

Humiliation with Honor

Vera Brittain

"Only humiliation with honor — the honor of self-discipline and of new wisdom wrought out of bitter experience — can save men and women degraded by war from becoming sources of hatred and vengeance, and enable them to contribute in their unique fashion to those abiding things 'which belong to our peace.' "

Foreword by Harry Emerson Fosdick

Fellowship Publications

HUMILIATION WITH HONOR

by

VERA BRITAIN

"It is only the experience of historical failure itself that has proved fruitful, in the sense that the consciousness of humanity has thereby been increased."

NICOLAS BERDYAEV,
The Meaning of History.

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By the same Author

ENGLAND'S HOUR
TESTAMENT OF FRIENDSHIP
THRICE A STRANGER
HONORABLE ESTATE
POEMS OF THE WAR AND AFTER
TESTAMENT OF YOUTH
HALCYON, OR THE FUTURE OF MONOGAMY
WOMEN'S WORK IN MODERN ENGLAND
NOT WITHOUT HONOR
THE DARK TIDE
VERSES OF A V.A.D.

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TO THE
VICTIMS OF POWER

"Be not ashamed, my brothers, to stand before the proud and the powerful
With your white robe of simpleness.
Let your crown be of humility, your freedom the freedom of the soul;
Build God's throne daily upon the ample bareness of your poverty,
And know that which is huge is not great and pride is not everlasting."

Rabindranath Tagore: *The Sunset of the Century* (from *Nationalism*).

FOREWORD

ONE OF THE MOST significant and moving records of personal experience that came out of the First World War was Vera Brittain's book, *The Testament of Youth*. Ever since its publication its author has had a host of friends in the United States, to whom—and to others like them—this present volume should bring a welcome extension of acquaintance with her deep convictions about war.

This book, too, is intimate and personal, made up of letters written by Vera Brittain in England to her fifteen-year-old son in the United States, explaining to him the meaning of her pacifism. From beginning to end the book holds attention, if only because the author has chosen as her medium not argumentative discourse, but simple, direct, personal testimony—a mother writing to her son about some of the deepest convictions of her life.

Because those convictions are what they are, and because the present situation is what it is, the readers of this book are likely, for the most part, to be pacifists. This is a pity, for even though a non-pacifist should disagree with most of it, this little volume would make healthy reading for him. War can be viewed in two ways—first, as the instrument we use to overthrow an enemy; second, as itself the enemy that most needs to be overthrown. Intelligent non-pacifists, with a civilized, international outlook, would say that both these points of view are necessary, but in the fury of war and under the duress of its necessities the second often sinks out of sight, and multitudes forget it. This book, once read, makes it impossible to forget it. The vast, unheralded, submerged meanings of war to the plain people of the world here find a voice that, once heard, haunts memory and conscience.

I do not see how anyone can read this book without being moved to deeper levels of thought and determination. The author commends her convictions to our respect, as to her son's,

by her unfailing good will, her sympathetic understanding of those who differ with her, her candid criticism of pacifism's mistaken forms, by the profoundly Christian bases of her thought, her poised and balanced endeavor to face the realistic facts, and the obvious sincerity of her own conscientious stand.

I, for one, lay the book down feeling sure that such people as Vera Brittain are needed in this world.

HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

PROLOGUE

MY DEAR SON,—In one of R.'s recent letters, she told me that you and S. had been talking to her about the war and my attitude toward it. S., she said, had championed, with the passionate loyalty so characteristic of her, the ideas of the minority to which I belong. But you had questioned and criticized.

Let me say at once that I find it both right and natural that S. should applaud and you should criticize. Being nearly three years your junior, she still is younger than you were when you both went to America. At that time, you had not yourself reached the age of philosophic interrogation. But you have grown up so quickly in the past two years that your questions are now inevitable.

I need hardly say that I do not expect you, at fifteen, to endorse any beliefs that I hold just because they are mine. No one has much value as a member of a minority unless he has once thought with the majority, and shared the position of those who now call him a "fanatic" or a "crank." What matters most at your age is that you should think for yourself.

But it is also important that you should understand the thinking of others. Your criticism will not be authentic if it is directed against fake images and imaginary assumptions, and you will find that most war-time newspapers and magazines will tend to create those images and to make those assumptions. You must have a clear idea of what some of us really think about the world we are now living in, before you condemn us for our point of view and the penalties which it brings. Above all, I want you to realize that even humiliation is not dishonorable when it is voluntarily accepted and endured without bitterness for the sake of convictions which those who hold them believe to be true.

Pacifism is nothing other than a belief in the ultimate transcendence of love over power. This belief comes from an

inward assurance. It is untouched by logic and beyond argument—though there are many arguments both for and against it. And each person's assurance is individual; his inspiration cannot arise from another's reasons, nor can its authority be quenched by another's skepticism.

