# UNDER FIRE

HENRI BARBUSSE

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# INTRODUCTION

HENRI BARBUSSE was born in 1873 in one of the outlying suburbs of Paris, where the Seine curves to the north-west and factory chimneys now fence the horizon. His father was also a man of letters. From the Gard in the South he had brought to the capital a prolific pen, which he turned to the writing of vaudevilles and other plays popular in their day. Of his mother we know little, for she died long before the boy had learned to read or write. But she came from the North. Two very different strains thus intermingled at birth in the solitary child. To his Provençal blood he owed the fiery ardour of mind, the abundance of imagery and ideas which so often overflow in his maturer thought and writings. But in the growing child there is nothing but an extreme, poetic sensitiveness, a gentleness of nature that hardly fit a motherless child for his first approach to life. In *Les Suppliants*, an early novel, Barbusse has idealised these early years for us in poetic language. From the first the child shrinks into himself. Only by touching some face with his hands does he seem to reach the being who speaks to him. When his father reads to him by lamplight, he listens, not to the words, but to the face, searching there for "the rainbow which makes up the sum of the soul, from the fluid and changeable idea to the emotion, the total thought which has the full stature of the being within." Anxiously the father watches this, the growth of his child, realising that the human will dominate in his nature, to the exclusion of all else.

At school it is the same. The sensitive creature within the boy seems to deny life at every turn; the germs of a dark revolt are already at work within him. Only once does he "express" himself, and the story is characteristic enough. He manufactures a childish bomb, which explodes in a class-room window. A flash of pride lights up his

face for a moment; then once again he sinks back into his "orphan state." His schoolfellows describe a companion that resembles the full-grown man: outwardly languid, apathetic, indifferent; only the ardent eyes, some rare outburst of gaiety, reveal the life within.

The child's sensitiveness and latent fire have left a deep impress upon the mind of the growing boy. Intellectually, he again denies life at every turn; he "proceeds by negations"; he becomes prominent among the young *révoltés* who discuss the injustices of society on their way from school towards the lecture-rooms of the Sorbonne. In his early literary ventures, however, his mother's influence still appears to be uppermost. Young Barbusse develops a taste for elegant composition and verses, wins prizes at school, prizes in the anonymous literary competitions that are fashionable in the periodicals of the day.

We are told that the distinguishing mark of the young intellectuals of Paris in 1895 was their uncertainty. It was undoubtedly the characteristic of the young Socialist who now quits the Sorbonne, full of vague literary aspirations. Barbusse believed that the ideas of rebellion which simmered in his brain should find their expression in writing. But to which of the literary groups was he to turn? The advanced guard in literature—*symbolistes* like Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Laforgue—were locked up in ivory towers; their feet never descended to the common level of street pavements. Writers of the classical school were unpardonably classical, though, paradoxically enough, there were some who were not hostile to the ideas of the political "left." Remained the rear-guard of the Romanticists, who occupied the "centre" of the literary field, and appealed, by much that was florid and decadent, to the outer public of the boulevards. Conspicuous among this motley group was the veteran poet Catulle Mendès. It is he who takes Barbusse under his wing; he not only stands sponsor to the young author's first book, but gives him his daughter in marriage. This first book, *Pleureuses*, was, of course, a slender volume of verses. Slight, light even, delicately artificial, they take us into the atmosphere of the drawing-room; it would be difficult indeed to find here any trace of the real Barbusse. Soon after, he plunges

into journalism, and it is during this period, immediately preceding the war, that he writes *Les Suppliants*, *L'Enfer* and *Nous Autres* (*We Others*).

In *Les Suppliants* we are at the parting of the ways. The young man relives the sensitive, reluctant hours of his childhood, but the emotion so long pent up begins to flow in a rhythmical prose, surcharged with poetic imagery. A gap of a few years, and *L'Enfer* is published. Barbusse here declares his fierce and sombre powers, affirms himself as a poetic realist, achieves notoriety, a literary name. *L'Enfer* (*Inferno*) is a terrible book. At first glance it might be taken for one of those *livres hardis* which constantly appear to prick on the Parisian's appetite for sensation. The theme frankly lends itself to the crude naturalism of a Zola. A young man of no account discovers a spy-hole in his hotel chamber which commands the adjoining room. In its emptiness, this room really symbolises the spectacle that life has so far presented before the mind of the writer. To this discovered spy-hole he now claps an eye, resolved to pierce through the " drama " of human frailty and desire that is to be played within four narrow walls. Birth, passion, love, death—his eye shrinks before nothing in a desperate quest for truth behind the veils of flesh. He listens to the pitiful antiphony of two lovers. But beyond it all, what is there? Nothing, answers the watcher; nothing, except to believe that " confronting the human heart and its imperishable desire, there is only the mirage of what is desired." " Sometimes," says one voice in that chamber, " when I consider men, I feel moved to pity. And there are also moments when I would punish them, and plead with them."

