

Towards the Goal

A Woman's Letter from the Front

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Mrs. Humphry Ward

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By
Mrs. Humphry Ward

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A WOMAN'S LETTER FROM THE FRONT

March 26, 1917.

DEAR MR. ROOSEVELT,

It may be now frankly confessed—(you, some time ago, gave me leave to publish your original letter, as it might seem opportune)—that it was you who gave the impulse last year, which led to the writing of the first series of Letters on *England's Efforts* in the war, which were published in book form in June, 1916. Your appeal found me in our quiet country house, busy with quite other work, and at first I thought it impossible that I could attempt so new a task as you proposed to me. But support and encouragement came from our own authorities, and like many other thousands of English women under orders, I could only go and do my best. I spent some time in the Munition areas, watching the enormous and rapid development of our war in-

dustries and of the astonishing part played in it by women; I was allowed to visit a portion of the Fleet, and finally, to spend twelve days in France, ten of them among the great supply bases and hospital camps, with two days at the British Headquarters, and on the front, near Poperinghe, and Richebourg St. Vaast.

The result was a short book which has been translated into many foreign tongues—French, Italian, Dutch, German, Russian, Portuguese, and Japanese,—which has brought me many American letters from many different States, and has been, perhaps, most widely read of all among our own people. For we all read newspapers, and we all forget them! In this vast and changing struggle, events huddle on each other, so that the new blurs and wipes out the old. There is always room—is there not?—for such a personal narrative as may recall to us the main outlines and the chief determining factors of a war, in which—often—everything seems to us in flux, and our eyes, amid the tumult of the stream, are apt to lose sight of the landmarks on its banks, and the signs of the approaching goal.

And now again—after a year—I have been attempting a similar task, with renewed and

cordial help from our authorities at home and abroad. And I venture to address these new Letters directly to yourself, as to that American of all others, to whom this second chapter of *England's Effort* may look for sympathy. Whither are we tending—your country and mine? Congress meets on April the 2d. Before this Letter appears great decisions will have been taken. I will not attempt to speculate. The logic of facts will sweep our nations together in some sort of intimate union—of that I have no doubt.

How much further, then, has Great Britain marched since the Spring of last year—how much nearer is she to the end? One can but answer such questions in the most fragmentary and tentative way, relying for the most part on the opinions and information of those who know, those who are in the van of action, at home and abroad, but also on one's own personal impressions of an incomparable scene. And every day, almost, at this breathless moment, the answer of yesterday may become obsolete. I left our Headquarters in France some days before the news of the Russian revolution reached London, and while the Somme retirement was still in its earlier stages. Immediately afterwards the events of one short

week transformed the whole political aspect of Europe, and may well prove to have changed the face of the war—although as to that, let there be no dogmatising yet! But before the pace becomes faster still, and before the unfolding of those great and perhaps final events we may now dimly foresee, let me try and seize the impressions of some memorable weeks and bring them to bear—so far as the war is concerned—on those questions which, in the present state of affairs, must interest you in America scarcely less than they interest us here. Where, in fact, do we stand?

Any kind of answer must begin with the Navy—for in the case of Great Britain, and indeed scarcely less in the case of the Allies, that is the foundation of everything. To yourself the facts will all be familiar—but for the benefit of those innumerable friends of the Allies in Europe and America whom I would fain reach with the help of your great name, I will run through a few of the recent—the ground—facts of the past year, as I myself ran through them a few days ago, before, with an Admiralty permit, I went down to one of the most interesting naval bases on our coast and found myself amid a group of men engaged night and day in grappling with the submarine

menace which treatens not only Great Britain, not only the Allies, but yourselves, and every neutral nation. It is well to go back to these facts. They are indeed worthy of this island nation, and her sea-born children.

To begin with, the *personnel* of the British Navy, which at the beginning of the war was 140,000, was last year 300,000. This year it is 400,000, or very nearly three times what it was before the war. Then as to ships—"If we were strong in capital ships at the beginning of the war," said Mr. Balfour, last September, "we are yet stronger now—absolutely and relatively—and in regard to cruisers and destroyers there is absolutely no comparison between our strength in 1914 and our strength now. There is no part of our naval strength in which we have not got a greater supply, and in some departments an incomparably greater supply, than we had on August 4, 1914. . . . The tonnage of the Navy has increased by well over a million tons since war began."