In my next few letters I shall try to explain what I mean by these assertions. My letters will not be designed to solicit your agreement. Their purpose is only to discuss a minority problem made acute by war, and to illustrate a point of view which is shared by many people in addition to

YOUR MOTHER.

1. THE WHEELS OF JUGGERNAUT

I do not think I have ever told you just when and how those beliefs which you question began.

Their origin lies far back in the last war, which ended nine years before you were born. For two months of that war, during 1917, I was nursing wounded German prisoners in a camp in France.

Before that, I had felt much the same about Germans as most people feel today. Though I couldn't, even then, swallow quite all the propaganda that I read, I took for granted, like other young people of my generation, that the government was always right, and that it was our duty to kill Germans because they said so.

Those two months started me thinking for myself in much the same way as you are thinking now. Before they were over, they had taught me that the qualities common to all human beings, of whatever race or country, far exceed the national and political differences which sometimes divide them.

That discovery was one of those profound spiritual experiences which make all controversial argument seem trivial and irrelevant. Even after twenty-five years I have still to learn its full implications, though it made me resolve to devote my life to examining the causes of war and doing what I could to prevent another. This endeavor has failed for the time being; but I should be false to myself, and you, and everything which matters to us both, if I were to deny today what I learned from that spiritual experience.

Some of us who remember the First World War recall their oppressive consciousness of a vast machine gradually taking control of the men who made it. The politicians of the Great Powers had set the wheels of Juggernaut in motion, but almost immediately the chariot seemed to take its own direction, and to roll over humanity at its self-chosen pace.

Today, in a second and still more destructive war, the same thing is happening all over again and on an even larger scale.

Because they proved incapable of learning the lessons of history, some of the blind leaders who thought that they could control the machine are already numbered amongst its victims. The speed of the crushing wheels which they started is carrying us to the end of that epoch which began four centuries ago with the Renaissance and the Reformation.

I expect you often see the American news magazine, *Time*. At the beginning of 1942 * there was a sentence in it which has stayed in my mind: "In 1941, over the world's measureless acres of misery, the war lay like a burden too great to be carried, too great to be thrown off." That sentence referred to the period before Pearl Harbor. In 1942 the burden grew heavier, and the acres of misery multiplied.

If you turn your eyes to the world as a whole from the land of rich resources where you are now a guest, you will see a picture of suffering probably unparalleled in history. The worst peace conceivable would not have produced a tenth of it.† In spite of its darkness this picture contains its elements of hope, but I shall write of these in later letters. Today I want you to realize the measure of unnecessary pain which has come to mankind through a war that could have been prevented on a score of occasions if those in authority had really intended to do good instead of evil. This deliberate choice of the worse way rather than the better was typical of the nations which won the last war, long before it began again to be typical of Germany, or of Japan.

The peoples who are suffering today still have more reasons for liking than for detesting one another, just as the British Tommies and the German prisoners found that they had in

* January 5, 1942.

† Nothing illustrates this fact more strikingly than the fate of the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. The World Jewish Congress recently stated (*Evening Standard*, August 6, 1942) that of the seven million Jews who normally live in these territories, one million have been done to death. Yet according to a provisional census taken in May, 1939, and quoted by the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the total number of Jews in the pre-war Reich was no more than 339,892. This figure included Austria and Sudetenland, but not Danzig and Memel.

1917. But their rulers, each of whom is playing his own game of power politics and blaming the ensuing catastrophes upon the others, do their best to prevent them from discovering the true extent of their affinity. By emphasizing the latent antagonisms which can divide communities, and attributing to all their opponents whole categories of qualities which only a few of them possess, they persuade ordinary men and women to hate, despise, and kill others of their kind with whom they have no quarrel.

Never, within so short a period, have great populations all over the world been tortured in such a variety of ways both mental and physical. We know this to be happening, though one of the unique features of this war is that we seldom receive any trustworthy details. The shapes which emerge from the kaleidoscope of pain are dim and confused. Like mist concealing the outlines of mountain summits, the fog of propaganda blankets the sharp edges of truth.

Here in Europe, we have seen the political achievements of millennia fall into dissolution. In Asia, the British and Dutch Empires, built through centuries by the toil of millions, disintegrated in three months. Every morning we in England and you in America read in our newspapers of events comparable to the clash of planets, of historic changes greater than those which caused the fall of the Roman Empire. But have you ever noticed how little we learn of the day-by-day incidents which give human meaning to these revolutionary events? What actually lies behind the reassuring platitudes of the radio or between the lines of the press reports, so carefully drawn up in words designed to neutralize tension and reduce earth-shaking cataclysms to the comfortable proportions of normality?

We do not know. Because the British, like the Americans, are a humane people, the barrier of censorship has to be imposed and the news sifted all the more carefully. We recoil from the thought that, by blockading the Continent, a government which we elected is conniving at the starvation of millions.