*L'Enfer*, it need hardly be said, was not translated into English. Its violent realism only ends in emptiness and blackness of mind. But it is impossible to read it without recalling that at the time a vaster spectacle, far more terrifying in its *negations*, in its realism and intensity, was already preparing within the frontiers of Europe—a spectacle that would stir every nerve and fibre in this same writer's being.

In the year of the outbreak of war, *Nous Autres* (*We*

*Others*) appeared. Here a number of short stories are brought together and grouped under three headings: Fate, the Madness of Love, Pity. Barbusse does not reveal himself as a master in the art of the short story. Those in the first section are violent, rapid in surprise, often improbable. In the second, however, there are one or two—*The True Judge*, for instance—that a Guy de Maupassant might have approached from a slightly different angle and worked out to an inevitable close. In the third section Barbusse seems at first surer of himself and is near to abandoning realism. But in the later pages the story tends to dwindle away and become a moral. We are reminded that mere artistry never appealed to Barbusse; we can hear his sneer in *L'Enfer* when one character explains: "Thank God, I'm a writer, not a thinker."

But war is declared. Barbusse, who might have pleaded doubtful health, is called up with his class, and by the winter, he and his squad are in the front trenches. Seven months of heavy fighting follow in Artois and Picardy; Barbusse is mentioned in despatches. Still unwounded, his health gives way. He tries to remain near his company, first as a stretcher-bearer, then on the staff of the 21st Corps. Ordered to hospital, he attempts a month later to return in a territorial regiment. Three times he returns, only to be invalided out in 1917. But he had drained his cup of experience; *Under Fire, the Story of a Squad*, written partly in the trenches and partly in hospital, appeared in 1916 and won the Goncourt Prize of that year.

Barbusse was not the man to be content with seeing and describing modern warfare. It remained to draw the human lesson, to call on every survivor—ex-soldier and intellectual alike—to arms in revolt against the injustice and folly that find their loudest voice in war. To this end he writes *Clarté* (*Light*) in 1919. Here he attempts to review the whole problem through the eyes of a modest clerk, who is drawn out of his meaningless existence, purged in the horrors of war, and then returns to the disillusionment of his former life. Through his mouth Barbusse calls on men to found the Universal Republic, crush out slavery in every form. No one can deny the passionate sincerity of the writer, yet *Clarté* is disappointing, as all books that

are gospel and story in one are doomed to be. Then followed the formation of *le groupe Clarté*—" The League of Intellectual Solidarity for the Triumph of the International Cause," to which many well-known writers in England and other countries lent their names. The movement did not fail, but died away gradually during the years when the disappointing problems of peace were intervening between men and their recollection of war. From the first, however, the cause of *Clarté* lacked something in clarity and practical force. Was it an attitude of revolt, or a political revolution that was preached? And how was the doctrine of complete pacifism to be reconciled with the methods of a Russian Tcheka? Added to this, no doubt, was the fact that literary men often make poor committee-men.

Barbusse, at all events, was not to rest there. He turns to history and the study of mankind in different ages. The result was *Les Enchaînements* (*Chains*) published in 1924. This is nothing less than an epic, inspiring and exasperating by turns, in which the writer lives, through visionary reincarnations, the life of slave and lord, bondman and freeman, in past centuries. Many of these rushing visions have the strange vividness of dreams, but the reader who reaches the last page of these two volumes closes them with the feeling that he has been listening to some tremendous Germanic fugue, played on an organ with uncontrollable stops. Music like this was rarely heard among the Mozartians of France. And the theme of it all? Some cloudy grandeur of liberation and revolt. Even the title of the book seems to confuse, with its twofold idea of chains as the links between man and man, and the fetters which bind them.

