

WAR AND PEACE—

ENMITY.

I.

Everywhere around me—and doubtless equally in all belligerent countries—I see newspaper articles headed “Lessons of the War.”

And undeniably, war does bring lessons, though whether such as any engaged therein will ever learn is quite another matter. As regards myself, I can at least boast of having been shown by war a fact which I had hitherto overlooked, and which, so far as I know, has been overlooked by the teachers of grammar in all countries equally.

For it is, so to speak, a fact of grammar which war has brought home to me—namely, that a numerous class of verbs, otherwise fairly regular, are never conjugated in the *first* persons, singular or plural; but only in the *second*, or more frequently, the *third*:—*example*, *They* (or *you*) attack, bully, intrigue, oppress, massacre; never *we*.

Similarly there are other verbs of which the first person plural can be used only in the past, in a thoroughly *historical* past: *example*, *we were* mistaken, *we were* deluded, *we were* aggressive, *we were* preposterous. But never *we are*.

N.B.—In every language alike the infraction of this grammatical rule is a sure sign of being an alien, and, where martial law prevails, may lead to judicial pursuits or police raids.

II.

One begins to suspect that there is an instinctive aversion, almost a bodily recoil, from admitting that the sufferings of war will have been all in vain. That suffering brings forth good is, indeed, the chief consolation and support of the sufferer, keeping him from despair, enabling him to put out new doses of endurance; and religion has exploited this emotional belief because it helps faith in a beneficent and personal providence. There is innate in mankind an inglorious wish for advantage, a noble aversion to wastefulness, an almost æsthetic craving for balance and compensation; and all these together make us resent the possible uselessness of suffering and sacrifice worse almost than suffering and sacrifice in themselves. So, *willing to believe* in final compensation, we are ready to stake more suffering rather than admit that no good will come out of what is already there.

It may be also that suffering of a certain degree and kind, especially moral, brings with it an adaptation to its continuance, and a corresponding dread of its sudden cessation: this is the explanation of the old saw that joy may kill. The psychic machine would break or warp under such unexpected change of gearing; and thus the notion of good coming out of sacrifice is apt to be secretly welcome to minds who are ostensibly to themselves verbally wishing that the suffering may cease. It is as difficult to let go sometimes as it was initially difficult to hold on. There are thus two conflicting tendencies in the soul: you have to hate the suffering, say, of war, in order that it *be* suffering, and in order also to hate its supposed evil authors, but you have to cling to it in order not to snap your soul's insufficient elasticity.

Be this the right explanation or not, the belief that good comes out of great suffering is ingrained. It is a *vital lie* of the first importance; and, like other *vital lies*, it helps us to act as if it were a truth. What! all these lads mown down for nothing, all these widows and mothers' souls bled-white all to no purpose? The very notion seems blasphemous. Let us have more lads killed and more mothers and widows heartbroken, just to show that it has not *been in vain*.

Yet, if you come to think of it, there is no more reason why good should come out of war than that health should come out of the plague if sufficiently virulent, or that an earthquake, if only it would last, should rattle the fallen cities back into their places.

That is the logical side of the question. As to the religious one, of which there is so much talk on all sides, there lurks in the minds of many ostensible Christians a trace of primeval Moloch worship: nations shall be made safe, be strengthened and purified by passing their children through the fire for their

Christians a trace of primeval Moloch worship : nations shall be made safe, be strengthened and purified by passing their children through the fire, for human suffering is a burnt-offering acceptable to the Divine nostrils.

The teachings of Christ, on the contrary, can be summed up in very modern and psychological terms : the only way of purification is by imagination and sympathy, which bring the suspicion that wrong can never be on one side only, and that there is no real reason why *we* should always happen to be in the right.

III.

There seems also to be in protracted war much of the gambler's temper. Not merely or so much the temper which runs great risks for great gains, stakes much to win much, but rather that meaner spirit of the gambler who is afraid to admit loss and leave the table, but who goes on, from indecision or inability to accept bad luck, and throws good money after bad. It is this spirit which makes gambling tables like Monte Carlo, and State lotteries like the Italian one, a paying concern.

IV.

That this war should be the last one. The only reasonable hope of this (for the hope of permanent peace through crushing an adversary cannot be accounted very reasonable !) has lain in the final recognition by all the belligerents that their respective sacrifices have brought no corresponding advantage.

But in expecting this we pacifists have not counted with one thing—namely, the spontaneous delusions and necessary deceptions which have been as much part and parcel of the war as the killing itself. For war is kept up as much by misconceptions and misrepresentations as by munition, and every man and woman in every country has been busy in *that* factory, the busier and more efficient in output that it requires neither buildings nor hours, the production of such incendiary bombs and poison gases being compatible with everyone's daily round of business or futility, and the material always to hand in the shallowest human souls.

As a result it is extremely probable that this war will bring no lesson. Its causes will be hopelessly buried under self-generated or highly-commendable wrong explanations—explanations costing no effort of thought, still less of humility and fairness ; but, on the contrary, furnished and fostered by self-satisfaction, suspiciousness, and incoherence.

It is to be feared that the psychological operations of warfare (as important as the military, and invariably successful !) will have resulted in such fear and such vindictiveness as will not only keep the war going long after peace had become possible, but will also generate an inclination for more wars, or for warlike preparation (including alliances) fatally resulting in war.

At the end of this war all the nations will be thoroughly horrified and ashamed. At present I see no signs of anything of the sort. The nations are indeed horrified, but only with one another, and the only shame is the shame which the adversary *ought* to feel. Fighting seems incompatible with a suspicion of one's own possible mistakes and shortcomings ; and wisdom, like moral improvement, comes by the recognition of one's own share of responsibility, not by devolving the responsibility on someone else.

In our civilised and sanctimonious days especially fighting is a *Facit* (but not always *Facit* !) reiteration of that elementary notion : " I'm a good boy, and you're a liar."

V.

Pacifism is all very fine. But one must be practical in this world. So all the nations apply to one another those methods of violence which each declares it will rather die than yield to. And, for the same practical reasons, all the nations equally prefer ruin and extermination to the terrible danger of such an armed peace as had been existing for some fifty years.

That is evidently one of the lessons of this war.

VERNON LEE.