

A War-Time Christmas

By AGNES REPPLIER

*"Things are in the saddle,
And ride mankind."*



YOUNG American lieutenant, for whom the world had been from infancy a perilously pleasant place, wrote home in the early spring of 1918:

It has rained and rained and rained. I am as much at home in a mud puddle as any frog in France, and I have clean forgotten what a dry bed is like. But I am as fit as a fiddle and as hard as nails. I can eat scrap iron and sleep standing. Are n't there things called umbrellas, which you pampered civilians carry about in showers?

When I read that letter, I thought of the "Wandering Knight," in the finest of the old Spanish ballads:

My ornaments are arms,
My pastime is in war,
My bed is cold upon the wold,
My lamp, yon star.

The buoyancy of the ballad and the buoyancy of the young American's letter strike the same clear, dominant note. Both men are driven by the wind of their destiny, but both ride free. Face to face with the primitive emotions of life, its primitive comforts become subservient to their will, and its stuffy draperies are nowhere. The soldier does not belong to the dense body of mankind, which, according to Mr. Emerson, is ridden by the tyranny of things.

And if the Great War can so liberate our fighting men, may it not be our appointed time to free ourselves from the cumbrous old Juggernaut which has grown heavier with each succeeding age? "Le

superflu, chose très nécessaire," has reached such swelling dimensions that it has lost all comeliness, and all fitness in our lives. It has no longer even the poor distinction of being unattainable to the many. The mechanic's house and the mechanic's wife bear melancholy witness to its universality. Trade is as unconcerned with beauty as with usefulness. Peter Pindar's razor-man is at work the whole world over, and each and every one of us is burdened with his wares. The cry that was raised in England the first year of the war, and that has been reëchoed in the United States within the last twelve months, "Business as usual," means nothing but the reproduction of the unessential for the benefit of the producer. England has learned, and we are learning, that many things deemed indispensable can be readily dispensed with. England has learned, and we are learning, that the business of the Allies is war. Every dollar should contribute directly or indirectly to this supreme industry. If we are bankrupt in war, other forms of bankruptcy will follow as a necessary sequence. We shall be an insolvent nation, with Germany for our creditor.

Bearing this in mind, we may find it worth while to reconstruct our lives on a new and different scale. The counsel which is authoritatively given us is sometimes very confusing, because we are from first to last "economic illiterates" (I borrow the phrase from Mr. F. A. Vanderlip, chairman of the War Savings Committee); and while there is a great deal of talk, there is no visible standard which we may set ourselves to emulate and surpass. The artless creed of administrators that economy is to be measured by the discomfort it creates proves the rawness of our point of view. Judged by this rule, the

savings effected in our railroads should pay the cost of the war. The people look naturally and fearlessly to their leaders for guidance and example. That the Government should prove beyond dispute that the billions so cheerfully subscribed to loans and paid in taxes are spent with fidelity and thrift is not too much to ask. The debt of the tax-payer to the state is a business debt. The law provides measures to compel its payment. The debt of the state to the tax-payer is a debt of honor. He cannot enforce payment; but if it is withheld, the fine fabric of civilization crumbles into dust. The foundation of democracy is a square deal between the men who pay the taxes and the men who spend them.

And, after all, it is not so much economy as austerity which should be bred and sanctified by the war. The question of saving money is secondary to the question of saving our souls from the lust of things—a lust which is out of harmony with the dignity of life, and absurdly out of proportion to its brevity. Newman tells us that the Sultan Mahmud carried away great spoils from India. When he lay dying in extreme pain, he had the riches of his treasury spread out before him, and wept to think that he must leave them, and that the years of his possession had been so few.

After the Spanish-American War I heard one of my countrywomen say she wanted to go to Spain, because she understood that many Spaniards, impoverished by the contest and by the loss of their Cuban estates, would be obliged to sell their jewels and laces, and she would like to buy on the spot. She was a church-going Christian woman, but she spoke with the voice of Jacob when he bargained with his fainting brother for the birthright he shamefully coveted.

There is a passage in "Mr. Britling Sees It Through" which describes with precision the crown prince, as watched by English eyes. "He was the backbone of the war party at court. And presently he stole bric-à-brac. That will help posterity to a proper value of things."

It helps us now. The crown prince has committed worse crimes than carrying away bronzes and plate. The long years of the war have revealed in him no trait that is not evil. He has had no more heart for his own men than for his enemy. He has ridden his troops over their wounded comrades, over their dying comrades, over German soldiers bleeding on the battle-field for him who bore no wound. In this he has sinned against God and man; but not against his own caste, not against the pride of the Hohenzollerns. It is only petty larceny which cannot by any stretch of judgment be accounted a princely failing. It was only the profoundly stupid desire to possess something he did not need which made him part so lightly with the rank and title of a gentleman.

