

Chronicle of Youth

The War Diary 1913-1917

Vera Brittain

Edited by Alan Bishop with Terry Smart

VERA BRITTAIN

Testament of Youth

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STUDY
OF THE YEARS 1900-1925

PREFACE

It is now sixty years since the First World War ended, and few are still alive who survived that fearful experience at first hand. The War should now be a part of history; the weapons, the uniforms, the static horror of battles fought in trenches are all obsolete now. Yet the First World War refuses to fade away. It has marked all of us who were in any way associated with it, even at one generation's remove through our parents. The books, the poetry, the artifacts of those four and a half years still speak to young men and women who were not even born when the Second World War ended.

Why are we so haunted? I think it is because of the terrible irony of the War; the idealism and high-mindedness that led boys and men in their hundreds of thousands to volunteer to fight and, often, to die; the obscenity of the square miles of mud, barbed wire, broken trees and shattered bodies into which they were flung, battalion after battalion; and the total imbalance between the causes for which the war was fought on both sides, as against the scale of the human sacrifice. As Wilfred Owen put it in 'The Send-Off',

'Shall they return to beatings of great bells
In wild train-loads?
A few, a few, too few for drums and yells!'

There is another reason, too. The First World War was the culmination of personal war; men saw the other human being they had killed, visibly dead. Men fought with bayonets, with knives or even their bare hands. The guns themselves were on the battlefields, thick with smoke, the gunners sweaty and mudbound. War had not yet become a pitting of scientist against scientist or technologist against technologist. Death was not, on either side, elimination through pressing a

button, but something seen and experienced personally, bloody, pathetic and foul.

My own picture of the War was gleaned from my mother. Her life, like that of so many of her contemporaries who were actually in the fighting or dealing with its consequences, was shaped by it and shadowed by it. It was hard for her to laugh unconstrainedly; at the back of her mind, the row upon row of wooden crosses were planted too deeply. Through her, I learned how much courage it took to live on in service to the world when all those one loved best were gone: her fiancé first, her best friend, her beloved only brother. The only salvation was work, particularly the work of patching and repairing those who were still alive. After the war, the work went on — writing, campaigning, organising against war. My mother became a lifelong pacifist. I still remember her in her seventies, determinedly sitting in a CND demonstration, and being gently removed by the police.

Testament of Youth is, I think, the only book about the First World War written by a woman, and indeed a woman whose childhood had been a very sheltered one. It is an autobiography and also an elegy for a generation. For many men and women, it described movingly how they themselves felt. Time and again, in small Welsh towns and in big Northern cities, someone has come up to me after a meeting to ask if my mother was indeed the author of *Testament of Youth*, and to say how much it meant to them. It is a precious sort of immortality.

I hope now that a new generation, more distant from the First World War, will discover the anguish and pain in the lives of those young people sixty years ago; and in discovering will understand.

August 1977.

SHIRLEY WILLIAMS

Vera's daughter

FOREWORD

FOR NEARLY a decade I have wanted, with a growing sense of urgency, to write something which would show what the whole War and post-war period—roughly, from the years leading up to 1914 until about 1925—has meant to the men and women of my generation, the generation of those boys and girls who grew up just before the War broke out. I wanted to give too, if I could, an impression of the changes which that period brought about in the minds and lives of very different groups of individuals belonging to the large section of middle-class society from which my own family comes.

Only, I felt, by some such attempt to write history in terms of personal life could I rescue something that might be of value, some element of truth and hope and usefulness, from the smashing up of my own youth by the War. It is true that to do it meant looking back into a past of which many of us, preferring to contemplate to-morrow rather than yesterday, believe ourselves to be tired. But it is only in the light of that past that we, the depleted generation now coming into the control of public affairs, the generation which has to make the present and endeavour to mould the future, can understand ourselves or hope to be understood by our successors. I knew that until I had tried to contribute to this understanding, I could never write anything in the least worth while.

The way to set about it at first appeared obvious; it meant drawing a picture of middle-class England—its interests, its morals, its social ideals, its politics—as it was from the time of my earliest conscious memory, and then telling some kind of personal story against this changing background. My original idea was that of a long novel, and I started to plan it. To my dismay it turned out a hopeless failure; I

never got much further than the planning, for I found that the people and the events about which I was writing were still too near and too real to be made the subjects of an imaginative, detached reconstruction.

Then I tried the effect of reproducing parts of the long diary which I kept from 1913 to 1918, with fictitious names substituted for all the real ones out of consideration for the many persons still alive who were mentioned in it with a youthful and sometimes rather cruel candour. This too was a failure. Apart from the fact that the diary ended too soon to give a complete picture, the fictitious names created a false atmosphere and made the whole thing seem spurious.

There was only one possible course left—to tell my own fairly typical story as truthfully as I could against the larger background, and take the risk of offending all those who believe that a personal story should be kept private, however great its public significance and however wide its general application. In no other fashion, it seemed, could I carry out my endeavour to put the life of an ordinary individual into its niche in contemporary history, and thus illustrate the influence of world-wide events and movements upon the personal destinies of men and women.

