

## THE CONSCRIPT AND THE CRISIS

Very few of us ever see the history of our own time happening. And I think the best service a modern journalist can do to society is to record as plainly as ever he can exactly what impression was produced on his mind by anything he has actually seen and heard on the outskirts of any modern problem or campaign. Though all he saw of a railway strike was a flat meadow in Essex in which a train was becalmed for an hour or two, he will probably throw more light on the strike by describing this which he has seen than by describing the steely kings of commerce and the bloody leaders of the mob whom he has never seen&mdash;nor any one else either. If he comes a day too late for the battle of Waterloo (as happened to a friend of my grandfather) he should still remember that a true account of the day after Waterloo would be a most valuable thing to have. Though he was on the wrong side of the door when Rizzio was being murdered, we should still like to have the wrong side described in the right way. Upon this principle I, who know nothing of diplomacy or military arrangements, and have only held my breath like the rest of the world while France and Germany were bargaining, will tell quite truthfully of a small scene I saw, one of the thousand scenes that were, so to speak, the anterooms of that inmost chamber of debate.

In the course of a certain morning I came into one of the quiet squares

of a small French town and found its cathedral. It was one of those gray and rainy days which rather suit the Gothic. The clouds were leaden, like the solid blue-gray lead of the spires and the jewelled windows; the sloping roofs and high-shouldered arches looked like cloaks drooping with damp; and the stiff gargoyles that stood out round the walls were scoured with old rains and new. I went into the round, deep porch with many doors and found two grubby children playing there out of the rain. I also found a notice of services, etc., and among these I found the announcement that at 11.30 (that is about half an hour later) there would be a special service for the Conscripts, that is to say, the draft of young men who were being taken from their homes in that little town and sent to serve in the French Army; sent (as it happened) at an awful moment, when the French Army was encamped at a parting of the ways. There were already a great many people there when I entered, not only of all kinds, but in all attitudes, kneeling, sitting, or standing about. And there was that general sense that strikes every man from a Protestant country, whether he dislikes the Catholic atmosphere or likes it; I mean, the general sense that the thing was "going on all the time"; that it was not an occasion, but a perpetual process, as if it were a sort of mystical inn.

Several tricolours were hung quite near to the altar, and the young men, when they came in, filed up the church and sat right at the front. They were, of course, of every imaginable social grade; for the French conscription is really strict and universal. Some looked like young criminals, some like young priests, some like both. Some were so

obviously prosperous and polished that a barrack-room must seem to them like hell; others (by the look of them) had hardly ever been in so decent a place. But it was not so much the mere class variety that most sharply caught an Englishman's eye. It was the presence of just those one or two kinds of men who would never have become soldiers in any other way.

There are many reasons for becoming a soldier. It may be a matter of hereditary luck or abject hunger or heroic virtue or fugitive vice; it may be an interest in the work or a lack of interest in any other work. But there would always be two or three kinds of people who would never tend to soldiering; all those kinds of people were there. A lad with red hair, large ears, and very careful clothing, somehow conveyed across the church that he had always taken care of his health, not even from thinking about it, but simply because he was told, and that he was one of those who pass from childhood to manhood without any shock of being a man. In the row in front of him there was a very slight and vivid little Jew, of the sort that is a tailor and a Socialist. By one of those accidents that make real life so unlike anything else, he was the one of the company who seemed especially devout. Behind these stiff or sensitive boys were ranged the ranks of their mothers and fathers, with knots and bunches of their little brothers and sisters.

The children kicked their little legs, wriggled about the seats, and gaped at the arched roof while their mothers were on their knees praying their own prayers, and here and there crying. The gray clouds of

rain outside gathered, I suppose, more and more; for the deep church continuously darkened. The lads in front began to sing a military hymn in odd, rather strained voices; I could not disentangle the words, but only one perpetual refrain; so that it sounded like

Sacrarterumbrrar pour la patrie,  
Valdarkararump pour la patrie.

Then this ceased; and silence continued, the coloured windows growing gloomier and gloomier with the clouds. In the dead stillness a child started crying suddenly and incoherently. In a city far to the north a French diplomatist and a German aristocrat were talking.

I will not make any commentary on the thing that could blur the outline of its almost cruel actuality. I will not talk nor allow any one else to talk about "clericalism" and "militarism." Those who talk like that are made of the same mud as those who call all the angers of the unfortunate "Socialism." The women who were calling in the gloom around me on God and the Mother of God were not "clericalists"; or, if they were, they had forgotten it. And I will bet my boots the young men were not "militarists"—quite the other way just then. The priest made a short speech; he did not utter any priestly dogmas (whatever they are), he uttered platitudes. In such circumstances platitudes are the only possible things to say; because they are true. He began by saying that he supposed a large number of them would be uncommonly glad not to go. They seemed to assent to this particular priestly dogma with even

more than their alleged superstitious credulity. He said that war was hateful, and that we all hated it; but that "in all things reasonable" the law of one's own commonwealth was the voice of God. He spoke about Joan of Arc; and how she had managed to be a bold and successful soldier while still preserving her virtue and practising her religion; then he gave them each a little paper book. To which they replied (after a brief interval for reflection):

Pongprongperesklang pour la patrie,  
Tambraugtararronc pour la patrie.

which I feel sure was the best and most pointed reply.

While all this was happening feelings quite indescribable crowded about my own darkening brain, as the clouds crowded above the darkening church. They were so entirely of the elements and the passions that I cannot utter them in an idea, but only in an image. It seemed to me that we were barricaded in this church, but we could not tell what was happening outside the church. The monstrous and terrible jewels of the windows darkened or glistened under moving shadow or light, but the nature of that light and the shapes of those shadows we did not know and hardly dared to guess. The dream began, I think, with a dim fancy that enemies were already in the town, and that the enormous oaken doors were groaning under their hammers. Then I seemed to suppose that the town itself had been destroyed by fire, and effaced, as it may be thousands of years hence, and that if I opened the door I should come out on a

wilderness as flat and sterile as the sea. Then the vision behind the veil of stone and slate grew wilder with earthquakes. I seemed to see chasms cloven to the foundations of all things, and letting up an infernal dawn. Huge things happily hidden from us had climbed out of the abyss, and were striding about taller than the clouds. And when the darkness crept from the sapphires of Mary to the sanguine garments of St. John I fancied that some hideous giant was walking round the church and looking in at each window in turn.

Sometimes, again, I thought of that church with coloured windows as a ship carrying many lanterns struggling in a high sea at night. Sometimes I thought of it as a great coloured lantern itself, hung on an iron chain out of heaven and tossed and swung to and fro by strong wings, the wings of the princes of the air. But I never thought of it or the young men inside it save as something precious and in peril, or of the things outside but as something barbaric and enormous.

I know there are some who cannot sympathise with such sentiments of limitation; I know there are some who would feel no touch of the heroic tenderness if some day a young man, with red hair, large ears, and his mother's lozenges in his pocket, were found dead in uniform in the passes of the Vosges. But on this subject I have heard many philosophies and thought a good deal for myself; and the conclusion I have come to is *Sacrarterumbrar pour la Pattie*, and it is not likely that I shall alter it now.

But when I came out of the church there were none of these things, but only a lot of Shops, including a paper-shop, on which the posters announced that the negotiations were proceeding satisfactorily.