

# THE FIRING LINE ('LE FEU')

By Romain Rolland.

(From the Chicago Daily News, July 12, 1917.)

This article, entitled "The Journal of a Squad," is a review in Romain Rolland's usual impassioned style of the most remarkable book yet written on the war—"Le Feu"—by Henri Barbusse.—Paul Scott Mower.

"Here is an implacable mirror of the war. Day by day, for sixteen months, the war has been reflected therein; the mirror of two fine, clear, accurate, intrepid French eyes. The author, Henri Barbusse, has dedicated his book, 'To the memory of the comrades who fell beside me at Crouy and on Hill 119, December, 1915,' and this book, 'Le Feu (Journal d'une Escouade),' has just received, at Paris, the consecration of the Goncourt prize.

"By what miracle have such words of truth been able to make themselves heard integrally at a time when so much free speech, speech infinitely less free, is repressed? I do not try to explain it, but I profit by it; for the voice of this witness casts into the shadows all the selfish lies which in the last three years have sought to idealize the charnel house of Europe.

## The Soldiers as a Mass

"The armies stay buried there for years, 'in the depths of an eternal battle field,' packed in, 'chained elbow to elbow,' wrapped and padded 'against the winds from above, against the water from below, against the cold, that species of infinity which is everywhere.' The men, muffled in skins, bundles of blankets, sweaters, over-sweaters, squares of oilcloth, fur caps, tarred, gummed or rubber-coated hoods, look like cavemen, gorillas, troglodytes. One of them, while digging in the earth, finds the hatchet of a quarternary man, a pointed stone with a bone for a handle, and uses it. Others make elementary jewels, like savages. Three generations together, all races but not all classes—plowmen and workmen, for the most part, small farmers, farm hands, teamsters, delivery men, a factory foreman, a wine-shop keeper, a newspaper seller, a hardware dealer, miners—not many liberal professions. This amalgamated mass has a common tongue 'made of workshop and barracks slang and of patois seasoned with a few neologisms.' Each has its own silhouette, exactly seized and outlined; they are not to be confused when once one has seen them.

"But the process by which they are depicted is very different from that of Tolstoy. Tolstoy cannot see a soul without going to the bottom of it. Here one looks and passes on. The personal soul scarcely exists, is merely a husk; underneath, aching, crushed by fatigue, stupefied by noise, poisoned by smoke, the collective soul dozes in boredom, waiting, waiting, endlessly ('waiting machine'), no longer seeks to think, 'has given up trying to understand, given up being 'Iself.' They are not soldiers (they do not want to be); they are men, 'poor, ordinary fellows torn brusquely out of life; ignorant, unemotional, limited in view, full of great good sense which sometimes runs off the track, inclined to let themselves be led and to do what they are told, inured to hard labor, capable of long suffering, simple men still further simplified, in whom, by the force of things, nothing is accentuated save their primitive instincts—instincts of self-preservation, egotism, a tenacious hope of living through everything, the joy of eating, drinking and sleeping.

"Even in the danger of a bombardment they get bored after a few hours, they yawn, play cards, talk nonsense; 'they drop off to sleep,' they are bored. 'The grandeur and extent of these out-

breaks of artillery tires the mind.' They go through hells of suffering, and do not even remember them. 'We've seen too many. And everything we've seen was too much. We aren't meant to hold it all. It gets away on every side, we're too little. We're regular forgetting machines. Men are things that don't think much, and mostly forget.' In Napoleon's time each soldier had a marshals baton in his cartridge box, and the image of the little Corsican officer in his mind. At present there are no longer any individuals, there is a human mass which itself is drowned in elementary forces. 'Ten thousand kilometers of French trenches, 10,000 kilometers of misery, similar or worse \* \* \* and the French front is one-eighth of the total front \* \* \*'

## What the Soldiers Think

"But I must be brief and reach the main part of the work—its thought.

"In Tolstoy's 'War and Peace' the deep meaning of the Destiny which guides humanity is ardently sought for, and is seized, at long intervals, by the light of a flash of suffering or of genius, or through a few personalities unusually refined in race or in heart. Prince Andre, Pierre Besoukno—a levelling roller has passed over the peoples to-day. At the very most, there may arise above the immense herd for a moment the isolated bellowing of an animal about to die. Such is the pale visage of Corporal Bertrand 'with his thoughtful smile'—scarcely outlined—'speaking but little ordinarily, never speaking of himself,' and who only once reveals the secret of the thoughts which torment him—in the twilight of the slaughter, a few hours before he himself is killed. He thinks of those whom he has slain, of the madness of the hand-to-hand fight.

"'It had to be,' he said. 'It had to be for the sake of the future.'

"He crossed his arms and shook his head.

"'The future!' he cried, suddenly. 'With what eyes will those who live after us look upon these killings and these exploits, which we who achieve them scarcely know whether we ought to compare to those of the heroes of Plutarch and Corneille or to the exploits of apaches? And yet,' he continued, 'look! There is one face which stands out above the war and which will continue to shine in the beauty and import of its bravery.'

"I listened, braced upon a stick, leaning toward him, absorbing this voice, which, in the silence of the twilight, issued from lips almost always silent. He cried in a clear voice: "Liebknecht!"

