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TO THE MEN BEHIND THE ARMIES

*An Address delivered on February 18, 1917,
at the Æolian Hall, at a meeting of the Fight
for Right Movement.*

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EMILE CAMMAERTS

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TO THE MEN BEHIND THE ARMIES

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

It is possible that you may remember having seen a reproduction of the drawing by Forain of two French *poilus*, covered with mud and exposed to an infernal shell-fire. "Let's hope," says one, "that they'll hold out." "Who?" asks the other. "Why! the civilians."

Not the soldiers in the trenches, lashed by the rain and bitten by the frost, but the civilians, in their snug homes, with their feet upon the hearth; not those at "the front," who, every instant in danger of death and the most horrible mutilations, live the brutal and primitive life of savages; but those "behind," who sleep in beds, eat at well-furnished tables, and enjoy, by comparison, full comfort and security.

There is a bitter irony in these words, but at the same time a profound truth. The greater our experience of the present war becomes, the more surely do we grow convinced that the ultimate result will be found to depend as much upon the patriotism of the non-combatants as upon the valour of the Army. In this colossal struggle it is not alone the generals who have the control of the

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operations. The part played by the Government is every whit as important. It is not only the soldiers who fight with gun, and bomb, and bayonet; it is the workmen, the capitalists, the shopkeepers, the writers, who fight with hammers, money, and pens.

For, as we are often reminded, it is not here a question of material resources alone; we are not concerned to know simply who will be able to produce the greatest number of guns, the largest store of munitions; we must know also who will prove themselves capable of the greatest sacrifice, who will possess the truest faith and show the most genuine unselfishness. Our armies, if they are to conquer, must not only be supported by all the material power of their peoples; they must also have the consciousness of all the unknown virtues, all the inflexible hopes, all the fervent prayers of the grown men, of the aged, of the women, and of the children who are behind them. It is only when the weakest among us shall have given the best of his strength and the very essence of his being to the common cause that the sun of victory shall rise. It is only when the war shall have absorbed us all and wholly that we may begin to hope for peace. It is only when the uttermost grain of corn shall have been sowed that we may look for our harvest.

If Germany and her vassals were not wholly at the orders of a military dictatorship, this fact would be entirely to our advantage. For how may we compare the patriotism of the allied nations

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with that of this motley throng of peoples that Prussia drags at her heels? But, in spite of the efforts which have been made in the countries of the Entente to co-ordinate and organize our efforts, it is impossible to apply, from day to day, to free men, in seven or eight different countries, those radical measures which Hindenburg, by a stroke of his pen, imposes upon his slaves, both civil and military, from Antwerp to Persia. The very ideal for which we are fighting robs us of certain practical advantages; an iron discipline, for instance, and unity of command. Our Governments require our support before they demand our services. From this state of things a certain loss of time and energy necessarily results. For this loss we, the civilians behind the Army, must make up by a more diligent watchfulness, a more eager enthusiasm, and a more spontaneous generosity, or else may it not happen one day that our love of liberty is charged against us as a culpable weakness?

When some among us give way to discouragement; when others—and this is more serious—delude themselves to such a degree that they become blind to the gravity of the situation and continue to pursue their own selfish aims; when, finally, yet others raise their voices in protest against the measures which the Government is forced to take, unless our chances of success are gravely to be endangered, it is by citing the example of the Army that we most generally seek to shame such people. “You are in despair, while

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at the front optimism is universal ; you shrink from giving your time and money, while at the front no one hesitates to sacrifice his life ; you clamour against a few paltry directions, a few timid restrictions, while at the front our soldiers cannot take a step or say a word which is contrary to the military rule."