So Mr. Balfour, six months ago. Five months later, it fell to Sir Edward Carson to move the naval estimates, under pressure, as we all know, of the submarine anxiety. He spoke in the frankest and plainest language of that anxiety, as did the Prime Minister in his now

famous speech of February 22d, and as did the speakers in the House of Lords, Lord Lytton, Lord Curzon, and Lord Beresford, on the same date. *The attack is not yet checked. The danger is not over.* Still again—look at some of the facts!

In two years and a quarter of war:

Eight million men moved across the seas—almost without mishap.

Nine million and a half tons of explosives carried to our own armies and those of our allies.

Over a million horses and mules; and

Over forty-seven million gallons of petrol supplied to the armies.

And besides, twenty-five thousand ships have been examined for contraband of war, on the high seas, or in harbour, since the war began.

And at this, one must pause a moment to think—once again—what it means, to call up the familiar image of Britain's ships, large and small, scattered over the wide Atlantic and the approaches to the North Sea, watching there through winter and summer, storm and fair, and so carrying out, relentlessly, the blockade of Germany, through every circumstance often of danger and difficulty: with

every consideration for neutral interests that is compatible with this desperate war, in which the very existence of England is concerned; and without the sacrifice of a single life, unless it be the lives of British sailors, often lost in these boardings of passing ships, amid the darkness and storm of winter seas.

There, indeed, in these wave-beaten ships, as in the watching fleets of the English Admirals outside Toulon and Brest, while Napoleon was marching triumphantly about Europe, lies the root fact of the war. It is a commonplace, but one that has been "proved upon our pulses." Who does not remember the shock that went through England—and the civilised world—when the first partial news of the Battle of Jutland reached London, and we were told our own losses, before we knew either the losses of the enemy or the general result of the battle? It was neither fear, nor panic; but it was as though the nation, holding its breath, realised for the first time where, for it, lay the vital elements of being. The depths in us were stirred. We knew in very deed that we were the children of the sea!

And now again the depths are stirred. The development of the submarine attack has set

us a new and stern task, and we are "straitened till it be accomplished." The great battleships seem almost to have left the stage. In less than three months, said Sir Edward Carson, speaking on the 21st of February, 626,000 tons of British, neutral, and allied shipping had been destroyed. Since the beginning of the war we—Great Britain—have lost over two million tons of shipping, and our allies and the neutrals have lost almost as much. There is a certain shortage of food in Great Britain, and a shortage of many other things besides. Writing about the middle of February, an important German newspaper raised a shout of jubilation. "The whole sea was as if swept clean at one blow"—by the announcement of the intensified "blockade" of the first of February. So the German scribe. But again the facts shoot up—hard and irreducible, through the sea of comment. While the German newspapers were shouting to each other, the sea was so far from being "swept clean," that 12,000 ships had actually passed in and out of British ports in the first eighteen days of the "blockade." And at any moment during those days, at least 3,000 ships could have been found traversing the "danger zone," which the Germans imagined themselves to have

barred. One is reminded of the *Hamburger Nachrichten* last year, after the Zeppelin raid in January, 1916. "English industry lies in ruins," said that astonishing print. "The sea has been swept clean," says one of its brethren now. Yet all the while there, in the danger zone, whenever by day or night one turns one's thoughts to it, are the 3,000 ships; and there in the course of a fortnight are the 12,000 ships going and coming.

Yet all the same, as I have said before, there is danger and there is anxiety. The neutrals—save America—have been intimidated; they are keeping their ships in harbour; and to do without their tonnage is a serious matter for us. Meanwhile the best brains in naval England are at work, and one can feel the sailors straining at the leash. In the first eighteen days of February there were forty fights with submarines. The Navy talks very little about them, and says nothing of which it is not certain. But all the scientific resources, all the fighting brains of naval England are being brought to bear, and we at home—let us keep to our rations, the only thing we can do to help our men at sea.

