

TIPPERARY

What a strange pleasure there is sometimes in seeing what we expected, or hearing what we knew was a fact! The dream then seems really to hold together and truth to be positively true. The bells that announced the Armistice brought me no news; a week sooner or a week later they had to ring. Certainly if the purpose of the war had been conquest or victory, nobody had achieved it; but the purposes of things, and especially of wars, are imputed to them rhetorically, the impulses at work being too complicated and changeful to be easily surveyed; and in this case, for the French and the English, the moving impulse had been defence; they had been sustained through incredible trials by the awful necessity of not yielding. That strain had now been relaxed; and as the conduct of men is determined by present forces and not by future advantages, they could have no heart to fight on. It seemed enough to them that the wanton blow had been parried, that the bully had begged for mercy. It was amusing to hear him now. He said that further bloodshed this time would be horrible; his tender soul longed to get home safely, to call it quits, and to take a long breath and plan a new combination before the next bout. His collapse had been evident for days and months; yet these bells that confirmed the fact were pleasant to hear. Those mean little flags, hung out here and there by private initiative in the streets of Oxford, had almost put on a look of triumph; the very sunlight and brisk autumnal air seemed to have heard the tidings, and to invite the world to begin to live again at ease. Certainly many a sad figure and many a broken soul must slink henceforth on crutches, a mere survival; but they, too, will die off gradually. The grass soon grows over a grave.

So musing, I suddenly heard a once familiar strain, now long despised and out of favour, the old tune of *Tipperary*. In a coffee-house frequented at that hour some wounded officers from the hospital at Somerville were singing it, standing near the bar; they were breaking all rules, both of surgeons and of epicures, and were having champagne in the morning. And good reason they had for it. They were reprieved, they should never have to go back to the front, their friends—such as were left—would all come home alive. Instinctively the old grumbling, good-natured, sentimental song, which they used to sing when they first joined, came again into their minds. It had been indeed a long, long way to Tipperary. But they had trudged on and had come round full circle; they were in Tipperary at last.

I wonder what they think *Tipperary* means—for this is a mystical song. Probably they are willing to leave it vague, as they do their notions of honour or happiness or heaven. Their soldiering is over; they remember, with a strange proud grief, their comrades who died to make this day possible, hardly believing that it ever would come; they are overjoyed, yet half ashamed, to be safe themselves; they forget their wounds; they see a green vista before them, a jolly, busy, sporting, loving life in the old familiar places. Everything will go on, they fancy, as if nothing had happened.

Good honest unguided creatures! They are hardly out of the fog of war when they are lost in the fog of peace. If experience could teach mankind anything, how different our morals and our politics would be, how clear, how tolerant, how steady! If we knew ourselves, our conduct at all times would be absolutely decided and consistent; and a pervasive sense of vanity and humour would disinfect all our passions, if we knew the world. As it is, we live experimentally, moodily, in the dark; each generation breaks its egg-shell with the same haste and assurance as the last, pecks at the same indigestible pebbles, dreams the same dreams, or others just as absurd, and if it hears anything of what former men have learned by experience, it corrects their maxims by its first impressions, and rushes down any untrodden path which it finds alluring, to die in its own way, or become wise too late and to no purpose. These young men are no rustics, they are no fools; and yet they have passed through the most terrible ordeal, they have seen the mad heart of this world riven and unmasked, they have had long vigils before battle, long nights tossing with pain, in which to meditate on the spectacle; and yet they have learned nothing. The young barbarians want to be again at play. If it were to be only cricket or boating, it would be innocent enough; but they are going to gamble away their lives and their country, taking their chances in the lottery of love and of business and of politics, with a sporting chance thrown in, perhaps, of heaven. They are going to shut out from view everything except their topmost instincts and easy habits, and to trust to luck. Yet the poor fellows think they are safe! They think that the war—perhaps the last of all wars—is over!

