THE WAR AND THE CHILDREN.[1]

BY CHARLOTTE M. MASON.

SIR,—This is a time of searchings of heart for everybody, and especially for us who teach. Not that we think ourselves of much importance; we are diffident enough, Heaven knows; it is not we who are important, but the war, which is, among other things, a revealer of spiritual values, has opened our eyes to the enormous national trust we hold in every class-room. "What of the precious future of France?" was a question put lately by a writer in *The Times Literary Supplement*, and the reply was a discussion of the books read by French children. We, too, regard our scholars, and consider "What of the future of England?" Each of us asks, humbly and dutifully "What wouldst Thou have me to do?"

Notwithstanding the overwhelming distress of nations, the outlook is hopeful and inspiring; more than life or death, want or fullness, pain or ease is the manner of men and women we are, and it seems to many of us that a wonderful thing has happened; reserves of human nature have been called to the front; people are more than we took them for; there is always a man ready to give his life for you or me; every one is generous; the four cardinal virtues seem to flourish on soil enriched by the blood of men. All this concerns us as schoolmasters (may the term include schoolmistresses?), chiefly because we shall come before our scholars in the new year with the sense that they are more than we used to think them; we shall look upon them not only with the reverence expressed in the old tag, but with respect for the enormous wealth of the human nature lodged in each of them. Then will follow the query. "Is what we are giving good enough?" and the further query, "What can we do to meet the demands of this great occasion?" By and by we shall perceive that a few problems are perplexing us all, and we may be sure that these same problems vex the boys and girls, *insouciants* as they seem. "Is the war right?" Here is a question that we can face with good courage, for never did nation wage a war more purely for righteousness' sake. "But

is any war right?" At once we are in deep waters. We may not have the courage to say with Wordsworth—

> Yea, Carnage is Thy daughter,

but we may say that the Prince of Peace Himself announced that He came, not to send peace, but a sword; and so it has been—a sword, spiritual or material, has carved a way for every advance of the kingdom of God. "Yes, I know, martyrs and missionaries and things; but killing people is different," says our young interlocutor, and we are faced with the awful antithesis—carnage, heaps of the slain 6ft. high, and Christianity: we must have the courage of our convictions to bottom this quagmire of thought, and we shall come out on the other side with the triumphant certainty that flesh does not matter; it is the spirit that liveth, and all that the fallen men were they still are—brave souls and dutiful, loving, and wise. Even had they been living on a lower level than they might have kept, why perhaps this last splendid act of dying for love and pity and fair play, instead of being a calamity, is a promotion. For manifestly people do not leave off; all that makes a man what he is, his kindness or harshness, intelligence or

dullness, his greed or liberality, are not of the flesh, but of the spirit, which cannot die, because there is nothing in spirit capable of dying; and our gallant soldiers who drop under the enemies' shells simply go on with a life, indestructible and very full. That they fall in crowds, in multitudes, on whichever side, need not dismay us, for God is our Father all the more evidently in these days of perplexity and distress, and He deals with His children one by one; we may be sure that of each of them who has done well it may be said,—

> Then long eternity shall greet (his) bliss
> With an individual kiss,

and is it not a well-doing that they too enter the invisible gates with garments rolled in blood—whether it be, as we believe in our own case, in order that righteousness and peace shall meet together, or fighting for the patriotic, if mistaken, idea that the "Fatherland" is called to rule the world?

So far we can, at any rate, grope our way, but if we have succeeded in getting into the confidence of our young persons we shall be bombarded with a further string of questions. Children are very much aware that they are standing at the source of great issues and they want to know, not what to think—perhaps we are not allowed to tell them that—but what principles

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should guide their thoughts. We shall probably be asked next: "Then are we, the Allies, jolly well right about the war, and the other fellows all wrong?" Again we make our feeble attempt to justify the ways of God to men: we may say that history, whether in or out of the Bible, seems to show that God occasionally used peoples as instruments for each other's chastisement, that whom He loveth He chasteneth; and the nation which has been given over to cowardly indolence or the pursuit of prosperity, after it has been chastened is apt to say, I will arise and go to my Father, I will seek the things that belong to the mind, the heart, the spirit, not the mere creature comforts of the flesh. Prussia itself is a case in point; a hundred years ago, crushed by the Napoleonic wars, she was sunk in the Slough of Despond, but her teachers were not hidden from her sight; by the voices of history, poetry, philosophy, ethics, she was stimulated to a new and higher life, and entered upon that age of *Kultur*, upon whose glory she still, like the impoverished descendant of a great house, continues to plume herself.