. . . How this grey estuary spread before my eyes illustrates and illuminates the figures

I have been quoting! I am on the light cruiser of a famous Commodore, and I have just been creeping and climbing through a submarine. The waters round are crowded with those light craft, destroyers, submarines, mine-sweepers, trawlers, patrol-boats, on which for the moment, at any rate, the fortunes of the naval war turns. And take notice that they are all—or almost all—*new*; the very latest products of British shipyards. We have plenty of battleships—but “we must now build, as quickly as possible, the smaller craft, and the merchant ships we want,” says Sir Edward Carson. “Not a slip in the country will be empty during the coming months. Every rivet put into a ship will contribute to the defeat of Germany. And 47 per cent of the Merchant Service have already been armed. The riveters must indeed have been hard at work! This crowded scene carries me back to the Clyde where I was last year, to the new factories and workshops, with their ever-increasing throng of women, and to the marvellous work of the shipyards. No talk now of strikes, of a disaffected and revolutionary minority on the Clyde, as there was twelve months ago. The will of the nation has become as steel—to win the war. Throughout

England, as in these naval officers beside me, there is the same tense yet disciplined expectancy. As we lunch and talk on this cruiser at rest, messages come in perpetually; the cruiser itself is ready for the open sea, at an hour and a half's notice; the sea-planes pass out and come in over the mouth of the harbour on their voyages of discovery and report, and these destroyers and mine-sweepers that lie so quietly near us, will be out again to-night in the North Sea, grappling with every difficulty and facing every danger, in the true spirit of a wonderful service, while we land-folk sleep and eat in peace—grumbling, no doubt, with our morning newspaper and coffee, when any of the German destroyers who come out from Zeebrugge are allowed to get home with a whole skin. “What on earth is the Navy about?” Well, the Navy knows. Germany is doing her very worst, and will go on doing it—for a time. The line of defensive watch in the North Sea is long; the North Sea is a big place; the Germans often have the luck of the street-boy who rings a bell and runs away before the policeman comes up. But the Navy has no doubts. The situation, says one of my cheerful hosts, is quite “healthy” and we shall see “great things in

the coming months." We had better leave it at that!

Now let us look at these destroyers in another scene. It is the last day of February, and I find myself on a military steamer, bound for a French Port and on my way to the British Headquarters in France. With me is the same dear daughter who accompanied me last year as "dame secrétaire" on my first errand. The boat is crowded with soldiers, and before we reach the French shore we have listened to almost every song—old and new—in Tommy's repertory. There is even "Tipperary," a snatch, a ghost of "Tipperary," intermingled with many others, rising and falling, no one knows why, started now here, now there, and dying away again after a line or two. It is a draught going out to France for the first time, north countrymen, by their accent; and life-belts and submarines seem to amuse them hugely, to judge by the running fire of chaff that goes on. But, after a while, I cease to listen. I am thinking first of what awaits us on the farther shore, on which the lights are coming out, and of those interesting passes inviting us to G. H. Q. as "Government Guests," which lie safe in our hand-bags. And then my thoughts slip back to a conver-

sation of the day before, with Dr. Addison, the new Minister of Munitions.

A man in the prime of life, with whitening hair—prematurely white, for the face and figure are quite young still—and stamped, so far as expression and aspect are concerned, by those social and humane interests which first carried him into Parliament. I have been long concerned with Evening Play Centres for school-children in Hoxton, one of the most congested quarters of our East End. And seven years ago I began to hear of the young and public-spirited doctor and man of science, who had made himself a name and place in Hoxton, who had won the confidence of the people crowded in its unlovely streets, had worked for the poor and the sick, and the children of Hoxton, and had now beaten the Tory member, and was Hoxton's Liberal representative in the new Parliament elected in January, 1910, to deal with the Lords, after the throwing out of Lloyd George's famous Budget. Once or twice since, I had come across him in matters concerned with education—cripple schools and the like—when he was Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Education, immediately before the war. And now here was the doctor, the Hunterian Pro-