This argument has some weight with those who have relatives in the Army ; but it is not wholly convincing. Here we are so far from the war that, unless we have some little imagination, we are unable to picture to ourselves either its horror or its splendour. Discipline at the front is not that of the parade ground. It is a necessity. *Esprit de corps* stifles all egoism, and every man perceives vaguely that, for the greater part of the time, it is less dangerous to obey than to hesitate. This in no way lessens the value of individual bravery—of which God knows what good cause we have to be proud!—but it explains to a certain extent how, out of millions of men, it is hard to discover even a few cowards. One cannot seriously compare the life in the trenches, the close daily intercourse of all the men in a section, of all the sections in a company, the perfect comradeship which grows up between the soldier and his fellows, the devotion that unites the men and their officers—those intimate relationships upon which depend the existence of each and the success of all—one cannot compare such a life with that of the clerk or the shopkeeper behind the battle lines, who, having done his day's work,

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gets back to his home or offers himself some pleasant diversion. In theory, perhaps, the workman who turns a shell, the employé of a Government department, and the peasant who sows his fields, are as necessary to success as the infantryman in the trenches ; but, in reality, these men can feel the burden neither of quite the same responsibilities nor of quite the same duties.

If the energies and patriotism of some of us are, after thirty months of war, still in need of any galvanizing, it is not so much to the example of our soldiers that I would direct their notice, but to that of certain other civilians, people who, like themselves, wear the overall or the jacket, who, for all their weapons, carry a stick or an umbrella, and who, living side by side with a detested enemy, have not even the satisfaction of being able to return him blow for blow and wound for wound. I speak, of course, of those seven millions of Belgians, isolated from the rest of the world after the fall of Antwerp, who, after thirty months, still, with an admirable resolution, maintain their struggle against their conquerors.

* * * *

These are people who enjoy none of the heartening advantages of military life. They cannot so much as comfort themselves by reflecting that they are indirectly working for the war. Work has become hateful to them, since they know that it is the enemy who benefits by their labours. They can do nothing ; it is their duty to do

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nothing ; and at every moment starvation threatens them. It is forced idleness ; it is the "strike of patriotism." Nor have they, like us, the satisfaction of giving vent to their feelings or of hoisting their flags. Even their womenfolk have ceased to wear tri-colour cockades, so that they may thus escape the insults and violence of the German officers, who do not hesitate to tear them off in the open street. The National Anthem may no longer be played unless on exceptional occasions upon the organs of the churches. Lately a boy was condemned to three months imprisonment for having dared to whistle it in the street. No national fête may be held. It is a criminal offence for a shopkeeper to close his shop or to alter, for the occasion, the display in his window ; and to possess the portraits of King Albert and Queen Elizabeth has become a crime.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is possible that there may be among you people who believe that they are quite able to live happily without hearing "God Save the King" or seeing the Union Jack. These things are obviously nothing but symbols ; and of what value are symbols for those who possess the realities for which they stand ? So long as you are free to sing what you will and to wear in your buttonholes all the colours of the rainbow, it is, of course, open to you to adopt a superior attitude towards such "trifles." But let us suppose that the Germans were drilling in Trafalgar Square, and that their regiments were parading down the Strand, and tell me where you

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would find the "æsthete," the "intellectual," or the "pacifist" who would be bold enough any longer to smile at these "worn-out symbols of the past"—these holy relics of your national sentiment. Our Socialist workmen never sang the "Brabançonne" before the war. To-day they are singing it, in the teeth of their gaolers, while the trains, filled with those who are being deported, make their way towards Germany.

Having crushed all patriotic demonstrations throughout Belgium, the Germans have set themselves to the task of poisoning the spirit and corrupting the soul of our people. Since the Belgian newspapers have ceased to appear rather than submit to the German censorship, they have created and now subsidize a number of journals with patriotic titles, such as *La Belgique* and *Le Bruxellois*, printed in French and Flemish, in the columns of which the most infamous accusations are made against the Allies and the Belgian Government. They have also posted notices, even in the smallest provincial villages, which give news of the war, and in which they announce, amongst other falsehoods, that the Allies have abandoned their intention of setting Belgium free, and that King Albert has taken refuge in England. When one remembers that in Belgium, at the beginning of 1915, a copy of *The Times* cost as much as £4, and that to-day it is almost impossible to obtain a foreign newspaper, one asks oneself by what miracle of good sense and loyalty the people have remained deaf to such propaganda. And

