The Passing of War?

The progress of humanity proceeds by a series of imaginations which the will in the race turns into accomplished facts and a train of illusions which contain each of them an inevitable truth. The truth is there in the secret Will and Knowledge that are conducting our affairs for us and it reflects itself in the soul of mankind; the illusion is in the shape we give to that reflection, the veil of arbitrary fixations of time, place and circumstance which that deceptive organ of knowledge, the human intellect, weaves over the face of the Truth. Human imaginations are often fulfilled to the letter; our illusions on the contrary find the truth behind them realised most unexpectedly, at a time, in ways, under circumstances far other than those we had fixed for them.

Man’s illusions are of all sorts and kinds, some of them petty though not unimportant,—for nothing in the world is unimportant,—others vast and grandiose. The greatest of them all are those which cluster round the hope of a perfected society, a perfected race, a terrestrial millennium. Each new idea religious or social which takes possession of the epoch and seizes on large masses of men, is in turn to be the instrument of these high realisations; each in turn betrays the hope which gave it its force to conquer. And the reason is plain enough to whosoever chooses to see; it is that no change of ideas or of the intellectual outlook upon life, no belief in God or Avatar or prophet, no victorious science or liberating philosophy, no social scheme or system, no sort of machinery internal or external can really bring about the great desire implanted in the race, true though that desire is in itself and the index of the goal to which we are being led. Because man is himself not a machine nor a device, but a being and a most complex one at that, therefore he cannot be saved by machinery; only by an entire change which shall affect all the
members of his being can he be liberated from his discords and imperfections.

One of the illusions incidental to this great hope is the expectation of the passing of war. This grand event in human progress is always being confidently expected and since we are now all scientific minds and rational beings, we no longer expect it by a divine intervention, but assign sound physical and economic reasons for the faith that is in us. The first form taken by this new gospel was the expectation and the prophecy that the extension of commerce would be the extinction of war. Commercialism was the natural enemy of militarism and would drive it from the face of the earth. The growing and universal lust of gold and the habit of comfort and the necessities of increased production and intricate interchange would crush out the lust of power and dominion and glory and battle. Gold-hunger or commodity-hunger would drive out earth-hunger, the dharma of the Vaishya would set its foot on the dharma of the Kshatriya and give it its painless quietus. The ironic reply of the gods has not been long in coming. Actually this very reign of commercialism, this increase of production and interchange, this desire for commodities and markets and this piling up of a huge burden of unnecessary necessities has been the cause of half the wars that have since afflicted the human race. And now we see militarism and commercialism united in a loving clasp, coalescing into a sacred biune duality of national life and patriotic aspiration and causing and driving by their force the most irrational, the most monstrous and nearly cataclysmic, the hugest war of modern and indeed of all historic times.

Another illusion was that the growth of democracy would mean the growth of pacifism and the end of war. It was fondly thought that wars are in their nature dynastic and aristocratic; greedy kings and martial nobles driven by earth-hunger and battle-hunger, diplomatists playing at chess with the lives of men and the fortunes of nations, these were the guilty causes of war who drove the unfortunate peoples to the battle-field like sheep to the shambles. These proletariates, mere food for powder, who had no interest, no desire, no battle-hunger driving them to
War and Self-Determination

armed conflict, had only to become instructed and dominant to embrace each other and all the world in a free and fraternal amity. Man refuses to learn from that history of whose lessons the wise prate to us; otherwise the story of old democracies ought to have been enough to prevent this particular illusion. In any case the answer of the gods has been, here too, sufficiently ironic. If kings and diplomats are still often the movers of war, none more ready than the modern democracy to make itself their enthusiastic and noisy accomplice, and we see even the modern spectacle of governments and diplomats hanging back in affright or doubt from the yawning and clamorous abyss while angry shouting peoples impel them to the verge. Bewildered pacifists who still cling to their principles and illusions, find themselves howled down by the people and, what is piquant enough, by their own recent comrades and leaders. The socialist, the syndicalist, the internationalist of yesterday stands forward as a banner-bearer in the great mutual massacre and his voice is the loudest to cheer on the dogs of war.