fessor, the social worker, the friend of schools and school-children, transformed into the fighting Minister of a great fighting Department, itself the creation of the war, only second—second—in its importance for the war, to the Admiralty and the War Office. And what a story the new Minister has to tell! I was myself for a fortnight of last year, the guest of the Ministry of Munitions, while Mr. Lloyd George was still its head, in some of the most important Munition areas; and I was then able to feel the current of hot energy, started by the first Minister running—not, of course, without local obstacles and animosities—through an electrified England. That was in February, 1916. Then, in August, came the astonishing speech of Mr. Montagu, on the development of the Munitions supply in one short year, as illustrated by the happenings of the Somme battlefield. And now, as successor to Mr. Montagu and Mr. Lloyd George, Dr. Addison sat in the Minister's chair, continuing the story. How true it is that circumstances at once discover and make the men! Given my own art, it is perhaps natural that the growth of personality is one of the most interesting things in the world to me. And as the Minister ran through the expan-

sions of his own Department, the aspect of the matter was especially plain to me. Starting from the manufacture of guns, ammunition, and explosives, and after pushing that to incredible figures, the necessities of its great task has led the Ministry to one forward step after another. Seeing that the supply of Munitions depends on the supply of raw material, it is now regulating the whole mineral supply of this country, and much of that of the Allies; it is about to work qualities of iron ore that have never been worked before; it is deciding over the length and breadth of the country, how much aluminum should be allowed to one firm, how much copper to another; it is producing steel for our Allies as well as for ourselves; it has taken over with time the supply of Motor Transport Vehicles for the War Office, and is now adding to it the provision of Railway Material here and abroad, and is dictating meanwhile to every engineering firm in the country which of its orders should come first, and which last. It is managing a whole gigantic industry with employees running into millions, half a million of them women, and managing it under wholly new conditions of humanity and forethought; it is housing and feeding and caring

for innumerable thousands; transforming from day to day, as by a kind of bywork, the industrial mind and training of multitudes, and laying the foundations of a new, and surely happier England, after the war; and—finally—it is adjusting, with, on the whole, great success, the rival claims of the factories and the trenches, sending more and more men from the workshops to the fighting-line, in proportion as the unskilled labour of the country of men and women, but especially of women—is drawn, more and more widely, into the service of a dwindling amount of skilled labour, more and more “diluted.” While the Minister’s vivid talk ranged over this immense field, one realised the truth of the saying—“It is by pumping that one draws water into one’s well”—in other words, it is action, and again action, that develops the strong man, and tests the weak one.

I recall particularly a little story of—lubricating oil! Lubricating oil, essential to the immense Motor Transport in the war, depends apparently upon two things—the shale from which the oil is extracted—the retorts in which it is manufactured. Two sets of employers, two sets of workers were concerned—each with their claim on railway-trucks; and no co-

ordination between the two. The shale lay waiting for the retorts; the retorts sat idle for lack of shale. But the Ministry stepped in; there was a conference in the Minister's room; a little good-will and organisation, and the trucks were pooled, the shale was brought to the retorts, the retorts were made available for the shale. Result—important increase in a product necessary to the war, and an important decrease in the expenses of production. So much for the Ministry on its home ground. Abroad, close to the front, which the Ministry of Munitions, under Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Montagu, covered last year with that vast supply of guns of all calibre, and ammunitions of all kinds, which contributed so vitally to win us the Battle of the Somme, and in its still further development is now assuring the safety and success of our armies as we pursue the German retreat—I came upon many traces of the present Minister in France, and all suggestive of the same quick and sympathetic intelligence.

. . . But the light is failing, and the shore is nearing. Life-belts are taken off, the destroyers have disappeared. We are on the quay, kindly welcomed by an officer from G. H. Q., who passes our bags rapidly through

the Custom House, and carries us off to a neighbouring hotel for the night, it being too late for the long drive to G. H. Q. We are in France again—and the great presence of the army is all about us. The quay crowded with soldiers, the port alive with ships, the grey-blue uniforms mingling with the khaki—after a year I see it again, and one's pulses quicken. The vast effort of England which last year had already reached so great a height, and has now, as all accounts testify, been so incredibly developed, is here once more, in visible action, before me.

