

FRANCE!

BY ROLAND HUGINS.

THERE are times when we have to speak sharply to those we love best. The friends of France will remonstrate with her, and the sincerer their affection the plainer will be their speech.

For France is living in a dream, wrapped in illusion. Because she suffers much she thinks her cause is just, and because her soul is high she imagines her deed is good. Every nation at war tends to idealize its motives, and this is particularly true of this world-war,—possibly just for the reason that most of its causes were selfish. The nations enlist under the banners of truth and righteousness, of humanity and pity, of liberty and civilization. But the discerning everywhere see through the sham. In England there are people who call this sort of thing “tosh,” and in America there are many who call it “buncombe.” In most countries these grandiose sentiments are not taken with entire seriousness; but with you, apparently, yes. No motive is too altruistic or too noble for you to proclaim. You furnish the world an example of national self-deception.

The truth is often like a shower of ice-water. It is gratifying to vaunt the glory of France or to inveigh against the wickedness of the enemy; but it is not so pleasant to talk of secret treaties, of Russian securities held by French investors, of the subjugation of Morocco, or of the intrigues of the Colonial party. Yet the one is ebullitions of the war spirit, while the other represents the realities of history. The French are a proud, a gifted, and a sensitive race. But does your pride exempt you from facing the facts? Why is it that you ignore or slur over aspects of this struggle which are so desperately clear to an outsider?

Any sane discussion of the Part France is playing in the war must center about the Franco-Russian alliance. That is the cardinal

fact. A quarrel breaks out between Serbia and Austria-Hungary. The occasion is the murder of the Austrian heir, but the real dispute is the balance of power in the Balkans. To settle the supremacy of the Near East, Germany and Russia fly at one another's throats. But the West is dragged in, and the whole world flames up,—for what reason? Because France acts with Russia. France makes Russian interests, Russian designs, Russian ambitions, her own.

G. Lowes Dickinson calls this long-standing bargain of yours with the Terror in the North an "unholy alliance." But let that go for the moment. The motives which prompted France to champion Russia are a separate question. First of all let us agree on the simple fact that France's action was conditioned on that of her ally. There has been a notable lack of straightforwardness in discussing this point; and some of you have tried to delude yourselves into the notion that you were wantonly attacked. At the beginning of the war, for example, your political and military leaders showed the greatest concern not to commit any act of "aggression." French troops were withdrawn ten kilometers behind the frontier. Was this ostrich-like act of innocence undertaken to impress the French populace, or to impress the outside world? Can you deny that France was already committed to fight for her northern ally? Was there anything at all which Germany could have done, or left undone, which would have kept you out?

On July 29, 1914, the Russian ambassador at Paris telegraphed to Sazonof: "Viviani has just confirmed to me the French government's firm determination to act in concert with Russia. This determination is upheld by all classes of society and by the political parties, including the Radical Socialists" (Russian Orange Book, No. 55). The same day Sazonof telegraphed back: "Please inform the French government...that we are sincerely grateful to them for the declaration which the French ambassador made me on their behalf, to the effect that we could count clearly upon the assistance of our ally, France. In the existing circumstances, that declaration is especially valuable to us" (Orange Book, No. 58).

These quotations are from a hundred possible. Every line in both the Russian Orange Book and the French Yellow Book confirms the allegiance of France to Russia. Every statesman in Europe knew what your attitude would be. The Germans understood it; yet they pressed you for an open statement of your intentions. Your only answer was to mobilize the entire army and the fleet.

Viviani acted throughout in complete subservience to Russia.

