

IN PRAISE OF PEACE LOVERS

LET us now praise peace lovers and the peace makers. The kind of talk that lately has filled too many gaping mouths and buzzed in too many wide spread ears is calculated to ruffle the calm of all but the craven and lethargic. Enough din bruited abroad in time must put to silence 'the still sad music of humanity': that has happened before, and has nearly happened again now, but the realists, the only true idealists, are at work to still the clamour and to attune discordant hearts to notes of peace. Bugle calls and roll of drums make a stirring music to march to, and a martial tread and shouldered arms are a stirring sight to see; but bugles sound calls to men whose ears are deaf to their music; and arms reversed and solemn tread accompany dead men to their graves.

We have not finished with the last war yet. Those who fell in battle in Europe, Africa and Asia, who sank with their ships on the high seas, who were flung dead from the skies, are commemorated on countless memorials and remembered with reverence at the fall of the year; trophies and hatchments, scrolls of honour, crosses and tombs proclaim them. Others, fellows of these, maimed and blind, await in hospitals their death from wounds, by most of us forgotten. But there are those also who 'live and move and have their being', who, regarded not as victims but as fortunate survivors of the war, eke out their days in a denial of their destiny; men whose aspiring spirit was stultified, clipped and seared by an alien god whom they served when he took command of their families and country; civilians branded by war.

One such died lately. An artist in whom the creative spirit was maimed when brutality and horror did violence to his soul. His eyes were blue and clear, and in his youth they held a visionary gleam that changed to a gaze of pain and abstractedness because he had looked on beastliness and had seen the rape of beauty. His delicacy of face and form remained, but from his body lissomness departed prematurely and the sensitiveness of his features betrayed the suffering of which he did not speak. He was a gay companion and of a liberal spirit, a sportsman too, and a great lover. Of a high, impetuous nature, he poured out four years of the 'glad red wine of his youth' in the service of his king. When he finally returned, no decoration starred his breast, no scar of wound was visible on his flesh, but he had parted with comrades in battle, and in its most horrid form had seen death.

'That should be hidden from youth,
A great thing biding upon the fullness of age,
And not made common gossip among (those) tides
Of daily beastliness.'

He returned, in common with thousands of others, to a workaday world and found old values valueless, and mockery in the place of early hopes, and an emptiness where once was the full sound of music. People wondered that he did not adapt himself to new conditions: some thought that he did. Certainly his courage never left him, nor his love. He had to fight still, and he was hurt. Then suddenly he died.

His funeral was planned with strict simplicity, but his old comrades remembered him and did not let him pass without their tributes. They draped his coffin with his country's flag; they bore him to the church themselves, they formed a guard of honour for him there; along the steep path to the church that stands upon a hill, within the shadowed aisles, under the yew tree beyond the wall, at intervals along the road, and lining the grassy track that leads to the quiet graveyard where trees rustled gently under an English sky, stood 'men who were boys when (he) was a boy' and gypsies and the workless whom he had befriended. Like a rich garden his grave was spread with flowers, and there were laurels and Flanders poppies for remembrance.

We will not lament his untimely death by reviling the past for wanton waste, for he too 'sleeps well'; but shall we not remember, as those old soldiers remembered, the victims of the last war who survived into a later day, who linger still, cheated of the fulfilment of their lives and making the supreme sacrifice at the last? So for those who follow us there shall be less risk of disillusion and frustration, and they also shall live to bless the peace makers.

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