I have tried to write the exact truth as I saw and see it about both myself and other people, since a book of this kind has no value unless it is honest. I have also made as much use as possible of old letters and diaries, because it seemed to me that the contemporary opinions, however crude and ingenuous, of youth in the period under review were at least as important a part of its testament as retrospective reflections heavy with knowledge. I make no apology for the fact that some of these documents renew with fierce vividness the stark agonies of my generation in its early twenties. The mature proprieties of "emotion remembered in tranquillity" have not been my object, which, at least in part, is to challenge that too easy, too comfortable relapse into forgetfulness which is responsible for history's most grievous repetitions. It is not by accident that what I have written constitutes, in effect, the indictment of a civilisation.

The task of creating a matrix for these records has not been easy, for it is almost impossible to see ourselves and our friends and lovers as we really were seven, fifteen or even twenty years ago. Many of our contemporaries of equal age, in spite of their differences of environment and inheritance, appear to resemble us more closely than we resemble ourselves two decades back in time, since the same prodigious happenings and the same profound changes of opinion which have moulded us have also moulded them. As Charles Morgan so truly says in *The Fountain*: "In each instant of their lives men die to that instant. It is not time that passes away from them, but they who recede from the constancy, the immutability of time, so that when afterwards they look back upon themselves it is not themselves they see, not even—as it is customary to say—themselves as they formerly were, but strange ghosts made in their image, with whom they have no communication."

It is because of these difficulties of perspective that this book has been so long delayed; even to be wise in my generation and take advantage of the boom in War literature, I could not hurry it. Now, late in the field and already old enough for life's most formative events to seem very far away, I have done my best to put on record a personal impression of those incomparable changes which coincided with my first thirty years.

VERA BRITAIN

November 1929—March 1933.

From Chronicle of Youth: The War Diary
by Vera Brittain

Friday March 19th

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Whatever the future may bring – whether it be the sorrow I fear more than anything on earth, or the joy which now I scarce dare dream of, much less name – as long as I have memory & thought, I shall not forget to-day & yesterday. My beloved one has been here and departed again, & now indeed I may see his dear face never any more. I cannot write about it much; it is not only useless but impossible to try to record in words anything I felt so poignantly & shall always remember so vividly. When I first came back here after saying goodbye to him – or rather, it was “Au Revoir” that I said, because my courage would not even contemplate a last farewell, though I tried – I simply could not take up my pen & write; I felt paralysed. Now he has gone I can scarcely bear to think of him, & yet I cannot think of anything else.

Yesterday after lunch I went to meet his train, which arrived at about 2.20, & we drove up in a taxi. Mother met us at the door & of course Roland was very shy at first, but Mother did not trouble him to talk to her long but went upstairs, leaving us together in the morning-room. Of course I started at once on the subject uppermost in my mind; strangely enough I found my feelings much harder to keep in check than they were later on, nearer the time of his departure. I suppose it was the sudden effect of seeing him after all the agitation of mind I had had about it during the last few days, but I felt very near to tears – had even an effort at times to prevent him seeing I was, & in fact, I believe he knew all along.

A good deal of our conversation was an argument, which I forced upon him, as to why he wanted to go; when I made him analyse his actual reasons for going out he seemed to have none that he could give. He said the vague reason of “freedom” was hardly strong enough, he had no personal animosity against the enemy, & he certainly did not want to die himself. He has no love for the army at all & admitted that he wished he were at Oxford occupied with Classics & books. He seemed to find that part of the reason was vanity, & yet this is not enough because he does not care what people say, & certainly not enough to wish to risk his life because of it. The real reason seems to be the vague moral sense of acting up to his faith in, his highest opinion of, himself – the worship

1915

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& indefinite pursuit of heroism in the abstract – oh! I know well enough really why he wants to go, why if I were a man I should want to go – though I cannot put into words my understanding of his own motives, ineradicable as I know them to be. After all, the most important things in life are generally those one cannot give a reason for. I told him my peace of mind was gone from now until the end of the war; he said he could not be sorry that I cared, but he did want me to approve of his going. I told him I could not pretend to be glad, that I was no heroine who could pour forth set injunctions to do deeds of daring, or wear company manners because he was going to the front. Instead of this I was only a weak imperfect being, whose only interest in the war was through individuals concerned in it, and who, since his going to the front had become certain, had begun to pray again without believing in it much, just in case it did any good. He seemed unexpectedly a little affected by this information, although I told him I prayed selfishly, not that he should do deeds of heroism, but that God might bring him back. I teased him a little – rather sadly it must be owned, because I only did it to hide my own mournful feelings; he said he knew I should tease him for that reason. I said that it was difficult to realise how utterly different everything was now from the time when he came here just a year ago, when I teased him so unmercifully and took a delight in deriding his vanity.

I asked him if he thought it better to have seen the possibility of great joy that could not be realised as yet, perhaps never, or if he thought it better to keep one's peace of mind & never see. He said he thought the first was better, & I agreed with him, agreed that it was better to suffer & try to be strong over it than never to have risen to the point where suffering becomes possible. I do feel indeed like one standing at the entrance of the Promised Land – or like one who has been permitted to gaze upon it from the mountain tops without being allowed to enter. Sometimes I have wished I had never met him – wished that he had not come to take away my impersonal attitude towards the war, and make it a cause of personal suffering to me as it is to thousands of others. But yet, if I could choose never to have met him I would not. It is better as it is, in spite of all the sorrow. I would rather be unhappy, rather be that finer person whose redemption is “worked out by the soul itself with suffering & through time”, than be able to work on calmly in complete peace of mind.