At the same time he acted with a remarkable absence of candor toward Germany. Let me illustrate. On July 31 he informed his ambassador at St. Petersburg that, "Baron von Schoen (German ambassador at Paris) finally asked me, in the name of his government, what the attitude of France would be in case of a war between Germany and Russia. He told me that he would come for my reply to-morrow (Saturday) at 1 o'clock. *I have no intention of making any statement to him on this subject*, and I shall confine myself to telling him that France will have regard to her interests. The government of the Republic need not indeed give any account of her intentions except to her ally" (French Yellow Book, No. 117). On the following day, August 1, Viviani had the audacity to telegraph to his ambassadors abroad that, "This attitude of breaking off diplomatic relations without direct dispute, and although he (i. e., Baron von Schoen) *has not received any definitely negative answer*, is characteristic of the determination of Germany to make war against France" (Yellow Book, No. 120). How, in the name of Janus, was Germany to receive "any definitely negative answer" if Viviani refused to "make any statement on this subject"? What would you call this sort of thing in ordinary affairs,—hypocrisy or deceit? This attempt to cloak hostile designs with silence deceives no one; it was perfectly clear what French "intentions" were. You intended to strike Germany from the west, should she be at war with Russia in the east.

Let us not try to evade a patent truth. The historical fact, from which there is no escape, is that you were bound to go in if Russia went in. Perhaps your treaty made it obligatory on you to fight by the side of Russia; in any event there was no disposition on the part of your leaders to keep the sword sheathed. All that talk in the days of the crisis about patrols crossing the frontiers, about German troops firing on French outposts, and about French aeroplanes flying over German territory, does not touch the core of the situation. These allegations, from whichever side, are mere banalities and pose. The die was cast; it had been cast for years. Even if you impute the most sinister motives to Germany, even if you prove to your own satisfaction that she started on a career of world domination, you do not demonstrate that she wanted to make war on France in 1914. Whatever her motives, Germany would have preferred to deal with one enemy at a time, would she not? It would have been far better for her, you must acknowledge, to fight Russia alone, than to grapple at the same time with Russia, France, England, and all their allies.

For you, therefore, to declare that you suffered an unprovoked attack, and that you are now purely on the defensive, is to fall short of an honest avowal. Germany, it is true, sent you an ultimatum and put a time-limit on your preparations; and at the end of that limit she invaded your territory. These, however, were acts necessary to her plan of strategy. She knew you were bent on fighting. Why should she not seize the initial advantage? If you persist in describing yourselves as being on the defensive it is merely because no nation ever admits that it is acting on the aggressive. Of this there is a striking example in French history. Napoleon Bonaparte toyed with the notion that he was merely defending himself. In Sir Walter Scott's "Life of Napoleon" the following conversation between the emperor and his minister Decrès is recorded. The conversation takes place immediately after Napoleon's marriage with Maria Louisa.

Napoleon—"The good citizens rejoice sincerely at my marriage, monsieur?"

Decrès—"Very much, Sire."

Napoleon—"I understand they think the lion will go to slumber, ha?"

Decrès—"To speak the truth, Sire, they entertain some hopes of that nature."

Napoleon—"They are mistaken: yet it is not the fault of the lion: slumber would be as agreeable to him as to others. But see you not that while I have the air of being the attacking party, I am, in fact, acting only on the defensive?"

There has been altogether too much use made of this phrase "on the defensive." If you, France, are on the defensive, it is only in that attenuated sense that a victory of Germany over Russia would have tilted the balance of power in favor of Germany. But why were you interested in the balance of power? Why were you, the innocent and idealistic French, interested in wars and military combinations? The whole question, you see, simmers down to this: Why were you in alliance with Russia?

Surely it was not on account of sympathy with the Russian government. There were never two more oddly assorted yoke-mates than republican, intellectual France, and autocratic, illiterate Russia. Whatever way you look at it, Russia is the most backward power of Europe, industrially, educationally and politically. A great deal of nonsense has been published in France lately, the purpose of which is to eulogize the Russians, and to paint in bright colors the drab reality. Attention has been called

to Russian art, music, literature. But this is simply to magnify the exceptional. Every one admits that Muscovite culture has produced a few rare flowers, just as every one admits that potentially the Russian civilization has admirable aspects, realizable after it has emerged from medievalism. The typical Russia of to-day, however, is not a few revolutionists, nor a handful of intellectuals excoriating their government. The typical Russia is the secret police, the superstitious millions, the military despotism, the Siberia of exile, the grave of a dozen nationalities, and the gehenna of the Jews. That is Russia as the whole world knows it, and no amount of sentiment or whitewash can hide the truth. The whole world knows, too, that Russia changes, and can change, very slowly.