Another recent illusion was the power of Courts of Arbitration and Concerts of Europe to prevent war. There again the course that events immediately took was sufficiently ironic; for the institution of the great Court of international arbitration was followed up by a series of little and great wars which led by an inexorable logical chain to the long-dreaded European conflict and the monarch who had first conceived the idea, was also the first to unsheathe his sword in a conflict dictated on both sides by the most unrighteous greed and aggression. In fact this series of wars, whether fought in Northern or Southern Africa, in Manchuria or the Balkans, were marked most prominently by the spirit which disregards cynically that very idea of inherent and existing rights, that balance of law and equity upon which alone arbitration can be founded. As for the Concert of Europe, it seems far enough from us now, almost antediluvian in its antiquity, — as it belongs indeed to the age before the deluge; but we can remember well enough what an unmusical and discordant concert it was, what a series of fumblings and blunderings and how its diplomacy led us fatally to the inevitable event against
The Passing of War?

which it struggled. Now it is suggested by many to substitute a United States of Europe for the defunct Concert and for the poor helpless Hague tribunal an effective Court of international law with force behind it to impose its decisions. But so long as men go on believing in the sovereign power of machinery, it is not likely that the gods either will cease from their studied irony.

There have been other speculations and reasonings; ingenious minds have searched for a firmer and more rational ground of faith. The first of these was propounded in a book by a Russian writer which had an enormous success in its day but has now passed into the silence. Science was to bring war to an end by making it physically impossible. It was mathematically proved that with modern weapons two equal armies would fight each other to a standstill, attack would become impossible except by numbers thrice those of the defence and war therefore would bring no military decision but only an infructuous upheaval and disturbance of the organised life of the nations. When the Russo-Japanese war almost immediately proved that attack and victory were still possible and the battle-fury of man superior to the fury of his death-dealing engines, another book was published, called by a title which has turned into a jest upon the writer, *The Great Illusion*, to prove that the idea of a commercial advantage to be gained by war and conquest was an illusion and that as soon as this was understood and the sole benefit of peaceful interchange realised, the peoples would abandon a method of settlement now chiefly undertaken from motives of commercial expansion, yet whose disastrous result was only to disorganise fatally the commercial prosperity it sought to serve. The present war came as the immediate answer of the gods to this sober and rational proposition. It has been fought for conquest and commercial expansion and it is proposed, even when it has been fought out on the field, to follow it up by a commercial struggle between the belligerent nations.

The men who wrote these books were capable thinkers but they ignored the one thing that matters, human nature. The present war has justified to a certain extent the Russian writer though by developments he did not foresee; scientific warfare
has brought military movement to a standstill and baffled the strategist and the tactician, it has rendered decisive victory impossible except by overwhelming numbers or an overwhelming weight of artillery. But this has not made war impossible, it has only changed its character; it has at the most replaced the war of military decisions by that of military and financial exhaustion aided by the grim weapon of famine. The English writer on the other hand erred by isolating the economic motive as the one factor that weighed; he ignored the human lust of dominion which, carried into the terms of commercialism, means the undisputed control of markets and the exploitation of helpless populations. Again, when we rely upon the disturbance of organised national and international life as a preventive of war, we forget the boundless power of self-adaptation which man possesses; that power has been shown strikingly enough in the skill and ease with which the organisation and finance of peace were replaced in the present crisis by the organisation and finance of war. And when we rely upon Science to make war impossible, we forget that the progress of Science means a series of surprises and that it means also a constant effort of human ingenuity to overcome impossibilities and find fresh means of satisfying our ideas, desires and instincts. Science may well make war of the present type with shot and shell and mines and battleships an impossibility and yet develop and put in their place simpler or more summary means which may bring back an easier organisation of warfare.

So long as war does not become psychologically impossible, it will remain or, if banished for a while, return. War itself, it is hoped, will end war; the expense, the horror, the butchery, the disturbance of tranquil life, the whole confused sanguinary madness of the thing has reached or will reach such colossal proportions that the human race will fling the monstrosity behind it in weariness and disgust. But weariness and disgust, horror and pity, even the opening of the eyes to reason by the practical fact of the waste of human life and energy and the harm and extravagance are not permanent factors; they last only while the lesson is fresh. Afterwards, there is forgetfulness;
human nature recuperates itself and recovers the instincts that were temporarily dominated. A long peace, even a certain organisation of peace may conceivably result, but so long as the heart of man remains what it is, the peace will come to an end, the organisation will break down under the stress of human passions. War is no longer, perhaps, a biological necessity, but it is still a psychological necessity; what is within us, must manifest itself outside.

Meanwhile it is well that every false hope and confident prediction should be answered as soon as may well be by the irony of the gods; for only so can we be driven to the perception of the real remedy. Only when man has developed not merely a fellow-feeling with all men, but a dominant sense of unity and commonalty, only when he is aware of them not merely as brothers,—that is a fragile bond,—but as parts of himself, only when he has learned to live not in his separate personal and communal ego-sense, but in a larger universal consciousness can the phenomenon of war, with whatever weapons, pass out of his life without the possibility of return. Meanwhile that he should struggle even by illusions towards that end, is an excellent sign; for it shows that the truth behind the illusion is pressing towards the hour when it may become manifest as reality.