Yet I could not help speaking of the war. It seemed, I said, to have come just in time to make it possible that I should live ever after under the shadow of it, with all my future darkened by that Shadow of Death which I must always think of now as hovering close behind the footsteps

of him & of Edward. "Ah don't say that," he said. "Don't say it will all be spoilt; when we return, things may be just the same." "If you return," I could not help saying. "When", not "if", he insisted, but I said I did not imagine for a moment he was going out without realising fully all that it might mean. He answered very gravely that he had thought many times of what the issue might be, yet he had a settled conviction that he was coming back – not quite whole perhaps, but he hoped I should not like him less if he was, say, minus an arm. He said he had had his hand read once by someone supposed to be very good, who had told him to follow up all his military opportunities, that he would be in danger of death many times but would always just escape. But he continued that someone had told him that the only thing that kept an army together was that each man individually believed that he personally would return. I told him of my conviction that of him & Edward one of them would return, but not both. It seemed to distress him. Certainly I exercised no tact in mentioning death, but it seemed so vain to refrain from doing so when it was uppermost in both our thoughts. There are two kinds of people, who have two different ways of facing probable trouble; one kind put the thought of it firmly aside & refuse to think of it until it actually comes; the other kind will not blind themselves to the very worst that may happen and act as if it were going to in case it does. I said I was of the second kind, & that I was making myself feel I should never see him again in case I did not. He said he thought on the whole that I was right – that it was the braver way. Then I spoke to him about his mother, saying how hard I thought it must be for her. He did not say much about her, only I gathered that her attitude is rather one of negative acquiescence than anything else.

We had tea with Mother, who seemed to admire him in his uniform & could not agree that he looked at all plain. Not that I would wish him to be any less plain & broad & big; it would not be he if he were. After tea we decided to go for a walk. There had been a snow storm, which kept continuing on & off, but we did not mind that & went out into it. We walked right round Green Lane, with a blizzard driving part of the time into our faces. We spoke of much the same things as we did before tea; when two people's minds are full of one subject it is impossible not to talk about it, & perhaps after all it is better to speak of Death than to think about it in silence. I made him promise that if he met his death on the fields of France he would if possible come back from the Other Side & tell me that the grave is not the end of our apparently ironical existence here. As we came home I thought how speedily the precious moments were passing and how soon this time to-morrow, with its bitter recollection of parting, would be here. When we arrived in it was nearly

dinner-time, so I changed into my pretty blue & grey dress which everyone says I look so nice in, hoping he would think so too, & I believe he did.

Dinner was quite a success; Daddy was very affable & kept Roland smoking after dinner a little longer than I cared about. But he came up soon and Mother went away & left us in the drawing-room, sitting together on the sofa in the dim lamplight, with the fire flickering cheerfully in the grate. We remained there very close together until 12.0, he with his arm along the back of the sofa nearly round my shoulders. He looked at me the whole time with an expression which meant so much that I could hardly bear to raise my eyes & meet his. Never before have I experienced such a feeling as seemed to fill that quiet room with such an intensity of emotion that everything grew quite dim. I can scarcely recall our conversation, & indeed it could hardly be called such, & any listener would doubtless have thought it absurd. Occasionally we lapsed into long emotional silences.

We spoke again for a while about a Hereafter; both inclined to believe there could not be, both wishing – oh! so much – that we could believe that there was. I reminded him how he had spoken at Uppingham of Kant's theory that a beneficent Deity could not make us end with our aspirations unfulfilled & our work undone. Roland said he had sometimes felt a desire just to become nothing and leave everything off in the middle, but when I asked if he really meant that he would wish never to taste a possible joy, never to continue a work or a happiness which he had just begun, or just begun to realise, he said he certainly did not mean that. We tried to examine what it is in us which may live again, and did indeed come to the conclusion that there is something beyond our physical & mental selves, something neither intellect nor vanity, which impels us to do right without witness & without reward just because it is right, and that this part of us, this strange inexplicable moral sense, may continue to endure. Yet, as we both admitted, we did not wish to find one another again without our physical attributes – did not wish in another life to dispense with material characteristics which mean so much to us both, but this at least we know will have to be. For me Roland would not be Roland if I could not see with my earthly eyes that strong frame so expressive of his personality, if, still more, I could not look into those dark eyes of his, or hear his voice, the sound of which I never can recall when he is absent. To feel I may never again hear that voice fills me with a greater despair than when I think I may not again look on his face; yet, after all, these things are not Roland; it is the personality behind which makes them to me so essentially expressive of him.