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We are far away enough now from the war. It is time to look back dispassionately to the books which were written then, and to separate the true from the dross. The conviction comes that *Under Fire* will remain on record as the greatest novel of its kind. Other books seem to tell us *about* war, about our emotions in wartime. *Under Fire is* war. In the trenches Barbusse finds himself. The noise and horror seem to give calmness and

counterpoise to his mind. The tenderness that was unexpressed in childhood and marriage finds its object in the men—the children—who live and suffer around him. These men do not think, talk, laugh or feel as we do; their very irritations are not ours. They seem to have been fighting for years. They have none of our illusions about bravery; and though they can pay passing homage to the man who dies for an idea, they do not waste words on patriotism. But when their sufferings are past human endurance, cries burst from their lips, and they curse their destiny.

This unit of men is only a single unit, one microcosm in that endless line of fellow-men " scattered like star-dust " over the whole length of the battle-field, where shells burst at night over leagues of slime and decay. The journal of this squad is the journal of countless other trenches.

Lest those who read ask themselves: " Can such things be seen and borne? " Barbusse has fore-answered them; the men about him ask the same question, and he has only set out to give us the truth. None the less, the picture is carefully, admirably composed; it spares us some of the " raggedness " of modern warfare, though none of its fearful intensity. Yet there is a noble restraint in the words that Barbusse places at the end of this book: " If the present war has advanced progress by one step, its miseries and slaughter will count but little."

BRIAN RHYS.

The following is a list of works by Henri Barbusse:
Pleureuses (poems), 1895; another edition, 1920. Les Suppliants (a novel), 1903. L'Enfer (a novel), 1908. Nous Autres (tales), 1914; trans. as We Others, by W. Fitzwater Wray (Dent), 1918. Le Feu: Journal d'une escouade (a novel), 1916; trans. as Under Fire: the story of a squad, by W. Fitzwater Wray (Dent), 1917. Clarté (a novel), 1919; trans. as Light, by W. Fitzwater Wray (Dent), 1919. La Lueur dans l'abîme: Ce que veut le groupe Clarté, 1920. Paroles d'un combattant: Articles et discours, 1917–1920, 1920. Lettre aux intellectuels (in defence of Communism); with a portrait by Mela Muter (Rome), 1921. Quelques coins du cœur (proses); with 24 wood engravings by Frans Masereel (Geneva), 1921. Les Enchaînements, 1924; trans. as Chains, by Stephen Haden Guest; 2 vols., 1925. Les Bourreaux, 1926. Fait Divers, 1928; trans. as Thus and Thus, by Brian Rhys, 1928. Russie-Ce qui fut sera-Elévation, 1930; trans. as One Looks at Russia, by Warre B. Wells, 1930. Zola, 1932; trans. by M. B. and F. C. Green, 1932.

TO

THE MEMORY OF

THE COMRADES WHO FELL BY MY SIDE
AT CROUŸ AND ON HILL 119

JANUARY, MAY, AND SEPTEMBER 1915

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# UNDER FIRE

## I

### *THE VISION*

*Mont Blanc, the Dent du Midi, and the Aiguille Verte look across at the bloodless faces that show above the blankets along the gallery of the sanatorium. This roofed-in gallery of rustic wood-work on the first floor of the palatial hospital is isolated in Space and overlooks the world. The blankets of fine wool—red, green, brown, or white—from which those wasted cheeks and shining eyes protrude are quite still. No sound comes from the long couches except when some one coughs, or that of the pages of a book turned over at long and regular intervals, or the undertone of question and quiet answer between neighbours, or now and again the crescendo disturbance of a daring crow, escaped to the balcony from those flocks that seem threaded across the immense transparency like chaplets of black pearls.*

*Silence is obligatory. Besides, the rich and high-placed who have come here from all the ends of the earth, smitten by the same evil, have lost the habit of talking. They have withdrawn into themselves, to think of their life and of their death.*

*A servant appears in the balcony, dressed in white and walking softly. She brings newspapers and hands them about.*

*"It's decided," says the first to unfold his paper. "War is declared."*

*Expected as the news is, its effect is almost dazing, for this audience feels that its portent is without measure or*

*limit. These men of culture and intelligence, detached from the affairs of the world and almost from the world itself, whose faculties are deepened by suffering and meditation, as far remote from their fellow men as if they were already of the Future—these men look deeply into the distance, towards the unknowable land of the living and the insane.*