The motor arrives early, and with our courteous officer who has charge of us in front, we are off, first, for one of the great camps I saw last year, and then for G. H. Q. itself. On the way, as we speed over the rolling-down country beyond the town, my eyes are keen to catch some of the new signs of the time. Here is the first—a railway line in process of doubling—and large numbers of men, some of them German prisoners, working at it; typical, both of the immense railway development all over the military zone, since last year, and of the extensive use now being made of prisoners' labour, in regions well behind the firing-line. They lift their heads as we pass,

looking with curiosity at the two ladies in the military car. Their flat round caps give them an odd similarity. It is as if one saw scores of the same face, differentiated here and there by a beard. A docile, hard-working crew, by all accounts, who give no trouble, and are managed largely by their N. C. O's. Are there some among them who saw the massacre at Dinant, the terrible things in Lorraine? Their placid, expressionless faces tell no tale.

But the miles have flown, and here already are the long lines of the camp. How pleasant to be greeted by some of the same officers! We go into the Headquarters Office, for a talk. "Grown? I should think we have," says Colonel ——. And, rapidly, he and one of his colleagues run through some of the additions and expansions. The Training-Camp has been practically doubled, or, rather, another training-camp has been added to the one that existed last year, and both are equipped with an increased number of special schools—an Artillery Training School, an Engineer Training School, a Lewis Gun School, an actual gas-chamber for the training of men in the use of their gas-helmets—and others, of which it is not possible to speak. "We have put through half a million of reinforcements

since you were here last." And close upon two million rations were issued last month! The veterinary accommodation has been much enlarged, and two Convalescent Horse Depots have been added—(it is good indeed to see with what kindness and thought the Army treats its horses)! But the most novel addition to the camp has been a Fat Factory for the production of fat—from which comes the glycerin used in explosives—from all the food refuse of the camp. The fat produced by the system, here and in England, has already provided glycerin for millions of eighteen-pounder shells; the problem of camp refuse, always a desperate one, has been solved; and as a commercial venture, the factory makes 250 per cent profit.

Undeterred by what we hear of the smells! we go off to see it, and the enthusiastic manager explains the unsavoury processes by which the bones and refuse of all the vast camp are boiled down into a white fat, that looks almost *eatable*, but is meant, as a matter of fact, to feed not men, but shells. Nor is that the only contribution to the fighting-line which the factory makes. All the cotton waste of the hospitals—the old dressings and bandage—come here, and after sterilisation and dis-

infection, go to England for guncotton. Was there ever a grimmer cycle than this, by which that which feeds and that which heals become in the end that which kills? But let me try to forget that side of it, and remember, rather, as we leave the smells behind, that the calcined bones become artificial manure, and go back again into the tortured fields of France, while other by-products of the factory help the peasants near to feed their pigs. And anything, however small, that helps the peasants of France in this war comforts one's heart.

We climb up to the high ground of the camp for a general view before we go on to G. H. Q., and I see it, as I saw it last year, spread under the March sunshine, among the sand and the pines—a wonderful sight. “Everything has grown, you see, except the staff!” says the Colonel smiling as we shake hands. “But we rub along!”

Then we are in the motor again, and at last the new G. H. Q.—how different from that I saw last year!—rises before us. We make our way into the town, and presently the car stops for a minute before a building, and while our officer goes within we retreat into a side street to wait. But my thoughts are

busy. For that building, of which the long side-front is still visible, is the brain of the British Army in France, and on the men who work there depend the fortunes of that distant line, where our brothers and sons are meeting face to face the horrors and foulnesses of war. How many women whose hearts hang on the war, whose all is there in daily and nightly jeopardy, read the words "British Headquarters" with an involuntary lift of soul, an invocation without words. Yet scarcely half a dozen women in this war—will ever see the actual spot. And here it is, under my eyes, the cold March sun shining fitfully on it, the sentry at the door, the khaki figures passing in and out. I picture to myself the room within, the news arriving of General Gough's advance on the Ancre,—of the rapidity of that German retreat as to which all Europe is speculating.