Yet into the arms of this cruel and unscrupulous bureaucracy France threw herself unreservedly. She formed with the Bear of the North a binding military alliance which has brought her, at the last, to the supreme ordeal and sacrifice she now undergoes. Her motive could not have been fear. A France pacific in aim, and unallied with great military powers, would have been no more the object of suspicion, or the victim of aggressive designs, than would Switzerland. Germany would not have molested a non-militarist France, for Germany had defeated France thoroughly, and extirpated French influence from her internal politics. There's the rub! Germany had defeated France in 1870-71. She had humbled France as she had never been humbled before. She had taken Alsace-Lorraine, borderland provinces, neither exactly French nor exactly German, as the visible badge of her triumph. Formerly these two provinces belonged to the German empire, and were taken in the midst of peaceful conditions without even a show of right. Lorraine became French, but Alsace remained German with the exception of a small district on the southern frontier.

France formed the alliance with Russia when stinging from the bitterness of that defeat of 1870-71. Russia afforded the hope of an ultimate revenge. Russia was courted, flattered, financed. French gold bought Russian securities in such quantities that the whole of thrifty France came to have an interest in maintaining the political *mésalliance*.

Bismarck said that France would never forgive Germany her victories. Apparently he spoke the truth. France fights to restore Alsace-Lorraine. Yet is it because the inhabitants of that territory have been oppressed? You will complain that when your troops entered Alsace at the beginning of the war they were treated to poisoned wells and were shot in the back by the peasants. The

Alsations are among the bravest and most loyal of German soldiers,—these Alsations you wanted to “liberate.” You fight to recover provinces which do not want to be recovered—for the final glory of France. *La Revanche*! Yet after all is not revenge a very human motive?

Yes, revenge is very human, but it can hardly serve as an excuse for dragging the West into a war over the Balkans, and for decimating the whole of Europe. Revenge is supposed to be more the attribute of the Red Indian than of the civilized modern. Why should France alone be incapable of forgetting a past defeat? Why should she cherish the spark of hatred for more than a generation, waiting the hour to blow it into flame? The alignment in this war shows how many hatreds, how many revenges, have been foregone. Russia fights by the side of England and Japan: she forgets Crimea and the Yalu. Germany and Austria, once enemies, are not merely allies, they are a single unit of military administration. Italy was a member of the Triple Alliance (although no one can recall the fact without shame). Bulgaria linked with Turkey,—who would have thought it possible? You, France, you alone, pursued a policy of historic revenge. You alone found a wounded pride too sore for healing. For forty years the black ribbons of mourning fluttered from the statue of Strassburg. You have taken them off now,—to place them on a million graves.

But you did not want war, you are protesting. The mass of the French people were pacific. That must be admitted. But the mass of people in no country wanted war. The Germans did not want it; the English did not want it; the Russians knew nothing about it. Yet they all accepted it after it came; and now they give their lives gladly for their country. Oddly enough the very fact that the present war was made by governments rallies support to those governments, and enlists the loyalty of the peoples. You can see in your own nation how the paradox works. The French, you say, generally scorned war,—*C'est trop bête, la guerre*. Therefore when the war came they were convinced that it was not of their own making. It must be some one's fault. And whose but the enemy's? It must have been the vile Germans, the contemptible Boche, who brought this about. In war-time we completely forget the Biblical injunction about the beam in our own eye.

Yet after all the French people must be held responsible for the actions of their government. Possibly many of you did not realize where the alliance with Russia and the policy of colonial expansion would ultimately lead you. You may have been hypnotized by the

