

I - THE WAR ON THE WORD

It will hardly be denied that there is one lingering doubt in many, who recognise unavoidable self-defence in the instant parry of the English sword, and who have no great love for the sweeping sabre of Sadowa and Sedan. That doubt is the doubt whether Russia, as compared with Prussia, is sufficiently decent and democratic to be the ally of liberal and civilised powers. I take first, therefore, this matter of civilisation.

It is vital in a discussion like this that we should make sure we are going by meanings and not by mere words. It is not necessary in any argument to settle what a word means or ought to mean. But it is necessary in every argument to settle what we propose to mean by the word. So long as our opponent understands what is the thing of which we are talking, it does not matter to the argument whether the word is or is not the one he would have chosen. A soldier does not say "We were ordered to go to Mechlin; but I would rather go to Malines." He may discuss the etymology and archaeology of the difference on the march: but the point is that he knows where to go. So long as we know what a given word is to mean in a given discussion, it does not even matter if it means something else in some other and quite distinct discussion. We have a perfect right to say that the width of a window comes to four feet; even if we instantly and cheerfully change the subject to the larger mammals, and say that an elephant has four feet. The identity of the words does not matter, because there is no doubt at all about the meanings; because nobody is likely to think of an elephant as four feet long, or of a window as having tusks and a curly trunk.

It is essential to emphasise this consciousness of the thing under discussion in connection with two or three words that are, as it were, the key-words of this war. One of them is the word "barbarian." The Prussians apply it to the Russians: the Russians apply it to the Prussians. Both, I think, really mean something that really exists, name or no name. Both mean different things. And if we ask what these different things are, we shall understand why England and France prefer Russia; and consider Prussia the really dangerous barbarian of the two. To begin with, it goes so much deeper even than atrocities; of which, in the past at least, all the three Empires of Central Europe have partaken pretty equally, as they partook of Poland. An English writer, seeking to avert the war by warnings against Russian influence, said that the flogged backs of Polish women stood between us and the Alliance. But not long before, the flogging of women by an Austrian general led to that officer being thrashed in the streets of London by Barclay and Perkins' draymen. And as for the third power, the Prussians, it

seems clear that they have treated Belgian women in a style compared with which flogging might be called an official formality. But, as I say, something much deeper than any such recrimination lies behind the use of the word on either side. When the German Emperor complains of our allying ourselves with a barbaric and half-oriental power, he is not (I assure you) shedding tears over the grave of Kosciusko. And when I say (as I do most heartily) that the German Emperor is a barbarian, I am not merely expressing any prejudices I may have against the profanation of churches or of children. My countrymen and I mean a certain and intelligible thing when we call the Prussians barbarians. It is quite different from the thing attributed to Russians; and it could not possibly be attributed to Russians. It is very important that the neutral world should understand what this thing is.

If the German calls the Russian barbarous, he presumably means imperfectly civilised. There is a certain path along which Western nations have proceeded in recent times, and it is tenable that Russia has not proceeded so far as the others: that she has less of the special modern system in science, commerce, machinery, travel, or political constitution. The Russ ploughs with an old plough; he wears a wild beard; he adores relics; his life is as rude and hard as that of a subject of Alfred the Great. Therefore he is, in the German sense, a barbarian. Poor fellows like Gorky and Dostoieffsky have to form their own reflections on the scenery without the assistance of large quotations from Schiller on garden seats, or inscriptions directing them to pause and thank the All-Father for the finest view in Hesse-Pumpnickel. The Russians, having nothing but their faith, their fields, their great courage, and their self-governing communes, are quite cut off from what is called (in the fashionable street in Frankfort) The True, The Beautiful and The Good. There is a real sense in which one can call such backwardness barbaric, by comparison with the Kaiserstrasse; and in that sense it is true of Russia.

Now we, the French and English, do not mean this when we call the Prussians barbarians. If their cities soared higher than their flying ships, if their trains travelled faster than their bullets, we should still call them barbarians. We should know exactly what we meant by it; and we should know that it is true. For we do not mean anything that is an imperfect civilisation by accident. We mean something that is the enemy of civilisation by design. We mean something that is wilfully at war with the principles by which human society has been made possible hitherto. Of course it must be partly civilised even to destroy civilisation. Such ruin could not be wrought by the savages that are merely undeveloped or inert. You could not have even Huns without horses; or horses without horsemanship. You could not have even Danish pirates without ships, or ships without seamanship. This person, whom I may call the Positive Barbarian, must be rather more superficially up-to-date than what I may call the Negative

Barbarian. Alaric was an officer in the Roman legions: but for all that he destroyed Rome. Nobody supposes that Eskimos could have done it at all neatly. But (in our meaning) barbarism is not a matter of methods, but of aims. We say that these veneered vandals have the perfectly serious aim of destroying certain ideas, which, as they think, the world has outgrown; without which, as we think, the world will die.