Only the dead are safe; only the dead have seen the end of war. Not that non-existence deserves to be called peace; it is only by an illusion of contrast and a pathetic fallacy that we are tempted to call it so. The church has a poetical and melancholy prayer, that the souls of the faithful departed may rest in peace. If in that sigh there lingers any fear that, when a tomb is disturbed, the unhappy ghost is doomed to walk more often abroad, the fear is mad; and if it merely expresses the hope that dead men's troubles are over, the wish is superfluous; but perhaps we may gloss the old superstition, and read into it the rational aspiration that all souls in other spheres, or in the world to come upon earth, might learn to live at peace with God and with things. That would be something worth praying for, but I am afraid it is asking too much. God—I mean the sum of all possible good—is immutable; to make our peace with him it is we, not he, that must change. We should need to discover, and to pursue singly, the happiness proper to our nature, including the accidents of race and sex and the very real advantages of growing old and of not living forever; and we should need to respect without envying all other forms of the good. As to the world of existence, it is certainly fluid, and by judicious pressure we may coax some parts of it into greater conformity with our wills; yet it is so vast, and crawls through such ponderous, insidious revolutions, all so blind and so inimical to one another, that in order to live at peace with things we should need to acquire a marvelous plasticity, or a splendid indifference. We should have to make peace with the fact of war. It is the stupid obstinacy of our self-love that produces tragedy, and makes us angry with the world. Free life has the spirit of comedy. It rejoices in the seasonable beauty of each new thing, and laughs at its decay, covets no possessions, demands no agreement, and strives to sustain nothing in being except a gallant spirit of courage and truth, as each fresh adventure may renew it.

This gallant spirit of courage and truth, you young men had it in those early days when you first sang *Tipperary*; have you it still, I wonder, when you repeat the song? Some of you, no doubt. I have seen in some of you the smile that makes light of pain, the sturdy humility that accepts mutilation and faces disability without repining or shame; armless and legless men are still God's creatures, and even if you cannot see the sun you can bask in it, and there is joy on earth—perhaps the deepest and most primitive joy—even in that. But others of you, though you were driven to the war by contagious example, or by force, are natural cowards; you are perhaps superior persons, intellectual snobs, and are indignant at having been interrupted in your important studies and made to do useless work. You are disgusted at the stupidity of all the generals, and whatever the Government does is an outrage to your moral sense. You were made sick at the thought of the war before you went to it, and you are sicker of it now. You are pacifists, and you suspect that the Germans, who were not pacifists, were right after all. I notice you are not singing *Tipperary* this morning; you are too angry to be glad, and you wish it to be understood that you can't endure such a vulgar air. You are willing, however, to sip your champagne with the rest; in hospital you seem to have come forward a little socially; but you find the wine too dry or too sweet, and you are making a wry face at it.

Ah, my delicate friends, if the soul of a philosopher may venture to address you, let me whisper this counsel in your ears: Reserve a part of your wrath; you have not seen the worst yet. You suppose that this war has been a criminal blunder and an exceptional horror; you imagine that before long reason will prevail, and all these inferior people that govern the world will be swept aside, and your own party will reform everything and remain always in office. You are mistaken. This war has given you your first glimpse of the ancient, fundamental, normal state of the world, your first taste of reality. It should teach you to dismiss all your philosophies of progress or of a governing reason as the babble of dreamers who walk through one world mentally beholding another. I don't mean that you or they are fools; heaven forbid. You have too much mind. It is easy to behave very much like other people and yet be possessed inwardly by a narcotic dream. I am sure the flowers—and you resemble flowers yourselves, though a bit wilted—if they speculate at all, construct idealisms which, like your own, express their inner sensibility and their experience of the weather, without much resemblance to the world at large. Their thoughts, like yours, are all positings and deductions and asseverations of what ought to be, whilst the calm truth is marching on unheeded outside. No great harm ensues, because the flowers are rooted in their places and adjusted to the prevailing climate. It doesn't matter what they think. You, too, in your lodgings in Chelsea, quite as in Lhassa or in Mount Athos, may live and die happy in your painted cells. It is the primitive and the ultimate office of the mind to supply such a sanctuary. But if you are ever driven again into the open, if the course of events should be so rapid, that you could catch the drift of it in your short life (since you despise tradition), then you must prepare for a ruder shock. There is eternal war in nature, a war in which every cause is ultimately lost and every nation destroyed. War is but resisted change; and change must needs be resisted so long as the organism it would destroy retains any vitality. Peace itself means discipline at home and invulnerability abroad—two forms of permanent virtual war; peace requires so vigorous an internal regimen that