## They Who See Clearly

"But most often the human cry which arises from these humble comrades is anonymous. One does not know just which of them is speaking, for all, at times, have a common thought. Born of common trials, this thought brings them much nearer to those other unhappy men in the enemy trenches than to the rest of the world, which is back yonder in the rear. Against those of the rear, 'trench tourists,' journalists, 'exploiters of public calamity,' warlike intellectuals, their contempt, not violent but unfathomable, is general. To them has been given 'a revelation of the great reality; a difference which arises between beings, a difference much deeper, moats less easily to be crossed, than those of race; the sharp, clean cut and truly unpardonable division which exists, in the mass of men composing the nation, between those who profit and those who toil; those who are asked to sacrifice all, everything, who offer to the uttermost their numbers, their strength, their martyrdom,

and on whom the others walk, advance, smile and succeed.'

"'Ah,' says one of them, bitterly, in the face of this revelation, 'it doesn't make one want to die!'

"But he dies, nevertheless, bravely, humbly, like the others.

## The Future of the Slaves.

"The culminating point of the work is the last chapter: 'The Dawn.' It is like an epilogue, the thought of which completes that of the prologue, 'The Vision,' and widens it, as in a symphony, when the theme announced at the beginning takes its full form in the conclusion.

"'The Vision' depicts for us the arrival of the declaration of war in a sanitarium in Savoy, opposite Mont Blanc. And there these invalids of all nations, 'detached from things and almost from life, as distant from the rest of mankind as if they were already posterity, look out before them into space, toward the incomprehensible country of the living and the mad.' They see the deluge below, the shipwrecked people clinging; 'the 30,000,000 slaves, flung against one another by crime and error, in war and mud, lift up their human faces where germinates at last a will. The future is in the hands of the slaves and one sees clearly that the old world will be changed by the alliance which those whose numbers and whose miseries are infinite, will one day build between themselves.'

"The final 'Dawn' is a picture of the 'deluge below,' of the rain-drenched plain, the caved-in trenches. A spectacle out of Genesis! Germans and French flee the plague together, or sink pell mell into the common ditch. And then these shipwrecked men, cast away on the reefs of mud in the midst of the inundation, begin to awaken from their passivity, and a redoubtable dialogue takes place between the sufferers, life the responses in a tragic chorus. Their excess of suffering overwhelms them. And what overcomes them still more, 'like a great disaster,' is the thought that perhaps some day the survivors will have forgotten such miseries.

## "If People Remembered!"

"'Ah, if people remembered! If people remembered, there wouldn't be any more war.'

"And each in turn accuses, insults the war!

"'Two armies are fighting like one great army committing suicide.'

"'What's the war being made for? 'What for nobody knows, but who for we can say—for the pleasure of a few people who could be counted.'

## "For the Pleasure of a Few—"

"And they count them: 'The warriors, the inheritors of power; those who say races hate one another,' and those who say: 'I fatten on war, my belly gets big on it; and those who say, 'Bow your heads and believe in God'—the brandishers of sabers, speculators, the monstrous interests; 'those who bury themselves in the past, traditionalists for whom an abuse has the strength of a law, because it has become eternal'—etc.

"These are your enemies, just as much as are the German soldiers who lie here among you, and who are only poor dupes—odiously deceived and stupefied—domesticated animals. These are your enemies wherever they were

born and however they pronounce their names, and whatever the language they lie in. Look at them, in heaven, and on earth! Look at them everywhere! Recognize them once for all and remember them forever!'

"Thus clamor the armies. And the book closes with the hope and mute vow of an understanding between nations, while the dark sky opens and a tranquil sunbeam falls across the flooded plain.

"A sunbeam does not make a clear sky, and the voice of a soldier is not that of an army. The armies of to-day are nations, in which many diverse currents clash and mingle. The Journal of Barbusse is that of a squad composed almost exclusively of workmen and peasants. But that in these humble people who, like the third estate in 1789, are nothing and will be everything—that in this proletariat of the armies such a consciousness of universal humanity is being formed—that so bold a voice has arisen in France—that these battling people should be making a heroic effort to free themselves from their present misery and the obsession of death, to dream of the brotherly union of hostile nations—in this I find a grandeur which exceeds all victories, and whose dolorous glory will survive that of battles—will, I hope, put an end to them."

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A little tyranny is a dangerous thing. When the public surrenders one freedom, it may expect to be asked to surrender others.

## ...PARTY ANNOUNCEMENTS...

### ALBERTA PROVINCIAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Meets on the First Wednesday in each month, at 8 p.m., at Mrs. A. Martin's, 10528 98th Street, Edmonton, Alta.

Riverdale Local No. 87 (Toronto) meets at 82 Wroxeter Ave. (off Pape) every second and fourth Friday of the month, at 8 p.m. Everybody welcome. Address enquiries and communications to the Secretary, Charles M. Thompson, care 82 Wroxeter Ave., Toronto. (1)

The Dominion executive committee meets on the 2nd and 4th Tuesdays of the month at 363 Spadina Avenue, Toronto, secretary, I. Bainbridge.

The Ontario provincial executive committee meets on the 2nd and 4th Thursdays of the month at 363 Spadina Avenue, Toronto, secretary, I. Bainbridge.

Local No. 71, Toronto—Meets at 165 Van Horne street, every Sunday, at 2.30 p.m. A hearty invitation is extended to all friends and sympathizers. J. Cunningham, 219 Wallace avenue, Secretary.

Saskatchewan Provincial Executive Committee—Meets on the 1st and 3rd Sunday of each month. All comrades desiring to join party or organize Locals are requested to write, F. G. Wetzel, Box 151, Vanguard, Sask.

Locals and Executive Bodies may have their Advs. in the Directory for the sum of \$3.00 per year.

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