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this to such a degree that when certain Belgians succeeded in crossing the frontier, they were amazed to find that the refugees and the English people in London were less optimistic than themselves. Through steadily believing the opposite of that which the posters and the German newspapers told them, the Belgians had come to believe no longer in anything but victories of the Allies. The check sustained last summer by the invasion of Rumania could alone give them a more correct idea of the situation. "It will be for this summer, no doubt," one of them said to me the other day, "but if another winter is necessary, they will wait, over there. We have acquired patience."

Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you, dare we, in the face of so much confidence and so stoical a resignation—dare we still complain that the war is a weariness, and that we have had enough of it? How may we "have enough of it," with the knowledge that is ours, with the pledges of victory which we possess, when there, out of that slough of lies and calumnies that the Germans have created, the voices of our friends cry to us: "Take your time. We will wait as long as may be necessary."

* * * *

Germany has not succeeded in destroying the soul of Belgium, but she has succeeded, to some extent, in ruining her people. She has systematically requisitioned their harvests, their cattle,

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their raw material, and their machinery—in short, she has emptied the country of all that was in it, as a gang of robbers might empty a well-found house. She has absorbed all our agricultural products, paralyzed our commerce, and utterly destroyed our national industries. The material wealth which she has thus carried off may not easily be estimated ; but it is possible to give you an approximate idea of the monetary imposts, taxes, and fines which she has levied during one year (from June, 1915, to June, 1916). These amount to the fabulous sum of twenty millions of pounds—though this is nearly six times the total of the ordinary direct taxes paid to the Belgian State before the war, when the country's prosperity was at its zenith. The inevitable consequences of this policy followed. At the end of two years 500,000 workmen were out of work and 3,500,000 persons — half the population — were threatened with starvation and were exposed to serious hardships, in spite of all the efforts of the Commission for Relief.

It was now that, in October last, the deportations of Belgian civilians began. As you know, the general condition of unemployment was only the excuse. All the healthy men between 17 and 55 years of age, rich or poor, whether they were in work or no, are now threatened with slavery. Already more than 200,000 of them have been taken. And those who refuse to sign a contract for work are sent either to the Western front, where, with blows and brutalities of every kind,

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they are forced to work for the Army, or else into Germany, where, in punishment camps, their captors do their utmost to crush their resistance by starvation. We have received the evidence, during the last two months, of hundreds of witnesses. Men who have been deported and who have proved unable to withstand the treatment which they have had to endure have been sent back, dying, into Belgium. Others have succeeded in escaping. We have seen some of these. We have spoken with them. All tell the same story.

Those who refuse to sign are subjected to a terrible regime. The Germans force them to work with blows of the rifle-butt or the bayonet. For all sustenance they give them each day two or three cups of acorn or beetroot soup. They are so hungry that they go at night to scratch among the refuse which their German gaolers throw out behind their huts. A fish-head or a bit of potato-peel is a delicacy which they share with scrupulous fairness and devour raw. Their clothes are in rags and they sleep on the damp earth. Many of them have gone mad. Those who are sent back into Belgium, to die in their own homes, look like old men, and their families have difficulty in recognizing them. Men from 20 to 30 years old have white hair; their backs are bent, their voices are harsh, their gaze is dull, and they walk with difficulty, dragging their feet. The Germans massacred 5,000 Belgian civilians in August and September, 1914; but to-day they are ruining

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the lives of tens of thousands of strong men, whose only crime is that they will not betray their country.