We sat on there while the fire died down, after everyone else had gone to bed. I knew he would say nothing definite about any possible future, being too honourable to commit either himself or me to anything while he is so young & poor, & I would not wish him to because if he made a thousand promises I could not trust him more than I do or be more sure of him than I am. But we did speak of marriage a little; I said Mother was afraid I should become just an intellectual old maid, & that indeed was probably what I should become. "I don't see why," he said. "Simply because there will be no one left for me to marry after the war," I answered. "Not even me?" he asked in a very low voice. He said he was sorry to have destroyed my peace of mind by making me fond of him; I would not admit that I cared for him at first, but the sudden poignant stab of recollection that I might never have him with me again to tell him how much I really did, made me admit it then. But it is useless to try to write about a fragmentary conversation which was really not a conversation at all but a fitful expression of emotions made up of a strange mixture of sorrow & the saddest kind of joy. At last I felt I could stand it no longer; when one is but prolonging something that must in any case end soon, the sudden need comes to end it quickly. I saw he was looking tired & rather worn, though I think he would have stayed up all night if I had let him, so I made him put the lamp out. He took my hand and kissed it again as he did in the train once before — but this time there was no glove upon it.

There is not after all much more to be said. I was tired & slept but my night was restless & disturbed with dreams, & so, as he told me in the morning, was his. We had breakfast alone together as previously arranged, and had no time to be long over it. We neither of us said more than a word or two. I could not realise that goodbye was actually so imminent. On the ground the snow was lying very thick & the air was icy cold, but the sun was shining brightly overhead, and everything all round looked dazzling & white. All the way to the station we scarcely spoke a word. I only looked at him once or twice; his face was set & his eyes very sad. I hate his expression of silent emotion; it hurts me. It was just like the expression he wore at the Prize-Giving at Uppingham, but greatly intensified.

I shall never forget the look of the station so early on that cold bright March morning. The train did not go from the usual platform but from the one opposite, on the darker side of the station, and a train filling the line beside it made it seem gloomier than ever, and cold with the chillness of a wintry morning in places where the sun has not yet penetrated. In the distance the railway bridge & the snow-covered signal boxes gleamed in the brilliant light. On the chill station the air was crisp

& quite windless. As the train was almost due to start I got up into the railway carriage to say goodbye to him. He held my hand a long time & looked at me in complete silence so sorrowfully that I wished I could have cried to ease the pain in my heart. I felt spiritually sick but as far from tears as I have ever been in my life; I did not feel in the least choked, and there was no mist in my eyes to dim the pitiless cold brightness of the morning. I did not wish him glory or honour or triumph; in comparison with seeing him again I cared about none of those things. So all I could say was just "I hope Heaven will be kind to me & bring you back." He held my hand & looked at me without a word. For a moment I wished he would have kissed me; many men would have done so and it would hardly have been a liberty at that solemn moment. But afterwards I was glad that he had not done so, but had remained characteristic of himself up to the last; the reservation of his emotion is somehow so much more expressive than the expression of it would be; he is so incapable of anything so light as flirtation, or of taking any liberty beyond what his own uprightness assures him he has the right to. So I got down from the carriage with the fact that we were more than just friends still unrecognised by everything but our spiritual consciousness. Then there was a slight bustling on the platform & the train began to move. We clasped hands once more as it was going &, though I was trying to train my mind into realising that probably this was indeed a final farewell, at the last I could only bring myself to say "Au revoir." He said it too & dropped my hand, then remained leaning out of the window looking sadly at me as I stood motionless watching the train until it disappeared altogether and where it had been there was nothing but the merciless sunlight shining on the rails. I hate public exhibitions of emotion, but if I could have burst into tears then & there I should have been glad, I felt so stunned & cold as I turned & walked slowly out of the station.

From 17 April 1915

I never thought I should ever say to anyone such things as I write to Roland. I suppose the nearness of death breaks down the reserves & conventions, which are seen to matter so little in the light of elemental things. Certainly I have never been so conscious of my love for Roland as I have to-day. I don't know if it is that I have really grown to caring more & more every day of the last month, or if I am only realising now how much I loved him when I said goodbye a month ago. One is often a little stunned at first by the sharpness of such an ordeal as that. Either way, the result is much the same; it means that my need of him, of seeing & hearing & talking to him, is so great that the longing for his presence drives me nearly desperate; I can scarcely keep it in check, much less face the thought that I may have to do without it for ever more. Thinking about that makes me feel utterly heart-sick & almost physically faint. Oh! my endurance is weak, & my courage fails! Now, as I write, my head aches & my eyes are tired with the tears I shed on his account – tears of weakness, which I should conquer, & have, until to-day. But when just a few words at the end of such a letter tell me how much he cares himself – it is even more unbearable than feeling how much *I* do. It is this separa-

tion that is so hard, so bitter. I should not fear the danger for him if I could share it – much less for myself.

There have been several Zeppelin raids all over the country. At Lowestoft the backs of some houses in the town were blown in, & one or two horses & dogs killed.

Sunday April 18th

To-day I finished Turgenev's *On the Eve* – one of the books Roland gave me for my 21st birthday. In the part I read to-day came the love scenes between Elena & Dmitri Insarov. They made me think of Roland & me – not what we have ever risen to in one another's presence, but what I believe we are both capable of rising to. All the rest of the day I felt wild with desire for him. Why despise physical longings & necessities just because they are physical? While we are in this world we are governed by physical laws, which are no less a part of the Deity than the spiritual & mental laws which can only express themselves here through the physical & with it form one great unity. The physical desire is after all but the outward & visible sign of the inward & spiritual necessity. So I admit, it is not enough to know that I am one with him in mind & spirit; I want his physical presence, I need to feel him near me & be able to touch him before this pain at my heart will cease to torment & drive me desperate.