And now there comes cropping up from time to time in our newspapers an agitating report that Germany is "cornering pearls," and that French jewelers have been found base enough to deal, through Swiss agents, with these speculators. What have the Allied nations to fear from such a scheme? It is true that a string of pearls, sold last July at Christie's, brought forty-seven thousand pounds, which is said to be the biggest sum ever paid in a London auction-room. This proves, what we all know, that wealth and want go hand in hand in war-time. It is also true that British women gave their pearls to make up the famous Red Cross necklace, sold for the needs of the wounded. But what Germany corners, Germany can consume. If, when peace comes, and brings some measure of justice to a stricken world, there can be found a French, British, Italian, or American woman willing to buy a pearl from the Hun's dishonored hand, to what end has the war been fought?

The efforts of our law-makers to decide what is a luxury (with a view to taxing it when disclosed), and the efforts of economists and statisticians to aid them in this decision, have brought to light some instructive and discouraging facts. Strange to say, luxury taxes are not, and never

have been, popular. The Paris Chamber of Commerce protested vigorously against the French war-tax of April, 1918, which raised the duty on such undisputed luxuries as jewels, pianos, and motors from ten to twenty per cent. The law was held to impose "serious hardships on traders," and a modification was asked for. The British Luxury Tax Committee submitted in August, 1918, a report which combined uncompromising clearness, triumphant common sense, and a human quality not often found in such an inhuman business as tax-raising. That medical, surgical, and dental appliances should be exempted is natural and reasonable; but that this hard-driven committee should have paused in its labors to consider and recommend for exemption, "the first sale of an artist's work, made by himself, and not exceeding one hundred and twenty pounds," proves pleasantly that a functionary may yet be a man and a brother.

In this country the word luxury is held to embrace not only a long list of inutilities (jade carvings, lacquered shrines, wooden jewel-boxes, and brass candlesticks were added last June to the list of restricted imports), but an equally long list of needful articles, if they are of a reasonably good quality. We must have clothes, because the law does not permit us to appear, even in August, without them. We must have boots and shoes, because, otherwise, our feet would be frost-bitten in January. The high price of clothes and boots and shoes has long been a matter of solicitude. But that "departmental tax experts" should pronounce these stern necessities to be luxuries because tailors and bootmakers ask so much for them, is to add insult to injury, and injury to insult. Even the possibility of buying, untaxed, two shoddy suits instead of one woolen one, and two pairs of paper shoes instead of one pair of leather ones, does not reconcile us to fate, or make clear the workings of democracy.

For it is not on necessary apparel, nor yet on jade carvings and lacquered shrines, that the wealth of the country is being wasted. We can make shift to do without

the carvings and the shrines, especially if they are of the sort prepared for the American trade, and shown on the upper floor of a department store; but the savings so effected will not build many ships. The staggering sums to contemplate are the three millions of dollars spent on imported feathers, mostly from China and Japan; the fifty millions spent on chewing-gum; and the three hundred millions spent on candy, all in the fiscal year of 1917. A story has been going the rounds that Mr. Woolworth asked the architect of the Woolworth Building in New York how much iron was used in the structure.

"Twenty-seven thousand tons," said Mr. Gilbert.

"Last year," commented Mr. Woolworth, "I sold in my stores more than that weight of candy."

There is no use telling the public that "voluntary self-denial of the great American appetite is all that stands between our comrades in Europe and starvation." There is no such thing as voluntary self-denial on a scale commensurate to the needs of a world whose food supply is running low. It is not voluntary self-denial which has enabled Germany to survive four years of blockade, to put up a hard fight, heap money in the Deutsche Reichsbank, make the biggest guns in the world, and have still the cash and the spirit left to corner the pearl market, to say nothing of cornering the German-American traitor market, which has cost her rather more than it was worth. Austria went on placidly eating all she wanted as long as she had it to eat. So did England, though she obeyed with superb precision as soon as prohibitory laws were passed. Americans, except for a few insignificant restrictions, are now eating all they want, or at least all they can afford to buy. The fact that in remote portions of Europe men and women are on the brink of starvation does not impair their appetite. If they are aware of this circumstance (and many are not), if they recall it (and few do), they say: "The food is here, and not in Serbia or Armenia. If I don't eat it, my neighbors will," and pursue their way.