It is essential that this perilous peculiarity in the Pruss, or Positive Barbarian, should be seized. He has what he fancies is a new idea; and he is going to apply it to everybody. As a fact it is simply a false generalisation; but he is really trying to make it general. This does not apply to the Negative Barbarian: it does not apply to the Russian or the Servian, even if they are barbarians. If a Russian peasant does beat his wife, he does it because his fathers did it before him: he is likely to beat less rather than more, as the past fades away. He does not think, as the Prussian would, that he has made a new discovery in physiology in finding that a woman is weaker than a man. If a Servian does knife his rival without a word, he does it because other Servians have done it. He may regard it even as piety, but certainly not as progress. He does not think, as the Prussian does, that he founds a new school of horology by starting before the word "Go." He does not think he is in advance of the world in militarism merely because he is behind it in morals. No; the danger of the Pruss is that he is prepared to

fight for old errors as if they were new truths. He has somehow heard of certain shallow simplifications, and imagines that we have never heard of them. And, as I have said, his limited, but very sincere lunacy concentrates chiefly in a desire to destroy two ideas, the twin root ideas of rational society. The first is the idea of record and promise: the second is the idea of reciprocity.

It is plain that the promise, or extension of responsibility through time, is what chiefly distinguishes us, I will not say from savages, but from brutes and reptiles. This was noted by the shrewdness of the Old Testament, when it summed up the dark irresponsible enormity of Leviathan in the words, "Will he make a pact with thee?" The promise, like the wheel, is unknown in Nature: and is the first mark of man. Referring only to human civilisation, it may be said with seriousness that in the beginning was the Word. The vow is to the man what the song is to the bird, or the bark to the dog; his voice, whereby he is known. Just as a man who cannot keep an appointment is not fit even to fight a duel, so the man who cannot keep an appointment with himself is not sane enough even for suicide. It is not easy to mention anything on which the enormous apparatus of human life can be said to depend. But if it depends on anything, it is on this frail cord, flung from the forgotten hills of yesterday to the invisible mountains of to-morrow. On that solitary string hangs everything from Armageddon to an almanac, from a successful revolution to a return ticket. On that solitary string the Barbarian is

hacking heavily, with a sabre which is fortunately blunt.

Anyone can see this well enough, merely by reading the last negotiations between London and Berlin. The Prussians had made a new discovery in international politics: that it may often be convenient to make a promise; and yet curiously inconvenient to keep it. They were charmed, in their simple way, with this scientific discovery, and desired to communicate it to the world. They therefore promised England a promise, on condition that she broke a promise, and on the implied condition that the new promise might be broken as easily as the old one. To the profound astonishment of Prussia, this reasonable offer was refused! I believe that the astonishment of Prussia was quite sincere. That is what I mean when I say that the Barbarian is trying to cut away that cord of honesty and clear record on which hangs all that men have made.

The friends of the German cause have complained that Asiatics and Africans upon the very verge of savagery have been brought against them from India and Algiers. And in ordinary circumstances, I should sympathise with such a complaint made by a European people. But the circumstances are not ordinary. Here, again, the quiet unique barbarism of Prussia goes deeper than what we call barbarities. About mere barbarities, it is true, the Turco and the Sikh would have a very good reply to the superior Teuton. The general and just reason for not using non-European tribes against Europeans is that given by Chatham against the use of the Red Indian: that such allies might do very diabolical things. But the poor Turco might not unreasonably ask, after a week-end in Belgium, what more diabolical things he could do than the highly cultured Germans were doing themselves. Nevertheless, as I say, the justification of any extra-European aid goes deeper than any such details. It rests upon the fact that even other civilisations, even much lower civilisations, even remote and repulsive civilisations, depend as much as our own on this primary principle, on which the super-morality of Potsdam declares open War. Even savages promise things; and respect those who keep their promises. Even Orientals write things down: and though they write them from right to left, they know the importance of a scrap of paper. Many merchants will tell you that the word of the sinister and almost unhuman Chinaman is often as good as his bond: and it was amid palm trees and Syrian pavilions that the great utterance opened the tabernacle to him that sweareth to his hurt and changeth not. There is doubtless a dense labyrinth of duplicity in the East, and perhaps more guile in the individual Asiatic than in the individual German. But we are not talking of the violations of human morality in various parts of the world. We are talking about a new and inhuman morality, which denies altogether the day of obligation. The Prussians have been told by their literary men that everything depends upon Mood: and by their politicians that all arrangements dissolve before "necessity." That is the importance of the German Chancellor's phrase. He did not allege some special excuse in the case of

Belgium, which might make it seem an exception that proved the rule. He distinctly argued, as on a principle applicable to other cases, that victory was a necessity and honour was a scrap of paper. And it is evident that the half-educated Prussian imagination really cannot get any farther than this. It cannot see that if everybody's action were entirely incalculable from hour to hour, it would not only be the end of all promises, but the end of all projects. In not being able to see that, the Berlin philosopher is really on a lower mental level than the Arab who respects the salt, or the Brahmin who preserves the caste. And in this quarrel we have a right to come with scimitars as well as sabres, with bows as well as rifles, with assegai and tomahawk and boomerang, because there is in all these at least a seed of civilisation that these intellectual anarchists would kill. And if they should find us in our last stand girt with such strange swords and following unfamiliar ensigns, and ask us for what we fight in so singular a company, we shall know what to reply: "We fight for the trust and for the tryst; for fixed memories and the possible meeting of men; for all that makes life anything but an uncontrollable nightmare. We fight for the long arm of honour and remembrance; for all that can lift a man above the quicksands of his moods, and give him the mastery of time."