

Horrors of Gas Attacks

By Pierre Loti

A PLACE of horror which one would think Dante had imagined. The air is heavy—stifling; two or three little night lamps, which look as if they were afraid of giving too much light, hardly pierce the hot, smoky darkness which smells of fever and sweat. Busy people are whispering anxiously. But you hear, more than all, agonized gaspings. These gaspings escape from a number of little beds drawn up close together on which are distinguished human forms, above all, chests, chests that are heaving too strongly, too rapidly, and that raise the sheets as if the hour of the death rattle had already come.

It is one of our hospitals on the battle line, improvised as well as was possible on the morrow of one of the most infernal of German abominations; all these children of France, who look as if they are at the last gasp, were so terribly injured that it was impossible to carry them further away. This great hall, with its crumbling walls, was yesterday a storehouse of hogsheads of champagne, these little beds—some fifty in number—were put together in feverish haste, made of branches that still keep their bark, and look like rustic garden furniture.

But why this heat, which the stoves send forth and which makes breathing almost impossible? The reason is that it cannot be too hot for asphyxiated lungs. And this darkness, why this darkness which gives an air of the inferno to this place of martyrdom, and which must so hinder the gentle, white-clad nurses? It is because the barbarians are there in their burrows, quite close to this village, whose houses and church tower they have more than once amused themselves by pounding with their shells, and if, with their ever-watchful field glasses, they saw in this sad, November twilight the lights appearing in the windows of a long hall, they would instantly scent a field hospital and shells would rain on the humble sick beds; we have learned how they love to sprinkle grapeshot on hospitals, Red Cross convoys, churches!

So that one can hardly see here through a sort of mist, spread by water boiling in heaters. Every moment nurses bring huge, black air balloons, and those who are struggling in agony stretch out

Gas Attacks

their poor hands to beg for them; it is oxygen which makes them breathe better and suffer less. Many of them have these black air balloons resting on their panting chests, and in their mouths they greedily hold the tubes through which the saving gas escapes; you would say that they were great children with milk bottles; this throws a sort of grotesque buffoonery over these scenes of horror.

Asphyxiation has different effects on different constitutions which require different forms of treatment. Some of the men, almost naked on their beds, are covered with blisters or smeared all over with tincture of iodine. There are others—these, alas, are the most seriously injured—who are all swollen, chests, arms, and faces, and who look like India rubber dolls blown up. India rubber dolls, children with nursing bottles! Although these are the only true images it seems almost sacrilegious to employ them when anguish weighs upon your heart and you long to weep, to weep for pity and to weep for wrath! Yet let these comparisons, brutal as they are, engrave themselves deep in our memories by their very strangeness, so that they may the longer nourish indignant hatred and the thirst of holy retribution!

For there is a man who spent years in preparing all this for us, and this man continues to live. He lives, and as remorse is without doubt unknown to his vulture soul he does not even suffer, unless it be from fury at having failed in his attempt. Before unchaining death upon the world he had coldly made his combinations, foreseeing everything. "If, however," he said to himself, "my rhinoceros-like rushes and my huge apparatus of murder should in the impossible case hurl themselves against a too magnificent resistance, then, perhaps, I should dare, relying on the poltroonery of the neutrals; I should dare, perhaps, to affront all the laws of civilization and to employ other means. In any case, let us prepare."

The great rush, in fact, did fail, and timidity at the beginning, fearful, in spite of all, of the whole world's disgust, he tried asphyxiation, after having justified himself, of course, by his habitual lies, accusing France of having made the beginning. As he cynically hoped, there was, unfortunately, no general revolt of the human conscience. No more than over the earlier crimes—organized looting, destruction of cathedrals, violations, massacres of children and of women—did the neutrals intervene. It veritably

Gas Attacks

seems as if the destructive, fierce, and deathlike glance of his Gorgon, or Medusa, head had frozen them where they stood, and at the hour at which I write the last one Gorgonized by this monstrous glance is the poor King of Greece, inconsistent and maladroit, who is trembling on the verge of the precipice of the gravest crimes. That there may be neutrals from terror one can understand; but that nations with high qualities should remain Germanophile, by what tricks have they been blinded, by what slanders or by what bribes?

