

CURRENT OPINION

June, 1918

AN AUSTRIAN OFFICER'S GRUESOME PICTURES OF WAR The Cry of a Human Soul Wrung by Agony and Horror

THE war has produced two masterpieces: 'Under Fire,' by the French soldier Barbusse, and 'Men in War,' by the Austrian officer Andreas Latzko, an even more poignant interpretation of the effect of war on human beings than Barbusse's novel." So writes a critic in the *New York Evening Mail*. This judgment is shared by the *New York Sun*, and has served to direct attention to a book that, on all sides, is conceded to be one of the great literary products of the war. "Men in War" (Bonī and Liveright) has something of the quality of Leonid Andreyev's "Red Laugh." It is horrible in its fascination, and so intense as to be actually painful to the reader. Its author is said to have been an Austrian officer who sickened of military ruthlessness and escaped to Switzerland. The name appended to the English translation is probably a pseudonym.

Disillusionment and an almost morbid sympathy with mental and physical suffering are outstanding features of the book. There is also in it a sense of hopeless futility and a prevailing nihilistic tone. Several critics complain that the author has not sufficiently distinguished between the varying motives that lead to war. The book may be called, as a writer in the *Boston Transcript* says, a revelation of the infamy of the Teutons. It is equally calculated to strip the glory from warfare of any kind.

"Men in War" is a series of impressionistic descriptions, vivid, poetic, realistic. The first is entitled "Off to War," and reports conversations that take place in the garden of a war hospital in a small Austrian town fifty miles from the battle front. The second, entitled "Baptism of Fire," tells the story of how a gentle Italian Captain and his bloodthirsty young Lieutenant go into battle together. The Captain has been, in his day, an engineer and a student. He is too complex to be able to adjust his psychology easily to the simple business of slaughter. He hates, even more than he hates the enemy, the spirit of inhumanity. As we get the story:

"Captain Marschner was ashamed. A real physical nausea of the part he had just played overcame him. What was there left for these simple people to do, these bricklayers and contractors and

Agony and Horror

cultivators of the earth who, bent over their daily toil, had lived without vision into the future—what was there left for them to do when the grand folks, the learned people, their own Captain with the three golden stars on his collar, assured them it was their duty and a most praiseworthy thing to shoot Italian bricklayers and farmhands into fragments? They went—gasping behind him—and he—he led them on! Led them against his inner conviction, because of his pitiful cowardice, and asked them to be courageous and contemptuous of death. He had talked them into it, had abused their confidence, had made capital of their love for their wives and children, because if he acted in the service of a lie, there was a chance of his continuing to live and even coming back home safe again, while if he stuck to the truth he believed in there was the certainty of his being stood up against a wall and shot. He staked their lives and his own on the throw of loaded dice because he was too cowardly to contemplate the certain loss of the game for himself alone! . . .

“All alone, with no ear to hear, amid the fury of the bursting shrapnel which fell up there as thick as rain in a thunderstorm, Captain Marschner gave himself up to his rage, his impotent rage against a world which had inflicted such things on him. He cursed, roared out his full-throated hatred into the deaf tumult and then sprang up when, far below, almost in the valley now, his men emerged followed by Lieutenant Weixler running behind them like a butcher’s helper driving his oxen to the shambles.”

The Captain and the Lieutenant, varying so widely in sensibility, are united in death.

A third sketch is entitled “The Victor,” and portrays the daily life of the “celebrated General X, the man the papers liked to call the ‘Victor of —,’” in a town back from the firing-line. There is a hospital nearby, but His Excellency has given strict orders that no wounded or deformed soldiers shall be allowed to mar the landscape. Every afternoon an orchestra plays. The General and his staff sit under the trees sipping coffee and eating cakes. In the days before the war he had worn himself out over all the exigencies of a petty bourgeois existence. For thirty-nine years he had never swerved from disciplining himself to abstemiousness. Now he lives in a castle and all men do him obeisance.

“One single lowering cloud streaked the shining firmament of this wonderland and cast its shadow on the brow of His Excellency. Sometimes his pure joy was disturbed by the thought that the fairytale might give way to reality and he might be awakened from the glorious dream. It was not peace that His Excellency dreaded. He never even thought of peace. But what if the wall so artfully constructed of human bodies should begin to totter some day? What if the enemy were to penetrate all the fortifica-

3 Agony and Horror

tions, and discipline were to give way to panic, and the mighty wall should dissolve into its component parts, human beings fleeing madly to save their lives? Then the 'Victor of —,' the almighty fairy-tale king, would sink back again into the sordid commonplace of old."

The fourth and fifth chapters of the book are agonized studies in mental pathology. We hear the ravings of officers who have become insane as a result of the sufferings they have witnessed. One man has seen his wounded comrade defaced beyond recognition by a clumsy grappling-hook. Another has seen a friend decapitated in the very act of playing a phonograph, and thereafter strangely confuses heads and phonograph discs. "They call me sick," exclaims one harrowed victim; "it is the others who are sick!"

"They are sick who gloat over news of victories and see conquered miles of territory rise resplendent above mounds of corpses. They are sick who stretch a wall of flags between themselves and their humanity so as not to know what crimes are being committed against their brothers in the beyond that they call 'the front.'"

The book is characterized by the *New York Times* as "a bitter attack upon the by-products of the Teutonic military idea." One rises from it, says the *Transcript* critic, "shaken in pulse and brain by the horror and bloody sweat of this ghastly infamy, this cold-blooded megalomania of Berlin and Vienna that hurled a score of nations into hell." And yet, he continues, "one turns the last page with exultation, too, for this book shows how from brain to brain within the iron enceinte of the Central Powers there runs the shining spark of truth. These men will not forever be slaves to Hohenzollern and Hapsburg. 'In the end, truth beareth away the victory.'"

"It is such men as Latzko whose hands we must grasp with honor and admiration when at last the war comes to an end. It is they, working from within, who will disrupt the evil fabric of Prussianism, the cannon-lechers and the feasters on blood. It is they who, knowing the black despair of war with a bitterness beyond the fetch of words, will help us to end it. It is they who, having been duped and tricked by comfortable bureaucrats, will make the world safe for the humble. It is they who will bury the carrion emperors and general staffs deep beyond plummet's sounding—so deep that even the old scorn and hatred of them will seem but the shadow of a shade."