*" Austria's act is a crime," says the Austrian.*

*" France* must *win," says the Englishman.*

*" I hope Germany will be beaten," says the German.*

*They settle down again under the blankets and on the pillows, looking to heaven and the high peaks. But in spite of that vast purity, the silence is filled with the dire disclosure of a moment before.*

*War!*

*Some of the invalids break the silence, and say the word again under their breath, reflecting that this is the greatest happening of the age, and perhaps of all ages. Even on the lucid landscape at which they gaze the news casts something like a vague and sombre mirage.*

*The tranquil expanses of the valley, adorned with soft and smooth pastures and hamlets rosy as the rose, with the sable shadow-stains of the majestic mountains and the black lace and white of pines and eternal snow, become alive with the movements of men, whose multitudes swarm in distinct masses. Attacks develop, wave by wave, across the fields and then stand still. Houses are eviscerated like human beings and towns like houses. Villages appear in crumpled whiteness as though fallen from heaven to earth. The very shape of the plain is changed by the frightful heaps of wounded and slain.*

*Each country whose frontiers are consumed by carnage is seen tearing from its heart ever more warriors of full blood and force. One's eyes follow the flow of these living tributaries to the River of Death. To north and south and west afar there are battles on every side. Turn where you will, there is war in every corner of that vastness.*

*One of the pale-faced clairvoyants lifts himself on his elbow, reckons and numbers the fighters present and to*

*come—thirty millions of soldiers. Another stammers, his eyes full of slaughter, "Two armies at death-grips—that is one great army committing suicide."*

*"It should not have been," says the deep and hollow voice of the first in the line. But another says, "It is the French Revolution beginning again." "Let thrones beware!" says another's undertone.*

*The third adds, "Perhaps it is the last war of all." A silence follows, then some heads are shaken in dissent whose faces have been blanched anew by the stale tragedy of sleepless night—"Stop war? Stop war? Impossible! There is no cure for the world's disease."*

*Some one coughs, and then the Vision is swallowed up in the huge sunlit peace of the lush meadows. In the rich colours of the glowing kine, the black forests, the green fields and the blue distance, dies the reflection of the fire where the old world burns and breaks. Infinite silence engulfs the uproar of hate and pain from the dark swarmings of mankind. They who have spoken retire one by one within themselves, absorbed once more in their own mysterious malady.*

*But when evening is ready to descend within the valley, a storm breaks over the mass of Mont Blanc. One may not go forth in such peril, for the last waves of the storm-wind roll even to the great verandah, to that harbour where they have taken refuge; and these victims of a great internal wound encompass with their gaze the elemental convulsion.*

*They watch how the explosions of thunder on the mountain upheave the level clouds like a stormy sea, how each one hurls a shaft of fire and a column of cloud together into the twilight; and they turn their wan and sunken faces to follow the flight of the eagles that wheel in the sky and look from their supreme height down through the wreathing mists, down to earth.*

*"Put an end to war?" say the watchers.—"Forbid the Storm!"*

*Cleansed from the passions of party and faction, liberated from prejudice and infatuation and the tyranny of tradi-*

*tion, these watchers on the threshold of another world are vaguely conscious of the simplicity of the present and the yawning possibilities of the future.*

*The man at the end of the rank cries, " I can see crawling things down there "—" Yes, as though they were alive "—" Some sort of plant, perhaps "—" Some kind of men "—*

*And there amid the baleful glimmers of the storm, below the dark disorder of the clouds that extend and unfurl over the earth like evil spirits, they seem to see a great livid plain unrolled, which to their seeing is made of mud and water, while figures appear and fast fix themselves to the surface of it, all blinded and borne down with filth, like the dreadful castaways of shipwreck. And it seems to them that these are soldiers.*

*The streaming plain, seamed and seared with long parallel canals and scooped into water-holes, is an immensity, and these castaways who strive to exhume themselves from it are legion. But the thirty million slaves, hurled upon one another in the mud of war by guilt and error, uplift their human faces and reveal at last a bourgeoning Will. The future is in the hands of these slaves, and it is clearly certain that the alliance to be cemented some day by those whose number and whose misery alike are infinite will transform the old world.*

## II

### IN THE EARTH

THE great pale sky is alive with thunderclaps. Each detonation reveals together a shaft of red falling fire in what is left of the night, and a column of smoke in what has dawned of the day. Up there—so high and so far that they are heard unseen—a flight of dreadful birds goes circling up with strong and palpitating cries to look down upon the earth.