"But, I say, don't we go in just as much for getting on and doing ourselves well as those fellows did?" Yes, indeed, and because of our sin we suffer; if we, who did not provoke the war, but went into it very unwillingly from motives of good faith, may regard the war as the act of God, yet we must understand that because we, too, have offended we also suffer. We are rather like a school prefect who has been implicated in a "row"; his business is to castigate, but he also feels the rod. The war has awakened the soul of the nation and given to most of us high ideals, but peace also has its ideals and vocations, and we must look for these, living as people for whom other men have died. We shall probably find that commercial greed clouds our national honour, and that we offend by an arrogance which is intolerable to other nations; who knows but that after this experience our schoolmasters may instruct us in that humility which is the sign-manual of the Christian character, a humility which is not relative, but absolute, which leads a man not to think mean things of himself as compared with So-and-so, but rather not to

think of himself at all because there is so much that is more interesting to think about; that is, his humility is synonymous with simplicity.

"All the same," says he, "we may want a licking for some things, but we are not confounded asses like them; yet they think they're all right!" Our persis-
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tent young friend brings another difficult problem before us, but the war itself would be worth while if it induce us as a nation to face that problem. We acknowledge some restraint in our actions, even in our speech, but we believe we are all free to think what we choose, whereas the issues of life may hang upon our power of examining, and accepting or rejecting, that very initial notion with which our thoughts at the moment play:—"See that ye *enter* not into temptation," it has been said; and the law which requires us to examine notions that are presented to us obtains not only in morals and science, but in all matters intellectual and spiritual. We all know something of the genesis of the "swelled head" or megalomania which ails the enemy, whom we believe to be fine fellows all the same. We know how Nietzsche began it with his palatable doctrine of the Superman and how Treitschke glorified the individual superman with a fine patriotism as a member of the Superstate, *Deutschland über Alles*; and, again, how the Militarists blew up this bubble of popular opinion for their own ends.

We Britons are not so easily puffed up, whether because of our common sense or our national phlegm, but let us remember that we too have gone mad; more than once delirous [sic] months have befallen us. Let us read "Peveril of the Peak" again, with the note on the infamous Colonel Blood in which we get the benefit of Scott's legal mind—and we shall understand the better what has happened in Germany. Now, the point I wish to make is that this sort of delirium is criminal, and the person affected by it is punishable for crime, whether it be the jealous lover who shoots his rival or the nation that makes aggressive war. We may not take notions into our heads because we choose or because other people have adopted them; neither may we "follow our lights"; we know how the prophets of old condemned the sinners who did that which was right in their own eyes; and this precisely is the claim of the moral anarchist; he does that which he thinks right. Probably no one fails to do what is right in his own eyes, because the natural action of our vaunted "reason" is to justify any notion, right or wrong, which we choose to accept, as well as all action which is the outcome of that notion. Every German can prove that he does well to be angry with England, that he has as much title to our belongings as we have; his arguments are so logical that we half agree with him until we recollect that our German friend should have begun by saying to himself, "Thou shalt not
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covet." That clears the ground; all the talk about a right to a place in the sun, a mission to educate and elevate the world, vanishes like a bubble that is pricked.

Perhaps the tremendous object lesson of a nation gone astray may help us to see that the end of education is the power to form a right judgment in all things; that to think amiss is to do amiss; that a regulated will instructed by conscience must determine the notions we receive; because, once let a notion in and it behaves in its own way and brings about its proper results; and because, again, we always have a moment of leisure in which to decide on the claims of a new notion before we let it in, but, once established in the seat of our understanding, very few of us are able to eject an idea even if we come to doubt its validity. We shall be no doubt bombarded with further knotty questions, but the consideration of even these few may give us

a sort of objective in our educational work; we shall realise more fully because of the war how much is included in a person; and from this new point of view we shall see that the proper study of mankind is man; that every neophyte wants some definite instruction about the behaviour of his own powers; and that there is no short road to a right judgment. Schooldays must afford scope for the wide and ordered reading which should help towards just thinking.

Let me say a word as to a more obvious way of dealing with the situation. We are all desirous to help and are just a little envious of persons who find the right thing to do. Now the lady who has thought of telling for children the history of the war in "Gallant Deeds" has chanced on an exquisitely right thing to do. That we should have produced a breed of heroes, whose gallant deeds are unsurpassed if not unequalled in the whole of our proud annals, is not a negligible fact. Children should have their fill of the glory and beauty of it; trust them to point the moral; boys (and girls too) will realise that it is a great thing to be living in great times, that it would be indeed shameful to be either ignorant or unready for any heroic part that may come their way. But all this infallible doctrine of patriotism and heroism comes incidentally; we are made so; and when we fail it is because in our schooldays or after we have been taught amiss. We need not try to inflate young people with notions of the greatness of England; our business will rather be to put in place of "high-falutin'" talk clear concepts of duty and the zeal of service.

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I have ventured, as perhaps the *doyen* amongst acting teachers, to suggest a few of the principles which should guide us at this critical time; other teachers will, no doubt, amplify and correct. As my apology, let me offer Wordsworth's happy lines:—

> And may it not be hoped, that, placed by age
> In like removal, tranquil though severe,
> We are not so removed for utter loss …
> But for some favour, suited to our need?
> What more than that the severing should confer
> That power to commune with the invisible world,
> And hear the mighty stream of tendency
> Uttering, for elevation of our thought,
> A clear sonorous voice.

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