

The British Empire and The Present War

Rev. Dr. Harrison at Newcastle Men's Union Meeting Aably Discusses Britain's Stand.

As a preliminary word to the discussion of England's part in the present war, it may be in place to notice that her action in entering this momentous conflict has received the most emphatic approval of the various parts of her empire and the all but unanimous assent of the different political parties within the nation, and this assent has been given at a time when intense party feelings had been aroused by other great pressing national questions. Multitudes of men who had done valiant service for peace policies for many years are also in perfect harm's way with Britain's action in entering the war. It is admitted by a vast large portion of the neutral nations that England having failed in her unceasing efforts to secure a peaceful solution of the disturbing questions, there was nothing—absolutely nothing—left for her to do but to take the course she did if she was to retain the loyalty and support of her people and the respect and confidence of the outside world as well. These feelings have deepened with the passing months and were never so intense and widespread as at the present time.

Supposing, however, that England for motives and reasons of her own had stood aloof from the conflict and had decided to act the part of a neutral nation, what is likely to have happened to herself and to the allies with whom she now stands in such unity of purpose and such sacrificial determination and endeavor? It is really worth while in such a crisis as this to look at this phase of the question, lest there might be a lusting and distressing doubt that the best and wisest course had not been taken and that, perchance, a gigantic and irreparable national blunder had been made. What then, we ask again, is likely to have happened to England had she stood aloof from the conflict and as it were had watched the dread scene from the gallery as a mere spectator and nothing more?

1.—What would have been the position of Belgium if England had ranged herself among the base despicable cowards who desert a friend in the hour of that friend's bitterest need? If Belgium had yielded to the insolent domineering demand and pressure of Germany, in the absence of our expected aid and sympathy, who could have blamed her in the presence of such a challenge in the time of her cruel abandonment? She would, even in that event, have been certainly, if not nominally, wholly dependent thereafter upon Germany. "If she had resisted even in after we had forsaken her the end was sure. She would have lost her independence. She would have become Germany's vassal, and from her would have been demanded a ruthless tribute without the smallest hope of compensation." Can we imagine any nation, large or small, in a more desperate situation than that in which the brave martyr of Europe would have been placed?

2.—What would have been the position of France? "The record of the French army," as a noted journal has said, "during the months of war has been unequalled in the history of a nation distinguished for her gallantry and the power of self-sacrifice. The French nation is united as it never has before. The generals have shown themselves masters of strategy. Above all, the troops have sustained the reputation which they have so hardly won on many a field. The French character has shown over and over a singular power of responding rapidly to a call for energy and self-control, and never so splendidly as now. But could France have resisted successfully the onslaught of the German forces? We have to remember that France was very largely unprepared for such a conflict, and that her population is much smaller than the population of Germany, and when we speak of Germany we must not forget Austria. Would it have been possible for any length of time for the French

army fighting alone to keep the invaders out of Paris? Once in Paris they would have levied merciless tributes besides inflicting unspeakable losses in life and treasures of one kind or another. It is not easy to suppose that the French alone would have been able to defeat and expel the enemy. She would assuredly have lost many things dearer than life, and the hopes of forty years would have been dashed to the ground beyond repair." The defeat by the same foe forty years ago added to the defeat and humiliation of the present would have created a situation for France insufferable and never to be forgotten. "Russia might have held out in the struggle, as she possesses conditions in the way of territory, population and possible armies which make her unconquerable. But Russia was not mobilized and is by no means fully mobilized even to this day. The Germans were not far astray in their calculations when they reckoned it was possible to occupy Paris and then to sweep on to Russia. Germany and Austria in that event would have been drunk with victory, and it is quite possible that Russia might have had to accept a measure of humiliation and consent to a peace which would have impoverished her for many years to come." Supposing that these highly probable results would have taken place, what would the attitude of these nations have been to Great Britain as she stood aloof and as a mere spectator looked at the dreadful scene.

"As to Belgium there can be no dispute. England would have been condemned, and rightly condemned, by the whole world as a cowardly and recreant traitor. Nothing could ever have washed out that shameful stain. She would have been reckoned in the judgment of the world and of all time the basest, the most treacherous, the most dastardly of nations. If there had been no other reason for our entrance into the war beyond our obligations to Belgium the justification was not only ample but compelling."

