"HAI, JOE, WHERE ARE YOU MARCHING?"
A STUDY OF WAR: BY WILL LEVINGTON COMFORT

LABOR-GANG was trenching for tile in a near field and I went to the boss to hire one of his men. Of course I could have one, he said, remarking that they were treading on one another’s feet, as it were: . . .

"Take Joe, over there. . . . Hai, Joe!"

A derby hat at any season is unmitigated, but in the first days of August, in the splendid fury of summer, this approach was not unlike the passing of a kitchen-range. Joe was clapped in it. The whole field had a pent and airless look—from this crown of labor, heavy, sagging and mossy. I inquired of the boss if Joe were hopelessly addicted. He feared so, but added:

"You’ll forget that. Joe’s a bull with a pick."

I led him to the house and brought forth a wide light straw. In firm quiet manner, I took the bleak hearse from his head and hung it from a projecting stone high against the cobbled masonry of the stable, wondering if it would affect the pigeon-crosses, as Jacob’s rods of hazel and chestnut at the water-troughs ring-streaked the new-born calves. Joe’s troubled face looked less lardy under the straw-thatch, though his eyes turned often to the cobble work. In the afternoon, I found the straw hat hanging there, too gentle and humane to alter Nature in any way, unless to puzzle the hawks for a day or two, and stimulate the spiders to new manners of suspensions. The derby was back in place, clamped solid under the arc of the pick.

The idea was to shelve a Roman path from the shore to the top of the clay-bluff, a fifty-foot rise. Joe, comprehending presently, tore loose at the bank with a brute strength altogether new to me. I regarded him frequently and with alarm lest he turn blue. He could forget himself in that rending labor, as one at his best forgets the instrument when typing with machine. Labor, the heaviest and least inspiring, yet it filled him so that he asked no more. Having found his work, he lost himself and the illusion, time; gave himself to his task—a celestial profit in that mystery which touches the spirit of creativeness and silently fits a man to live indeed.

It was the children who found out that Joe was Russian; that he
had been in this country for a year, had a wife and baby boy at home, shortly to be sent for. In the afternoons, they would fill his dinner-box with tomatoes, radishes and cucumbers. Meanwhile the path shadowed forth from the bluff, and Joe paved it with gravel from the beach. I found it good to be with him from time to time, found possibly something of that excellent simplicity which Tolstoi turned back to re-discover. He recalled to my mind Manchuria, too, the Christless havoc of the war-days there, and the morning I awakened to hear a brigade of his fellow-peasants shouting forth its soul in song—singing, it seemed to me, as men never sang before, led singing to the slaughter of Liaoyang—faces like Joe's, miles of them, decent simple men, the stuff to make gods from, and murdered like a pestilence of vermin a few days afterward, not by the Japanese, but by the debauched appetites of their princes.

And now Russia was at it again, all Europe in frightful demolition, and the poor of the world to pay. First the flower of the people, then the stalk—all but the root to go. Every ship and shell, the last confiscations and the first by the strong hands of war, indemnities demanded by victor, wounds of pride, the cessations of almighty trade, even the infringements of neutrality, to be paid by the poor of the world—the bewildered and hunger-driven poor, first in blood and then in famine and labor. And from the undermen, from the maimed and the heavy-laden must the earth be replenished again.

A last time. . . .

It was one of the children who very recently asked Joe if he would have to go away and fight. His pick poised and then lowered with its own weight. His hard rounded palms opened to the sky. A look of childish terror came into his face.

"No—no—no!" he said, shaking his head, as a child aroused from evil dream. I saw that there was added terror, because the little boy had spoken it.

It signified the destruction of all he had worked for, the wrecking of his dream. Not vague, nor dull, nor greedy, this dream—a clear, clean home-making, labor-giving conception rather; a dream that had found its form through thousands of tons of labor, hewn and graven in earth-clay, but clearly done in the sight of God, I think, an equitable holding.

It was not the fear of war, but the fear he would be called. Across the world, but still cornered. In the heart of a strange country, yet he was not his own law. . . . Joe lived with desperate frugality, slept in the corner of a factory, yet every stroke of his strong hand was constructive and not for self, done with simple valor for a woman
and child. He was established in the beginnings of individuality, because he worked for others; heroically on his way, requiring no sentiment to call forth the honor of worthy men. For there is but one path. Genius nor prophet need ask to be more whole-heartedly on the way. One path without beginning and without end, but every path runs two ways. Those who rise against the grade, who face the East, are brothers.

Yesterday, he touched the old hat as I approached, leaned the pick-handle against the rim of the trench for he was hip-deep in the ground, and rolled a cigarette, the one fine thing that Joe does with his hands.

"I go back to Russia," he said, quietly.
"To your family, Joe?" I asked.
"No—to fight."

No terror now, not even the opposite swing to apathy. The call had come, the dream was ended, his prayer failed, his entity lost. The pressure of centuries had prevailed upon the beginnings of his personal spirit. . . . He worked until six as usual, said good-bye as usual. The children ate their supper in silence. Joe meant Russia and world-war to them; to us all, the war was more intimate and horrible. . . . "In a space of fifty square yards," I read from a Belgian chronicle, "the bodies of two hundred Germans lay crying for burial."

"Why, that’s just the size of the vegetable garden," said one of the children.