But we move on—to a quiet country house in a town garden—the Headquarters Mess of the Intelligence Department. Here I find among our kind hosts, men already known to me from my visit of the year before, men whose primary business it is to watch the enemy, who know where every German regiment and German Commander are, who,

through the aerial photography of our airmen are now acquainted with every step of the German retreat, and have already the photographs of his second line. All the information gathered from prisoners, and from innumerable other sources comes here; and the Department has its eye besides on everything that happens within the zone of our armies in France. For a woman to be received here is an exception—perhaps I may say an honour—of which I am rather tremulously aware. Can I make it worth while? But a little conversation with these earnest and able men make it clear that they have considered the matter like any other incident in the day's work. *England's Effort* has been useful, therefore, I am to be allowed again to see and write for myself; and therefore, what information can be given me as to the growth of our military power in France since last year will be given. It is not, of course, a question of war correspondence, which is not within a woman's powers. But it is a question of as much "seeing" as can be arranged for, combined with as much first-hand information as time and the censor allow. I begin to see my way.

The conversation at luncheon—the simplest of meals—and during a stroll afterwards is

thrilling indeed to us newcomers. "The coming summer's campaign *must* decide the issue of the war—though it may not see the end of it." "The issue of the war"—and the fate of Europe! There is no doubt here as to the final issue; but there is a resolute refusal to fix dates, or prophesy details. "Man for man, we are now the better army. Our strength is increasing month by month, while that of Germany is failing. Men and officers, who, a year ago were still insufficiently trained, are now seasoned troops, with nothing to learn from the Germans; and the troops recruited under the Military Service Act, now beginning to come out, are of surprisingly good quality." On such lines the talk ran and it is over all too soon.

Then we are in the motor again, bound for an aerodrome, forty or fifty miles away. We are late, and the last 27 kilometres fly by in 32 minutes. It is a rolling country, and there are steep descents and sharp climbs, through the thickly scattered and characteristic villages and small old towns of the Nord, villages crowded all of them with our men.

Presently, with a start, we find ourselves on a road which saw us last Spring—a year ago, to the day. The same blue distances,

the same glimpses of old towns in the hollows, the same touches of snow on the heights. At last, in the cold sunset light, we draw up at our destination. The wide aerodrome stretches before us—great hangars coloured so as to escape the notice of a Boche overhead—machines of all sizes rising and landing—coming out of the hangars, or returning to them for the night. Two of the officers in charge meet us, and we walk round with them, looking at the various types—some for fighting, some for observation; and understanding what I can! But the spirit of the men—that one can understand. “We are accumulating, concentrating now, for the summer offensive. Of course the Germans have been working hard, too. They have lots of new and improved machines. But when the test comes we are confident that we shall down them again, as we did on the Somme. For us, the all important thing is the fighting behind the enemy lines. Our object is to prevent the German machines from rising at all, to keep them down, while our airmen are reconnoitring along the fighting-line. Awfully dangerous work! Lots don’t come back. But what then? They will have done their job!”

The words were spoken so carelessly that

for a few seconds I did not realise their meaning. But there was that in the expression of the man who spoke them which showed there was no lack of realisation there. How often I have recalled them, with a sore heart in these recent weeks of heavy losses in the air-service!—losses due, I have no doubt, to the special claims upon it of the German retreat.

The conversation dropped a little till one of my companions, with a smile, pointed overhead. Three splendid biplanes were sailing above us, at a great height, bound southwards. "Back from the line!" said the officer beside me, and we watched them till they dipped and disappeared in the sunset clouds. Then tea and pleasant talk. The young men insist that D. shall make tea. This visit of two ladies is a unique event. For the moment, as she makes tea, in their sitting-room which is now full of men, there is an illusion of home.

Then we are off, for another fifty miles. Darkness comes on, the roads are unfamiliar. At last an avenue, and bright lights. We have reached the Visitors' Château, under the wing of G. H. Q.

MARY A. WARD.

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