The earth! It is a vast and water-logged desert that begins to take shape under the long-drawn desolation of daybreak. There are pools and gullies where the bitter breath of earliest morning nips the water and sets it a-shiver; tracks traced by the troops and the convoys of the night in these barren fields, the lines of ruts that glisten in the weak light like steel rails, mud-masses with broken stakes protruding from them, ruined trestles, and bushes of wire in tangled coils. With its slime-beds and puddles, the plain might be an endless grey sheet that floats on the sea and has here and there gone under. Though no rain is falling, all is drenched, oozing, washed out and drowned, and even the wan light seems to flow.

Now you can make out, a network of long ditches where the lave of the night still lingers. It is the trench. It is carpeted at bottom with a layer of slime that liberates the foot at each step with a sticky sound; and by each dug-out it smells of the night's excretions. The holes themselves, as you stoop to peer in, are foul of breath.

I see shadows coming from these sidelong pits and moving about, huge and misshapen lumps, bear-like,

that flounder and growl. They are "us." We are muffled like Eskimos. Fleeces and blankets and sacking wrap us up, weigh us down, magnify us strangely. Some stretch themselves, yawning profoundly. Faces appear, ruddy or leaden, dirt-disfigured, pierced by the little lamps of dull and heavy-lidded eyes, matted with uncut beards and foul with forgotten hair.

Crack! Crack! Boom!—rifle fire and cannonade. Above us and all around, it crackles and rolls, in long gusts or separate explosions. The flaming and melancholy storm never, never ends. For more than fifteen months, for five hundred days in this part of the world where we are, the rifles and the big guns have gone on from morning to night and from night to morning. We are buried deep in an everlasting battlefield; but like the ticking of the clocks at home in the days gone by—in the now almost legendary Past—you only hear the noise when you listen.

A babyish face with puffy eyelids, and cheek-bones as lurid as if lozenge-shaped bits of crimson paper had been stuck on, comes out of the ground, opens one eye, then the other. It is Paradis. The skin of his fat cheeks is scored with the marks of the folds in the tent-cloth that has served him for night-cap. The glance of his little eye wanders all round me; he sees me, nods, and says—

"Another night gone, old chap."

"Yes, sonny; how many more like it still?"

He raises his two plump arms skywards. He has managed to scrape out by the steps of the dug-out and is beside me. After stumbling over the dim obstacle of a man who sits in the shadows, fervently scratches himself and sighs hoarsely, Paradis makes off—lamely splashing like a penguin through the flooded picture.

One by one the men appear from the depths. In the corners, heavy shadows are seen forming—human clouds that move and break up. One by one they become recognisable. There is one who comes out hooded with his blanket—a savage, you would say, or rather, the tent

of a savage, which walks and sways from side to side. Near by, and heavily framed in knitted wool, a square face is disclosed, yellow-brown as though iodised, and patterned with blackish patches, the nose broken, the eyes of Chinese restriction and red-circled, a little coarse and moist moustache like a greasing-brush.

"There's Volpatte. How goes it, Firmin?"

"It goes, it goes, and it comes," says Volpatte. His heavy and drawling voice is aggravated by hoarseness. He coughs—"My number's up, this time. Say, did you hear it last night, the attack? My boy, talk about a bombardment—something very choice in the way of mixtures!" He sniffles and passes his sleeve under his concave nose. His hand gropes within his greatcoat and his jacket till it finds the skin, and scratches. "I've killed thirty of them in the candle," he growls; "in the big dug-out by the tunnel, old man, there are some like crumbs of metal bread. You can see them running about in the straw like I'm telling you."

"Who's been attacking? The Boches?"

"The Boches and us too—out Vimy way—a counter-attack—didn't you hear it?"

"No," the big Lamuse, the ox-man, replies on my account; "I was snoring; but I was on fatigue all night the night before."

"I heard it," declares the little Breton, Biquet; "I slept badly, or rather, didn't sleep. I've got a doss-house all to myself. Look, see, there it is—the damned thing." He points to a trough on the ground level, where on a meagre mattress of muck, there is just body-room for one. "Talk about home in a nutshell!" he declares, wagging the rough and rock-hard little head that looks as if it had never been finished. "I hardly snoozed. I'd just got off, but was woke up by the relief of the 129th that went by—not by the noise, but the smell. Ah, all those chaps with their feet on a level with my nose! It woke me up, it gave me nose-ache so."

I knew it. I have often been wakened in the trench