So we must not be permitted to picture the poor homes and ill-equipped, overcrowded hospitals in which Greek and Belgian children are dying from famine or the diseases which it brings. Nor must we be reminded of the aged and the invalids who shuddered through the last bitter winter without food, heat, or warm clothing.

The imagination of kindly men and women is protected against these facts because, if they were aware of what is really happening behind the drawn curtains, their decency would revolt. If they could see starvation, disease, and death actually at work, they might begin to ask, on an embarrassingly large instead of a tiny scale, whether any victory was worth having which involved the continuation of such methods. They might also remember that the makers of international law, now partially repudiated by both sets of combatants, based their rules upon the doctrine that it is better to suffer disadvantage in war than to descend to conduct so barbarous that it strips the cause in whose name it is committed of even the bare pretense of morality.

When I recollect walking through the snowy streets of Calais on the first stage of a roundabout journey to the United States in January, 1940, it is strange to think that the coast of France might be as distant as mute Batavia for all that we can now learn of the daily lives of its inhabitants. You and I cannot even guess what unexpected friendships may be growing up between human creatures drawn together by their dire need of comradeship and comfort. A million examples may exist of mercy, forgiveness, and cooperation, but they pass unrecorded. Because the curtain is seldom lifted on anything but hatred and murder, we receive from Europe and Asia a dark impression of pain unrelieved by pity.

You remember the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, those gaunt specters carrying tragedy through the world? We might well invent a Fifth, and call his name Silence. Today silence is the symbol of terror and bereavement, of lifelong speculation

following months of suspense. A ship sails—destroyer, merchantman, trawler, or submarine. It never reaches its destination. Where is it? Silence. A bomber goes out on a night flight or a daylight sweep, and “fails to return.” What has happened to the pilot—to my son, my husband, my brother? Silence. A small garrison holding an island fortress is beleaguered and attacked till communications cease. Why did they cease? Silence.

Perhaps we inquire what befell the civilians in other fallen cities and islands. You will remember that, for one moment, a searchlight played vividly upon a corner of Hong Kong. We averted our eyes, but ask the more urgently: What happened in Wake, in Guam, in Manila, in Penang,* in Singapore, in Java, in Tobruk, in Rostov? How did Mandalay appear when the Japanese had finished with it? What has occurred in Burma since it vanished from the news? Silence. In a world where the means of communication are swifter and more numerous than was even conceivable to the imagination of our grandparents, Silence has become the twin brother of Giant Despair.

Such is civilization in the fifteenth year of your too eventful life. If you mean to leave it better than you find it, you and your generation will have plenty to do. It will be worth doing. But it will not be easy for the artist into which you are developing. An artist is always a strong individualist, and the tendency of the present age is to repress the individual and impose conformity.

Next week I will tell you what I mean by this, and how it is done.

* In a letter to *The Times* (London) of August 14, 1942, on “Colonial War Damage,” Mr. L. D. Gammans, M.P., has stated: “There will be damage to private property as well. Thousands of houses will have been destroyed in actual combat or by bombs. Penang, for example, is little more than a shambles. . . . The houses and shops are almost entirely Asiatic-owned, and it is not always realized that over 50 per cent of the rubber and 40 per cent of the tin mines are owned and operated by Asiatics.” Mr. Gammans’ letter was written to inquire who is going to pay for all this damage.

2. THE DECLINE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

IN my last letter I tried to give you a general picture of the age of spiritual retrogression in which we live. Do not accuse me of pessimism because the picture was dark. I am so far from being a pessimist that even two wars have not impaired my faith in humanity and its future, though you are now more likely than myself to see the civilized society of which I have dreamed.

But wishful thinking and lack of realism are the bane of our day. It is natural that the inheritors of a terrible epoch should indulge in mental escapism, and should be encouraged in this by those who have led them to catastrophe. There is no antidote to discontent so effective as an easy sentimental optimism. But this has nothing in common with faith and courage, which spring from a knowledge and acceptance of the truth. You remember the words of Jesus to his disciples: "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." In *De Imitatione Christi*, Thomas à Kempis carried this promise to its next logical stage: "If the truth shall have made thee free, thou shalt not care for the vain words of men."

The vainest words are those which blunt the edge of our courage by depicting our circumstances as better than they are. We can save ourselves only if we honestly recognize the extent to which retrogression has begun, combat its manifestations with all our strength, and use whatever creative force we possess to reverse certain existing social tendencies.

If we fail in this, the human race may not recapture for centuries even the partial allegiance to spiritual values which has been characteristic of the more civilized in both East and West. I believe that our success depends largely upon our ability to reassert and recover the value of the individual as such.

When you study the history of civilization, you will find that it is the story of the individual's emergence from the