Wednesday April 21st

Sometimes I can hardly believe I am I. I feel as if I were writing a novel about someone else, & not myself at all, so mighty are the things happening just now. If, that summer just after I came out & things seemed as though they would always be stagnant & dull, someone had said to me "Before three years are over you will not only have fallen deeply in love with someone, but that very person will be fighting on the battlefields of France in the greatest war ever known to man. And your anguish of anxiety on his account will be greater than anything you have dreamed possible," I should not have believed it could really ever happen. To-night – not only when I heard from Roland but before – I have been full of a queer excitement – almost exultation. There has been no apparent reason for it, so I very much wonder why.

Apparently the hill we have taken near Ypres is a real advantage to us, but our losses are reported to be heavy. That means terrible long casualty lists within the next few days.

When I was a girl at St. Monica's and in Buxton, I remembered, I imagined that life was individual, one's own affair ; that the events happening in the world outside were important enough in their own way, but were personally quite irrelevant. Now, like the rest of my generation, I have had to learn again and again the terrible truth of

George Eliot's words about the invasion of personal preoccupations by the larger destinies of mankind, and at last to recognise that no life is really private, or isolated, or self-sufficient. People's lives were entirely their own, perhaps—and more justifiably—when the world seemed enormous, and all its comings and goings were slow and deliberate. But this is no longer, and never will be again, since man's inventions have eliminated so much of distance and time ; for better, for worse, we are now each of us part of the surge and swell of great economic and political movements, and whatever we do, as individuals or as nations, deeply affects everyone else. We were bound up together like this before we realised it ; if only the comfortable prosperity of the Victorian age hadn't lulled us into a false conviction of individual security and made us believe that what was going on outside our homes didn't matter to us, the Great War might never have happened. And though a few isolated persons may be better for having been in the War, the world as a whole will be worse ; lacking first-rate ability and social order and economic equilibrium, it will go spinning down into chaos as fast as it can—unless some of us try to prevent it.

Henceforward, my thought struggled on, following the faint gleam through the darkness, people will count only in so far as they realise their background and help to create and to change it. We should never be at the mercy of Providence if only we understood that we ourselves *are* Providence ; our lives, and our children's lives, will be rational, balanced, well-proportioned, to exactly the extent that we recognise this fundamental truth. It may be that our generation will go down in history as the first to understand that not a single man or woman can now live in disregarding isolation from his or her world. I don't know yet what I can do, I concluded, to help all this to happen, but at least I can begin by trying to understand where humanity failed and civilisation went wrong. If only I and a few other people succeed in this, it may be worth while that our lives have been lived ; it may even be worth while that the lives of the others have been

laid down. Perhaps that's really why, when they died, I was left behind.

So, thus portentously, I decided to read History, and then, when I had gone down from Oxford, to get into touch with some organisation which thought and tried to act along these lines. I had heard, as yet, very little of the bitter tale of pacifism during the War—the Union of Democratic Control, with its interrupted meetings and police-raided offices ; the imprisonment of E. D. Morel ; the removal of Bertrand Russell from his post at Cambridge ; the persecution and humiliation of conscientious objectors—but I had already started on the road which was ultimately to lead me to association with the group that accepted internationalism as a creed.

From the "Piping for Peace" chapter
Testament of Youth

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Italy, with its new scenes and experiences, had made all the difference; in spite of Asiago, in spite of Louvencourt, those weeks abroad had somehow healed the acutest soreness of the War's deep hurt. After them, apart from occasional dreams, I had no more hallucinations nor night terrors nor insomnia, and by the time that I joined Winifred at the end of the year in the Bloomsbury studio which we had taken as the result of our determination to live independently together, I was nearly a normal person.

From the moment that the War ended I had always known, and my parents had always tolerantly taken for granted, that after three years at Oxford and four of war-time adventure, my return to a position of subservient dependence at home would be tolerable neither for them nor for me. They understood now that freedom, however uncomfortable, and self-support, however hard to achieve, were the only conditions in which a feminist of the War generation—and, indeed, a post-Victorian woman of any generation—could do her work and maintain self-respect. After the Armistice my father, with characteristic generosity, had made over to me a few of his shares in the family business, in order that I might pay my own college bills and be spared the ignominy of asking him for every sixpence after so long a period of financial self-sufficiency.

Although I could not live upon this tiny income and a growing accumulation of rejection-slips, it enabled me to give more attention to writing and politics than would otherwise have been possible, and less to the part-time lecturing and teaching which Winifred and I had alike decided were the most accessible and least exacting methods

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of earning our living until journalism could be made to pay.