Our dear soldiers with burned lungs, gasping on their little rustic beds, are very grateful when, following the doctor, you come close to them, and they raise their gentle eyes to you when you take them by the hand. Here is one swollen like a balloon, unrecognizable, doubtless, for those who had only seen him before this frightful swelling began, and, if you touch even as lightly as possible his poor, distended cheeks, you feel under your fingers the vibration of the gases which have filtered in between skin and flesh.

“Good; he is better since this morning,” says the doctor, and he continues in a low voice, for the nurse: “I begin to think, Madame, we shall save this one also: but you must not leave him for a moment.” Oh, needless advice, for she has not the slightest intention of leaving him, this white-clad nurse, under whose eyes there are already dark shadows caused by eight-and-forty hours of truceless watching. Not one of them will be left, no; to be certain of that one has only to look at all these young doctors, all these orderlies, a little worn out, it is true, but so attentive and courageous that they do not lose sight of one of them.

And, thank God, they will save almost all of them! (Of 600 asphyxiated that night more than 500 are out of danger.) As soon as they can be moved they will be taken away from this hell of the battle front, where the Kaiser's shrapnels fall so willingly, even on the dying; they will be laid more comfortably in quiet hospitals where they will still suffer much, indeed, for a week, a fortnight, a month, but which they will presently leave, more cautious, more prudent, and eager to return to the fight.

It may be said that the trick of asphyxiation has failed like that of the great, savage rushes; it has not brought the result which the Gorgon's head expected. And yet with what skillful calculations it has been tried on each occasion, always at the most favorable moments! We know that the Germans, masters of spying and ceaselessly informed of every-

Gas Attacks

thing, never fail to choose for their attacks of whatever kind the days of relieving guard, the hours when newcomers, facing them, are still in the disorder of their arrival.

So the evening when this last crime was committed six hundred of our men had just taken their advance positions after a long and tiring march; all at once, in the midst of a salvo of shrapnel which aroused them from their first sleep, they made out here and there little sounds of whistling, as if from treacherous steam sirens, and the death gas was pouring around them, spreading its thick, gloomy, gray clouds. At the same time, in the midst of this fog, their lights waned to dim, small points. Bewildered, then, already suffocating, they thought, too late, of the masks which had been given them and which, besides, they did not greatly believe in; they put them on



too awkwardly, some of them even, by an irresistible instinct of self-preservation, when they felt the burning of their lungs, yielded to the desire to run, and these were the most terribly injured because of the excess of chlorine inhaled in the deep breaths of running.

But the next time they will not be caught, neither these men, nor any of our soldiers; with masks hermetically sealed they will stand immovable around heaps of fagots prepared beforehand, the sudden flames of which neutralize the poisons in the air, and there will be no result beyond an hour of discomfort, painful to pass through but almost always without fatal consequences.

It is true that in the accursed caverns which are their laboratories the intellectuals of Germany, convinced now that the neutrals will accept everything, are working hard to find new and worse poisons for us; but until they have found them the Gorgon's head will have lost this trick as, beyond contest, it has lost so many others. We, alas! have not been able to find means to repay them with sufficient cruelty; to defend ourselves

Gas Attacks

we have, therefore, only the protective mask, which is being improved, it is true, day by day; and, after all, in the eyes of the neutrals—if they still have eyes to see—it is, perhaps, nobler to employ no other means.

At the same time, how different would our position be if we did asphyxiate them, these plunderers and assassins who have attacked and invaded us, and who, despairing of piercing our lines, try to suffocate us in our own homes, in our dear land of France, as one might suffocate rabbits in their burrows or rats in their holes. The tongues of men have not forecast these transcendent ignominies, which would rend the hearts of the basest cannibals; therefore, we have no words to name them. Our poor, asphyxiated soldiers, gasping on their narrow cots, how willingly I would have shown them to all, to their fathers, to their sons, to their brothers, to raise to paroxysm their holy indignation and thirst for vengeance; yes, I would show them everywhere, and let their death rattle be heard, even to the impassive neutrals, to convince of their folly or their crime so many obstinate pacifists, to spread broadcast the alarm against the great barbarism which has broken forth over Europe!

