; but, instead, it is a deadly serious, deadly terrible business, to the successful prosecution of which he and his rulers, and his government, and his whole system of life have been earnestly and sincerely dedicated through a generation of preparation, mental as well as physical.

IV

When I think back on those first stages – and in some respects the most tragic stages – of the great war, I do not see it as a thing of pomp and glory, of splendid panorama, pitched on a more impressive scale than any movement ever was in all the history of mankind. I do not, in retrospect, see the sunlight glinting on the long, unending, weaving lanes of bayonets; or the troops pouring in grey streams, like molten quicksilver, along all those dusty highroads of Northern Europe; or the big guns belching; or the artillery horses going galloping into action; or the trenches; or the camps; or the hospitals; or the battlefields. I see it as it is reflected in certain little, detached pictures – small-focused, and incidental to the great horror of which they were an unconsidered part – but which, to me, typify, most fitly of all, what war means when waged by the rote and rule of Prussian militarism upon the civilian populace of an invaded country.

I see again the little red-bearded priest of Louvain who met us on the day we first entered that town; who took us out of the panic of the street where the inhabitants fluttered about in aimless terror, like frightened fowl in a barnyard; and who led the way for us through a little wooden gateway, set in the face of a high brick wall. It was as though we were in another world then, instead of the little world of panic and distress we had just quit. About a neglected tennis court grew a row of pear trees, and under a laden grape arbour at the back sat four more priests, all in rusty black gowns. They got up from where they sat and came and spoke to us, and took us into a little cellar room, where they gave us a bottle of their homemade wine to drink and handfuls of their ripened pears to eat, and tried to point out to us, on a map, where they thought the oncoming Germans might be, none of us knowing that already uhlan scouts were entering the next street but one. As we were leaving, the eldest priest took me by the coat lapels and, with his kind, faded old eyes brimming and his gentle old face quivering, he said to me in broken English:

"My son, it is not right that war should come to Belgium. We had no part in the quarrel of these, our great neighbours. My son, we are not a bad people here – do not believe them should they tell you so. For I tell you we are a good people. We are a very good people. All the week my people work very hard, and on Sunday they go to church; and then perhaps they go for a walk in the fields. And that, to them, is all they know of life.

"My son," he said, "you come from a great country – you come from the greatest of all the countries. Surely your country, which is so great and so strong, will not let my little country perish from off the face of the earth?"

Because we had no answer for him we went away. And when, six weeks later, I returned to ruined and devastated Louvain, I picked my way through the hideous wreckage of the streets to the little monastery again. Behold! the brick wall was a broken heap of wrecked, charred masonry; and the pear trees were naked stumps, which stood up out of a clay waste; and the little cellar room, where we ate our pears and drank our wine, was a hole in the ground now, full of ill-smelling rubbish and fouled water, with the rotted and bloated corpse of a dead horse floating in the water, poisoning the air with the promise of pestilence. And the priests who once had lived there were gone; and none in all that town knew where they had gone.

Always, too, when thinking of the war, I think of the refugees I saw, but mostly of those I saw after Antwerp had fallen in the early days of October and I was skirting Holland on my way back out of Germany to the English Channel. I had seen enough refugees before then, God knows! – men and women and children, old men and old women and little children and babies in arms, fleeing by the lights of their own burning houses over rainy, wind-swept, muddy roads; vast caravans of homeless misery, whose members marched on and on until they dropped from exhaustion. And when they had rested a while at the miry roadside, with no beds beneath them but the earth and no shelters above them but the black umbrellas to which they clung, they got up and went on again, with no destination

in view and no goal ahead; but only knowing, I suppose, that what might lie in front of them could not be worse than what they left behind them. But never – until after Antwerp – did there seem to be so many of them, and never did their plight seem so pitiable. Over every road that ran up out of Belgium into Holland – and that in this populous corner of Europe meant a road every little while – they poured all day in thick, jostling, unending, unbroken streams. I marked how the sides of every wayside building along the Dutch frontier was scrawled over with the names of hundreds of refugees, who already had passed that way; and, along with their names, the names of their own people, from whom they were separated in the haste and terror of flight, and who – by one chance in a thousand – might come that way and read what was there written, and follow on.

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