As both our families expressed a desire for a few weeks of our company before we finally left them for good, we postponed our joint migration to the end of 1921, and spent the interval after our return from Italy in planning future work and acquiring enough small "money-making" jobs to occupy about three days a week. Almost daily I wrote long

letters to Winifred, coloured by that curious mixture of maturity and childishness which was so long characteristic of our dislocated generation; they palpitated with schemes for writing and lecturing and travelling, and for the dissemination of those internationalist ideas the teaching of which, I still felt, alone justified my survival of the War. In this ingenuous eagerness for every kind of new experiment and reform I resembled many other contemporaries who were at last recovering from the numbing shocks of the wartime years; our hopefulness was due to a belief that the War was really over, and to a failure as yet to understand completely how deep-rooted and far-reaching its ultimate consequences must be.

The prospects of interesting and suitable work seemed unexpectedly promising; I had already been offered some part-time teaching at a school in South Kensington, my aunt had invited me to give a course of six lectures on "International Relations" at St. Monica's, and two pupils presented themselves to be coached for Oxford examinations while I was still at home. The elder of these, a nervous and propitiatory graduate from the University of Wales, lived in Anerley, completely lacked the most elementary rudiments of a literary style, and had incongruous aspirations after Lady Margaret Hall which, greatly to my own surprise, I actually helped her to fulfil.

"I do wish her appearance didn't depress me so," I confessed to Winifred. "I have only seen the blue velours hat and long tweed coat twice, but am tired of them already. I have the feeling, too, that I shall never see anything else. Next time I will invite her to take the coat off—that will at least make a change. . . . I am so glad I used to put on my best clothes for . . . Mr. C. . . . What a difference it makes to have something nice to look at!"

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After speaking often at college debates and hearing a number of Oxford dons lecture in that inimitable fashion which scorns the base vulgarity of mere technical competence, the prospect of becoming a lecturer who could give a tolerable discourse from a platform no longer seemed so wildly unattainable as it had appeared in 1913. Not only, before going to Italy, did I boldly accept the St. Monica's invitation, but I wrote still more daringly to the newly established headquarters of the League of Nations Union in Grosvenor Crescent and offered myself as a speaker on the League of Nations, that international experiment in the

maintenance of peace and security which I felt, in common with many other students of modern history, to be the one element of hope and progress contained in the peace treaties. In reply I was asked to come to Grosvenor Crescent and be inspected by the secretary. The interview was arranged for me by Elizabeth Murray, my dazzling Somerville predecessor, now haughtily beautiful with her exquisite, adventurous clothes, her imperious figure and her short, waving dark hair.

When I first saw the secretary, I felt that his handsome, melancholy face and reticent, dreaming eyes would have been more appropriate to a stained-glass window than to that rather turbulent office of emphatic young men and women, who waged a gallant, perpetual battle against shortage of funds, the lethargy of the public, and the well-meaning inefficiency of untrained volunteers. But his gentle courtesy was almost immediately over-shadowed by the startling presence of an anonymous, impressive individual in morning coat, spats, and monocle, who suddenly burst through an adjacent glass door into the middle of my interview, and without ceremony inquired of me in a sceptical drawl: "What makes you think you can speak?"

I never learnt this intruder's name, nor do I recall what explanation I gave for the incongruous juxtaposition of mature claims and an immature appearance, but I left the secretary's office with a suitcase full of informative literature, and the encouraging impression that I should be invited to take meetings for the Union in the winter if he was satisfied with the specimen lecture that he had asked me to prepare.

Upon this lecture and the series for St. Monica's I spent many hours that autumn, spurred to gigantic efforts by the deliberations of the Washington Conference and the unexpected success of the League in settling the dispute between Serbia and Albania. I felt my responsibility very keenly; already, I thought, I had begun to take part in that campaign for enlightenment which must inevitably lead a bewildered, suffering world into the serene paths of rational understanding.

"You would have been amused," I told Winifred, who was herself preparing a course of lectures on "Personalities of Pre-Renaissance Italy" to succeed my own series at St. Monica's, "if you could have seen me last night, dressed up in a hat and a fur, declaiming in front of the looking-glass! I am going to do it every day once, till I know the thing by heart and stop feeling a fool... I'm so glad I did 'International Relations,' glad I am lecturing on them now,

though in ever such a small way, glad to do anything, however small, to make people care for the peace of the world. It may be Utopian, but it's constructive. It's better than railing at the present state of Europe, or always weeping in darkness for the dead."

The half-realised onset of jaundice spoilt my first St. Monica's lecture, making me oppressively aware how trivial this event, so momentous to me, had appeared to everyone else. "How good it is for us," I recorded disconsolately, "to be mere business units... people whose colossal edifice of life means nothing more than an interrupted half-hour of preparation." But during my convalescence the reading of a newly published selection of internationalist essays, entitled "The Evolution of World Peace," restored to me that sense of the cause's momentous dignity which for the next few

years was to drive me in pursuit of small, reluctant audiences conscientiously shivering in draughty town halls, in dusty clubs, in dimly lighted schoolrooms, or beneath the gaunt roofs of whitewashed Wesleyan chapels which continually eluded my frantic search for them through the wintry darkness of unknown streets. Joyously recognising, clearly and convincingly expressed, the motive which had set me reading History at Oxford, I copied from Mr. F. S. Marvin's editorial Introduction to the essays a paragraph which embodied, and still embodies, the inspiration of hopeful humanity's quest after international harmony, although the eager confidence which illumined the minds of reason's post-war exponents was so soon to fade into the dun stoicism of baffled yet persistent endeavour:

"If we desire peace and co-operation in the world, and can find in history clear indications that co-operation is a growing quantity, then our desires become a reasonable ideal, we are fighting to enlighten mankind as to their true destiny and to hasten its realisation... It is the broad view and the long vision which alone can cure our fearfulness and fortify our steps... A longer vista lies before us than even anthropology can offer of the past.