At the end of dusk that night, last night, I went out alone to the edge of the bluff. Stillness, save for the crickets and cicadas; the trees still and the sky pure, the white magnolias blooming again. The Lake tranced the last of the light; lakes of corn were a silent background; children laughed in the distance among the pleasant lights of the neighboring cottages. The two noblest planets seen from earth were in the sky and no others yet, a rare visitation—Jupiter rising in the East, Venus setting in the West. The land teemed with richness and peace; and the white immortal reflections in the sky completed the globe of promise. Yet fifty years from now they will say (never quite comprehending) of this waning summer of nineteen fourteen, "In the midst of that year, all Europe went suddenly insane." . . .

A last time.

HOW clear it is that lawless ego turns insane—and yet, so long have the multitudes lost themselves in obedience to a few families that have never learned to govern themselves, much less their race; the many fallen victim often to imperial sons who have not the intelligence to keep themselves clean, mere galvanisms of degraded
passions. Inbred, luxury-lapped, world-fattened princes, played upon by every illusion and destructive force of the world of matter, nurtured in nests of softening, out of which any common man, not stupid, would pluck his own son as from a net of the devil; and the fortunes of whole races of men in the hands of such decadents—down-grade men, their backs to the East, drawn not to Heaven nor any ideal, but like other brute material, answering with little or no complication, the pull of the earth's center. Before God, that man is king only who has mastered himself, and this is the last time for the multitudes to be slaughtered and betrayed by the mock divinity of war-lords.

It was very clear (though I had been unable to perceive it before this rending of Europe and the world) that there must be a great war to end war. In no other way was that master of lies to be destroyed—that the only safe peace is in the presence of great armaments. All the seers and prophets of the world could not make themselves heard in the din of gun practice and riveting armor plate. The poor will die and the poor will pay, and then the poor will speak—that is the high and thrilling hope of this hour. Peace, not as a policy, but as a principle—the old love of man for his neighbor—that is the very essence of our future welfare and nobility. It is tragically clear now that war, in its very nature, could not die a lingering death, but must die with violence—a passing that will rend the world.

A passing, too, of the last imperial house, and all the barbarism and flunkeyism appertaining; for the spiritual deformity of kings is the breeding-bed of war. The passing of Hohenzollern, Hapsburg, Romanoff and other national parasites and baneful autocracies, all roots and lines that ramify them, not only cut down but burned afterward—the trade-cunning of Krupp and his like with them—that this may be the true and final extermination of the army worm. The strong peasant stalk and bloom where they cling and devour—this is the great sacrifice. A last time, for the poor of the world must now perceive the truth. The final tragedy of God's many—that the dream and the spirit of peace, conceived in agony, brought forth in this planetary parturition of war, may emerge not a dream, but clothed in the body and brain of flesh to move forever among men.

"In a space of fifty square yards, the bodies of two hundred Germans lay crying for burial," and on the same sheet, this cry of America, "Now is the time for us to profit!" The States of America must go to their knees to be rid of that temptation—the voice of the trade mind at its worst and lowest, a blend of green and yellow, of covetousness and cowardice, in the presence of Europe's ineffable disaster, which if not overcome now will bring us to the pass of Europe or worse, before it is done. The spirit of peace flees to fields of carnage
WAR! BY WILL LEVINGTON COMFORT

from the atmosphere of that conception. But such a shame will pass. The formal neutrality and the substantial neutrality of these States shall not be fouled in such a crisis by the dollar.

There is no law to prevent us accepting in silence the inevitable advantages of Europe’s disruption, but to campaign and aggressively to accumulate trade in this hour (in which it verily seems that the high God is testing the earth to find His few) such is the final debauchery of virtue.

Here is the chance for us to become workmen, not squirrels. The very streets are full of the strange new needs, because we are suddenly denied the products of European workmen. We miss their mastery in chemicals and minerals and wood. Here is the spur of need to make us workmen and masters of the secrets of matter—but to remain masters of matter in spirit and truth, the whole reason and purpose of manhood, adding to matter the intuitions of the spirit, and not making matter our God, for world-wars and every immortal wretchedness is the price of just that.

Never before in the history of the United States was there such time and incentive for austerity and contemplation, such need for sensitiveness to reality, for flippant and temporal things to be put quite away—such a need to burn and weep and pray for the abatement of agony and the new reign of God in the world—such a need to give and not to gain, to love and not to seize.

In the spirit of hope I tried to see clearly the demon of Russia cast out, her lofty and inimitable genius manifesting free-handed at last. . . . Miles of bayonets rusted in their fixity, miles of ashen faces and sodden gray coats—the dust of their tramping, the heaven of their singing. This was the Russian peasantry on the march, a moving storehouse of the earth’s future spirit, the genius of her coming days. They leave the sane brown yielding earth, all gilded with the beauty of harvests, for the red fields of madness. They march from cosmos to chaos. . . . There is an end to the singing; the hour has come of fire and blood. Through the wind tattered smoke, there is the strewn field covered with silent men and writhing men. The remnant rises and marches on. . . . But one face to me, not in helmet nor cap, but in a derby, old and absurd—a face of torture and bewilderment—rising from the field and marching on. . . . “Hai, Joe, turn back to the woman and the boy! Hai, Joe, where are you marching?”

It is the peasantry of the world marching forth a last time to find its prophet.