That trade must suffer if superfluities be discarded is not a sufficient reason for wasting labor and money on them. War necessarily involves suffering. Reform necessarily implies loss. Prohibition means a lessening of revenue and an added burden of taxation. It also spells ruin to the breweries and the grape-growers. Yet it is hard to think that a bottle of California wine is not a more useful article than the thousands of gimcracks exposed for sale by shopkeepers at Christmas-time. We can do better things with our labor and our money than produce and purchase inutilities. A great manufacturer of talking-machines is now making airplanes. This fact alone should convert all the pacifists in the country. It is honey snatched from the lion's jaw.

Rummage sales were first designed to fulfil a practical purpose. Useful articles, decent clothing, were given by the rich, and bought by the poor, who thus received more than the value of their money. With an increase of popularity came a change of character. Trash of every kind, cheap and costly, was dumped upon counters, and sold to people who knew no better than to buy it. As a method of raising money, the sales grew more valuable every year; but they catered to waste rather than to economy.

"Why have you left your counter?" I asked a light-hearted young woman who was making her way out of a crowded rummage-room.

"They don't want me any longer," she laughed. "I would n't let a mother of nine children buy a china stork. I said that was one thing she did n't need, and they told me, if I were going to sell only what was needed, I had better hand out stamps at a post-office."

Last spring, when the German drive was on, and we counted day by day, with hearts as heavy as lead, the number of miles that lay between Hindenburg and Paris, I saw a dense crowd of men and women standing before one of the newspaper offices. It took all the courage I possessed to approach those bulletin-boards; but when I pushed my way

through the throng, I saw that it was not concerned with war news. Next to the newspaper building was a chemist's shop, and in the window a very young girl sat before an elaborate toilet-table. She wore an evening dress of yellow tulle and a wreath of red and yellow flowers. Her cheeks flamed crimson with paint. She sat without turning her head, and stared at herself in the mirror, while the men and women in the street stared ecstatically at her. She was advertising a face powder. A few feet away the boards announced the fall of Noyon and the sinking of a British transport. The only object in the window besides the girl and the toilet-table was a huge war poster, lettered, "America's Answer to the Huns."

We have been told that we can finance the war by spending only on things we need. We could go a long way toward financing it by ceasing to spend on things we are better without. So little is necessary for health and efficiency; so much is ridiculous excess. And having lost our sense of proportion, it is hard to regain it, even in these years of stern enlightenment. A recent war novel, and an able one, challenges our admiration for the heroic temper of an American woman, the wife of a New York broker, who tells her husband she is prepared to run her house and her family of three on twenty-five thousand dollars a year. Four servants are all she will permit herself, and, as for dress, two thousand dollars will suffice. "Why should I want any new clothes this winter?" Moved to solemn transport by this sacrificial spirit, the broker affirms he will curtail his own personal expenses to twelve hundred dollars, and, taking down the family Bible, he reads with a swelling heart, "Who can find a virtuous woman, for her price is far above rubies."

And it is n't meant to be satiric. It is written seriously, and was printed in the fourth year of a world war in which uncounted thousands of men, women, and children have died of want. Neither is it wholly and typically American, for I read last winter, in the "Nineteenth Century and After," that Cecil Rhodes was a man

of such simple and "coarse" tastes that they could have been amply gratified on an income of five thousand pounds. Now five thousand pounds is a small sum when we look at it in connection with Cecil Rhodes; but as the outlay required for the contentment of simple and coarse tastes it seems a bit excessive.

When we count up our gains from a war which will cost us the flower of our manhood, we reckon a lesson in economy as one of our national assets. But abnegation is better than economy. It is the lesson which, of all others, is taught us by the first Christmas, and now is the time to take it soberly to heart. Those are good words of Lloyd George's, spoken to a nation which has made every sacrifice for freedom's sake: "Don't be always thinking

of getting back to where you were before the war. Get a really new world." A new and a better world, emptied of forced and artificial production, full of essentials, freely shared. We have been carrying too much cargo for a short and stormy voyage. Two of the cardinal virtues, prudence and temperance, combine to insure thrift; and where prudence and temperance are found, their nobler sisters, justice and fortitude, are close at hand. Christianity borrowed these cardinal virtues from paganism, which honored them for centuries, and built its finest civilization on their strong support.

Their best fruit to-day is that voluntary austerity which Bacon says "may be as well for a man's country as for the Kingdom of Heaven."



Driftwood

By SARA TEASDALE

My forefathers gave me
My spirit's shaken flame,
The shape of hands, the beat of heart,
The letters of my name.

But it was my lovers,
And not my sleeping sires,
Who taught my spirit how to flame
With iridescent fires,

As the driftwood burning
Learned its jeweled blaze
From the sea's blue splendor
Of colored nights and days.