Early in February 1922, when I had begun to regard the Union's continued forgetfulness of my existence as one of the disappointing but inevitable facts of everyday life, a telephone message suddenly inquired whether I would take the place of a speaker who had succumbed to influenza. The meeting, my informant said, was a large affair on the following evening at a Baptist chapel in Watford, capable of holding an audience of two thousand; did I think that I could tackle so formidable a gathering? On my now established principle of never refusing anything, I replied as usual that I would, and in consequence spent a night and

day of apprehensive anguish. There was no time to get up a new speech, and my few weeks of teaching had already shown me that the lengthy "specimen lecture" could not possibly be delivered in full, so I reduced myself almost to delirium by the endeavour to make a digestible summary of all the chief points.

The next evening, after rehearsing the lecture before the looking-glass until my head was ready to split with nervous tension, I went down to Watford. When I arrived at the Baptist chapel after a shuddering search through dim, half-lighted streets, fifteen elderly females huddled in tweed coats awaited me in the vestry. The great hall next door was empty and dark, and I realised, to my crestfallen relief, that this was the meeting. Being then quite incapable of a hasty, informal speech, I breathlessly delivered the whole of my portentous discourse, but the long-suffering audience did not appear to mind, and even looked quite humanly amused. The local secretary must have given a tolerant report to Grosvenor Crescent, for twenty-four hours later I was again sent out, through a snowstorm, to act as substitute speaker at a meeting in Fulham, where the sceptical Cockney chairwoman introduced me to the audience as "the young person sent down by 'eadquarters to tell us about the League o' Nytions."

After that, for the greater part of the next three years and sometimes as often as four times a week, I made speeches or led discussions on the League in almost every London suburb and in numerous small towns and villages all over the South of England and the Midlands. Such names as Hounslow and Bromley, Fleet and Broadstairs, King's Lynn and Norwich, remain in my mind without reviving any particular impression. One of my most successful lectures was given at University College, Nottingham, on the historical development of the peace ideal. Another, addressed to a garden meeting near Beaconsfield, followed an authoritative discourse by Mr. H. A. L. Fisher, once Minister of Education and now warden of that Oxford college which has entered with such persistence into my private life; [...]

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All through the autumn of 1922, the chief subjects asked for by audiences were the Greco-Turkish conflict which had sent thousands of refugees flying in terror from devastated Smyrna, and the League scheme for the reconstruction of Austria. I had to deal with both these topics at a curious open-air gathering in Penge, where I spoke from the same platform as two Members of Parliament and a Liberal candidate. This meeting, described in the pink advance leaflets as "A Grand Open-Air Rally," was held on a small three-cornered piece of public ground known as the Triangle — "the usual sort of thing," I wrote to my mother, who was then in Cornwall; "grass and one or two trees enclosed with a railing in the middle of some wide cross roads in a very slummy district. Buses, trams, etc., were going by all the time. We had a big platform erected on this triangle against the railings and facing it on the opposite side of the road was a large pub. Just at the back of it and going under the triangle, was a big 'Gentleman's Lavatory' of the underground variety. Consequently our audience mainly consisted of the gentlemen who patronised both the pub and the lavatory. The former variety was inclined to be argumentative and one particularly truculent gentleman had to be removed by a policeman." [...]

In retrospect I am still grateful to the organisers of my lectures at Gillingham and Mere for always appearing to take me seriously, and treating me as the mature woman and competent lecturer that I sometimes felt but never succeeded in looking. Photographs of the time now show me that I still gave the impression, at most, of a juvenile twenty-three; it seemed strange and a little humiliating that so many storms should have passed over my head without leaving any apparent trace upon my external personality. Organisers and secretaries were apt to greet me at stations with fallen faces and the irrepressibly spontaneous exclamation: "Are you the speaker? I was looking for somebody *older*!" and on one deplorable occasion the disappointed words emerged: "You don't mean to say that *you're* Miss Brittain? I thought headquarters was sending us a *proper* lecturer!"

In spite of such crushing criticisms, the Union continued to urge me forth upon long hot journeys in trains, or long cold journeys in trams, until the halls and chapels at which I spoke, and the houses and vicarages at which I stayed

while thus carrying out the resolution made before taking History at Oxford, gradually merged into a vague kaleidoscopic dream of swaying lights and upturned faces; of sparsely furnished clerical drawing-rooms with leather-backed books, horsehair sofas and crochet antimacassars; of high teas in complacent Nonconformist parlours; of chilly bedrooms of all denominations, with semi-carpeted floors, white tomb-like jugs filled with cold water on marble-topped washstands, and black grates camouflaged with newspaper or coloured crinkled tissue.