Ladies and gentlemen, confronted by such misery and horror, who amongst us may any longer complain? We are given rations; but what a feast would not our daily ration appear, not only in the eyes of these unfortunate people who have been deported, but even in those of the formerly rich Belgian townsmen! We are asked to work. But how might we refuse our services to our own country and to our own Government, while Belgian civilians refuse, at the cost of what savage martyrdom! to assist their enemies? We are asked to have patience, and to endure calmly and with good temper such hardships as the existing situation imposes upon us. How might we dare to hesitate in our response to this appeal, when we learn the heroic and supremely patriotic conduct of those who live in the conquered territory? Let those who doubt speak with those who have been deported. Let them read their letters. "We are two or three hundred men here. They cannot kill us all. *It would not be right were our lot better than that of our brothers in the trenches.* We cannot take a step without being menaced by the bayonets of our gaolers. *I am hungry . . . but I will never work for them.*" "Hold on!" writes the author of a pamphlet that has been smuggled out. "*Upon our steadfastness hangs the liberation of Belgium from slavery and ruin.* If they wish to

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carry us away, let them come and drag us one by one from our homes. Let no one offer himself, neither employer, nor workman, nor priest, nor clerk, neither the man who is out of work nor he who has employment. Let them arrest us all! *Rather all than a few! L'union fait la force!*"

* * * *

Ladies and gentlemen, when, last December, the German Government sought, by its shadowy proposals for peace, to weaken the Allies, it was not without some hesitation that the Belgians who had taken refuge abroad declined to consider the possibility of negotiations being begun. How, indeed, could they assume so great a responsibility without informing themselves upon the views of their brothers who were still in Belgium, for whom, if the struggle should be continued, the results must be so terrible? We therefore did our utmost to obtain a true idea of the state of mind existing in those parts of Belgium which were in the occupation of the enemy, and we became profoundly convinced that the Belgian nation, in spite of the miseries which it has suffered, is just as firmly resolved to persist to the end as are the English or the French peoples. All those who are clothed with religious and civil authority, from Cardinal Mercier down to the humblest village *curé*, and from the senators and deputies down to the smallest parish councillor, have preserved their patriotism without a stain. And the working classes, for whom, more than for anyone else, the

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present situation spells misery, show no less enthusiasm. Listen to the last sentence of that eloquent appeal which, at the beginning of the deportations, the workmen of Belgium addressed to the workmen of all nations: "Let our tortures be what they may, *we will not accept any peace which does not assure the independence of our country and the triumph of justice.*" Everywhere we find the same force, the same uncompromising determination. After thirty months of captivity, a prisoner of war lately wrote: "*Even if the war goes on for another five years, I would rather have it than an indecisive peace.*"

In occupied Belgium there are no pacifists. Nor, ladies and gentlemen, would there be any here, did not the remoteness of danger and the leisure which our freedom gives us, provide the theorists with an opportunity of building their castles in the air. There is nothing like a reign of terror for bringing about a union of forces, nor for awakening patriotism like the perpetual presence of a hated enemy. A German newspaper states that in less than one year 100,000 persons have been condemned by the military tribunals in Belgium. Already many hundreds of people have been condemned to death; and in nearly every case for reasons similar to those which brought about the tragic end of Miss Cavell.

Personally, I am convinced that if London endured the same regime, the number of English martyrs would be no less than that of the Belgian. I believe, indeed, that many of our "peace

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cranks" and "C.O.s" would be the very first to rush to arms should a German army attempt to descend upon England. At the beginning of the war we witnessed a great number of such conversions in France and Belgium. It would be, unfortunately, a dangerous experiment to make, and those who are in doubt upon this point will do well to profit by our experience. What is happening to-day in Belgium is a faithful picture of what would happen in England did we not adopt stringent measures for warding off the strokes of the enemy. There is no way out of this dilemma. To-day it is necessary to work with all one's heart for one's own country or be forced to work, against one's will, for Germany; to respond cheerfully to the appeal which our Government makes to us, or to subject ourselves to the persecutions of German officers; to serve our country as free men, or the Kaiser as his slaves.



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