banner of *La Revanche* and the call of *La Gloire*. But you have a republican government; you are a democracy. There has been in France for a generation a strong war party. In the last decade or two, through all the kaleidoscopic changes of your politics, it has been apparent that this party of "aggressive patriotism" was gaining strength, gathering power. This effected the *entente* with England. It engineered the adventure in Algeria, and later managed the strangulation of Morocco. It maintained a strong financial interest in the blood-stained *concessionaire* system in the French and Belgian Congo. It constantly worked to embitter Anglo-German relations,—an effort ably abetted by the imperialist party in Britain. It undermined every attempt to achieve a reconciliation between France and Germany, and it brought about the ruin of Caillaux. In other words, the Colonial party, the Chauvinist party, was continuously successful in its designs. Although some of the most patriotic and far-sighted statesmen in France never ceased to combat it and the interests it represented, they were not able to break its grip. You had, indeed, a popular test of its power just previous to the outbreak of the war, in the elections on the Three Year Law. The Three Year Law was sustained. The militarists had won. The "New France," the France of aggressive temper, of nationalistic bombast, had been approved.

There was, I submit, a discernible downward trend in the policies of the successive governments under the Third Republic, and to some extent a decay in French sentiment. There have been times when France stood for liberty, equality and fraternity, and was ready to make great sacrifices for unselfish ends. But the France which battles to recover Alsace-Lorraine and to enthrone the Russian Czar in Constantinople, has drifted a long way from the ideals of the Revolution; just as the England of Grey and Asquith is far different from the England of Cobden, Bright and Palmerston. Indeed this war could not have happened had there not been a distinct deterioration in the tone of European politics. All sentiment was squeezed out of international relations, and along with it most of the principle. One indication was the support given by the Liberal West to the Russian bureaucracy, at a time when that bureaucracy was menaced by Liberal revolt at home. Another proof was the cynical abandonment of the weaker nations and the colored races. Morocco, the Congo, Finland, Persia, the Balkans! These outrages never would have been tolerated by any European civilization that was not preoccupied with selfish and sinister plots and counterplots. Things are now at such a pass that you are able

to laud in the most fulsome terms an Italy which bargains away its honor, enters upon a career of national piracy, and attacks its own allies in their hour of supreme peril. There has been a debacle in morals.

This "New France" is the worst France since the seventies, since the France of Paul Déroulède. You have revived that old lust for military glory which France, through all her history, has never been able quite to uproot. That is the heart of the matter. It will not do to picture yourselves as the good white knight forced to buckle on armor to meet the "Prussian menace." The obvious historical facts disprove the assertion. There has never been for you a Prussian menace. In the last forty years you, a people with a rapidly falling birth-rate and not essentially commercial, entered on a policy of colonial expansion. Germany, with more right, did the same thing. But you succeeded in acquiring territory while she, relatively, failed. But has she ever balked you in your enterprises? Quite the contrary. The spurs of the French chanticleer proved sharper and more annoying than the beak of the German eagle. Remember Morocco! In all those forty years the Mailed Fist was not once lifted against you. It would not have struck now had you not challenged the very existence of Germany by the alliances with Russia and England. What a masterly stroke of statecraft it was, this placing of Germany in a military vise! Your leaders could not resist that temptation. They saw a France rejuvenated, reborn, triumphant! And the soul of the French rose to the vision.

Well, you have the glory already, though not the victory. No one of the Allies has made so splendid a showing of military prowess and vigor. But at what a cost in lives and human agony! No nation ever bought its laurels more dearly. And who can tell what sacrifices you may yet be called upon to make? How idle it is, after all, to reproach the French! You are intoxicated; the madness is in your blood. It is too late to turn back now; you must see this through to the bitter end. Yet the whole world grieves for you, because the whole world loves you. It loves you not for your ambitions or your bellicose moods, but for the wholesome sanity of your life in times of peace, for your gaiety and wit, because of your intellectual and artistic brilliance, because you are, in a word, the most Greek of modern nations. Americans especially hold you dear, for they have not forgotten those flashes of sympathy you have shown for the ideals which America, in a blundering way, is trying to realize. We see you now as the most pitiable figure in this world

war, because you suffer so much and with the least need. Our sympathy is not less because you have, for the moment, turned your back on the great ideals of human progress. You are like a beautiful woman we have loved and who has betrayed our loyalty, and we look on you and think, how can you prove so false and be so fair. The fact that you suffer for your own sins as well as for the sins of others only makes the heartbreak heavier. Like France herself we bow our heads to mourn your irrevocable dead and unreturning brave.