every germ of dissolution or infection shall be repelled before it reaches the public soul. This war has been a short one, and its ravages slight in comparison with what remains standing: a severe war is one in which the entire manhood of a nation is destroyed, its cities razed, and its women and children driven into slavery. In this instance the slaughter has been greater, perhaps, only because modern populations are so enormous; the disturbance has been acute only because the modern industrial system is so dangerously complex and unstable; and the expense seems prodigious because we were so extravagantly rich. Our society was a sleepy glutton who thought himself immortal and squealed inexpressibly, like a stuck pig, at the first prick of the sword. An ancient city would have thought this war, or one relatively as costly, only a normal incident; and certainly the Germans will not regard it otherwise.

Existence, being a perpetual generation, involves aspiration, and its aspiration envelops it in an atmosphere of light, the joy and the beauty of being, which is the living heaven; but for the same reason existence, in its texture, involves a perpetual and a living hell—the conflict and mutual hatred of its parts, each endeavouring to devour its neighbour's substance in the vain effort to live for ever. Now, the greater part of most men's souls dwells in this hell, and ends there. One of their chief torments is the desire to live without dying—continual death being a part of the only possible and happy life. We wish to exist materially, and yet resent the plastic stress, the very force of material being, which is daily creating and destroying us. Certainly war is hell, as you, my fair friends, are fond of repeating; but so is rebellion against war. To live well you must be victorious. It is with war as with the passion of love, which is a war of another kind: war at first against the beloved for favour and possession; war afterwards against the rest of the world for the beloved's sake. Often love, too, is a torment and shameful; but it has its laughing triumphs, and the attempt to eliminate it is a worse torture, and more degrading. When was a coward at peace? **Homer, who was a poet of war, did not disguise its horrors nor its havoc, but he knew it was the shield of such happiness as is possible on earth.** *If Hector had not scoured the plain in his chariot, Paris could not have piped upon the slopes of Ida, nor sported with his sheep and his goddesses upon the green. The merchants of Crete or Phoenicia could not have drawn up their black keels upon the beach, if the high walls of Ilium had not cast their protecting shadow on their bales of merchandise, their bags of coin, and their noisy bargaining. When Hector was no more and the walls were a heap of dust, all the uses of peace vanished also: ruin and utter meanness came to inhabit that land, and still inhabit it. Nor is war, which makes peace possible, without occasions in which a free spirit, not too much attached to existence, may come into its own. Homer shows us how his heroes could gather even from battle a certain harvest of tenderness and nobility, and how above their heads, half seen through the clouds of dust and of pain, flew the winged chariots of the gods, and music mingled with their banquet.*

Be sad if you will, there is always reason for sadness, since the good which the world brings forth is so fugitive and bought at so great a price; but be brave. If you think happiness worth enjoying, think it worth defending. Nothing you can lose by dying is half so precious as the readiness to die, which is man's charter of nobility; life would not be worth having without the freedom of soul and the friendship with nature which that readiness brings. The things we know and love on earth are, and should be, transitory; they are, as were the things celebrated by Homer, at best the song or oracle by which heaven is revealed in our time. We must pass with them into eternity, not in the end only but continually, as a phrase passes into its meaning; and since they are part of us and we of them, we should accompany them with a good grace: it would be desolation to survive. The eternal is always present, as the flux of time in one sense never is, since it is all either past or future; but this elusive existence in passing sets before the spirit essences in which spirit rests, and which can never vary; as a dramatic poet creates a character which many an actor afterwards on many a night may try to enact. Of course the flux of matter carries the poets away too; they become old-fashioned, and nobody wishes any longer to play their characters; but each age has its own gods. Time is like an enterprising manager always bent on staging some new and surprising production, without knowing very well what it will be. Our good mother Psyche, who is a convolution of this material flux, breeds us accordingly to mindlessness and anxiety, out of which it is hard for our youthful intellect to wean itself to peace, by escaping into the essential eternity of everything it sees and loves. So long as the world goes round we shall see Tipperary only, as it were, out of the window of our troop-train. Your heart and mine may remain there, but it's a long, long way that the world has to go.

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George Santayana
1918