"What of France? England had obligations of friendship, honor and interest to that great nation which she could not possibly repudiate." Can we imagine the bitterness and anger with which France would have regarded England if she had forsaken her in the hour of extreme need? It is quite easy to conceive that the disappointment and anger of France, if thus abandoned by her professed friend, would have been kindled into a fierce and devastating flame. In fact, as the same writer has said, a reconciliation between France and Germany might have been effected by their common hatred of England. Such combinations have not been unknown, when nations have forgotten their own quarrel in the heat of a common antagonism in order to crush their common foe.

What of Russia? We may be quite sure that if England had played false Russia, Germany, Austria, France and Belgium would have found at least one point of unity in their unanimous loathing and contempt for Britain, and in their common determination to remove from her place a nation which had played the part of a traitor in a crisis such as the world has never seen.

If England had stood aloof from the present war because of a lowered if not decaying vitality, she might have fattened on the wrecked trade of Germany, of France, of Belgium and Russia, but what of this boasted gain in material advantages? What shall it profit a nation if it gain the whole world and lose its soul or what shall a nation give in exchange for its soul? What of betrayed friendship? What of her sacrifice of her sense of justice? What of her base repudiation of solemn treaties? What of the universal scorn in which such national immorality would have been held and the depths of disgrace and

shame from which there could be lit or no recovery? What of the feeling of abhorrence in which such conflict would inevitably be held?

What if England had not lifted her hand and voice against the infamous doctrine that Might is Right and against the insane dream of universal supremacy, which some of the leading men of Germany have not hesitated to proclaim in the most public fashion? Of this world-wide domination the fighting power of Germany has boasted and taught in language the most intolerant and unmistakable, and they have publicly proclaimed that this is their aim and that any means which will lead them to this universal supremacy is not only justifiable but actually moral. Sir Oliver Lodge in the January number of the North American Review, has condensed the substance of several German books advocating this pernicious and destructive teaching in the following impressive manner:

"The second error is the absolute entrenchment of material power, the blasphemous notion that nothing higher than the States exists, and that there is no moral law, human or divine, to which the strongest state is subject; nothing above its own conception of what is beneficial to itself. Expediency becomes the supreme guide; all other considerations are signs of weakness and timidity; the sole national virtue is power to execute what it intends, the one fatal sin is deficiency of power."

—It is this pernicious doctrine which has practically abrogated all international law; it is this which regards treaties as scraps of paper whenever they become inconvenient; it is this which has harried Belgium and intended to harry France and England with fire and sword. The theological doctrine of the crucial importance of right belief and of the damnation that follows a wrong belief has never been so conspicuously illustrated."

If England had decided to stand aloof, what would her own Empire have said? With the facts as we have them, it is possible that the various portions of our wide dominions would have submitted quietly to such conduct? Would not the feeling of profoundest humiliation have spread far and wide and found expression in no measured terms of protest and indignation? Looking over the record of the past five months we are grateful, deeply grateful, that England did not forsake the path of honor which has won for her the enthusiastic loyalty and support of a united Empire and the endorsement and admiration of the world. Any other action would have invited the passion and scorn of millions in our own nation and the anger and fury of those whom she has forsaken, and the probabilities are that under those maddening forces our empire would have been shattered never to be united again.

In view, then, of the positions taken in this paper, "Who can doubt that England in the step she has taken has chosen the better part? She sought a peaceful settlement and it was refused by Germany," as all the official documents of the Government conclusively show. All the discussion about who began the war, as Rev. Newell Dwight Hillis of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, has said, "is meaningless, when it is considered that there was only one nation that was ready for war—Germany—while the rest were unprepared. It is this which lends meaning to Bernard's statement, 'We must not in any case wait until our opponents have completed their arming and decided that the hour of attack has come.'" "Think," says Mr. Hillis, "of a man and a nation uttering such words and accusing England of perfidy. Germany thought the hour had come. The Kaiser was advised that the time was opportune and the long premeditated blow was struck." England's action gives no cause for shame. The flag has not been dishonored in the eyes of the world. The army of England has won the admiration of the world. The harmony of the allies promises a future which we are confident will bring no shame. The population and provinces of the Empire are neither a mob nor a rope of sand as stated by Germany but a unit deep, strong and magnificent. The struggle goes on and the sacrifices are great and many but few, very few, doubt the victorious ending for Britain and her allies. Yes! We firmly believe that in the great crisis in the world's history England has done that which is lawful and right and by this action has saved her soul alive.

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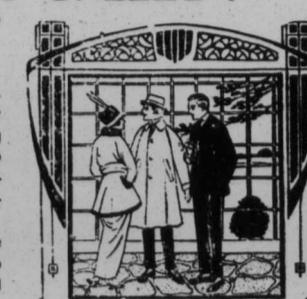
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