From "Another Stranger"

II

As spring matured slowly into summer, the imminence of those personal obligations, so much desired and yet so deeply dreaded, possessed more and more of my thoughts. Never before had I seemed to wait so long for May, with its warm winds and blossoming shrubs, yet when the lilac buds began to swell beneath the windows of our flat, and a chestnut-tree in Regent's Park burst prematurely into crumpled, delicate leaves, I realised that the ultimate uncertainty about my marriage had still to be faced and overcome.

So long, I knew, as I remained unmarried I was merely a survivor from the past—that wartime past into which all those whom I loved best had disappeared. To marry would be to dissociate myself from that past, for marriage inevitably brought with it a future; a new future of intimate relationships such as I once believed I had permanently renounced. I might, perhaps, even have the children that years ago I had longed for—children who would know and care nothing of the life that had been mine before I met their father, and who would certainly never ask me: "Mother, what did you do in the Great War?" because the War itself would be to them less than a memory. It would not even convey as much to their minds as the South African War had conveyed to mine, for had I not heard the barrel-organs playing "We're soldiers of the Queen, me lads!" and seen the bonfires on Mafeking Night? For them it would merely possess the thin remoteness of a legend, the story-book unreality of an event in long-past history; it would be a bodiless something, taking shape only in words upon the lips of the middle-aged and the old.

Should I, then, submit myself to the pain of a future so completely out of tune with the past? Should I, who had once dedicated myself to the dead, assume yet further responsibilities towards the living? Could I, a wartime veteran,

transform myself into a young wife and mother, and thereby give fate once more the power to hurt me, to destroy my vitality and my creative ability as it had destroyed them in the years which followed 1914? If life chose to deal me a new series of blows through G. and his children, should I have the strength to survive them and go on working? I doubted it, and often felt that it would be better to avoid the risk altogether. Yet always, after a tumult of thought, I was forced to conclude that it is only by grasping this nettle, danger, that we pluck this flower, safety; that those who flee from emotion, from intimacy, from the shocks and perils attendant upon all close human relationships, end in being attacked by unseen Furies in the ultimate stronghold of their spirit.

"You fear marriage, and America, and the cost of marriage, and me because I stand for these things," G. had written with intuitive comprehension of my hesitations only a few weeks before. "Of course you do. . . . Marriage is a great risk properly faced with fear, and we all so face it. . . . Marriage is not, as it is made out conventionally, sheer joy. It is, like all life's valuable things, new pain. The best hope for us . . . is that we both recognise that. . . . I offer you, I think, as free a marriage as it lies in the power of a man to offer a woman. . . . I ask you to give what you want to give, no more. . . . I hope you will never be condemned to regard marriage as in any sense an impoverishment. . . . If it is, you should give it up. There are sacred duties one owes oneself and others through oneself. . . . If when I die I shall have destroyed a few shams, done a very little for the better understanding of that social system which we must master as we have mastered Nature . . . I shall die satisfied. . . . I know that your work is more to you than I am . . . for love . . . is good but it is long after our own work, the work the War imposed on us, the task imposed on us by our knowledge; a knowledge gained in bitter experience."

Yes, I thought, that was really the point; whatever might be true for our successors, for us love and marriage must be subordinate to work. Yet surely to sacrifice them completely,

and in fear of their burdens to give them up, was to deny the vital principle which insisted that ideas and philosophies, like life itself, must be carried on?

"For me," I told G., "the feminist problem ranks with your economic problem. Just as you want to discover how a man can maintain a decent standard of culture on a small income, so I want to solve the problem of how a married woman, without being inordinately rich, can have children and yet maintain her intellectual and spiritual independence as well as having . . . time for the pursuit of her own career. For the unmarried woman there is now no problem provided that she has the will to work. For a married woman without children there is only a psychological problem—a problem of prejudice—which can be overcome by determination. But the other problem—that of the woman with children—remains the most vital. I am not sure that by refusing to have children one even solves the problem for one's self; and one certainly does not solve it for the coming womanhood of the race. But the need to solve it is so urgent that it is raised to the level of those cases where it is expedient that one man—and more than one man—should die for the people."

For weeks on end we exchanged similar letters, discussing how best I could combine writing and political work with temporary residence in America and the production of a family, and how we could help and not hinder each other's ambitions and occupations. Never before had I realised so forcibly as in meditating upon this problem—a problem by no means mine alone, but intimately bound up with the sociology of the future—how time had moved on for the world and myself since 1915. When I sat before the stove in the dark hut at Camberwell and considered marrying Roland, the personal difficulties of the situation had not occurred to me as fundamental, and, indeed, hardly as difficulties. In those days the War, with its dreadful and constant intimations of human mortality, made life itself infinitely more important than any way of living; in comparison with the tense anxieties of that moment, that remote

post-war future had seemed curiously simple. In any case, a college first-year student temporarily transformed into a V.A.D. probationer could hardly be said to have a career to defend, but after six years of learning, and writing, and lecturing, the proposition appeared very different. Its solution was one which went far beyond both the person and the hour; the future of women, like the future of peace, could be influenced by individual decisions in a way that had never seemed possible when all individuality was quenched and drowned in the dark tide of the War.

Marriage, for any woman who considered all its implications both for herself and her contemporaries, could never, I now knew, mean a "living happily ever after"; on the contrary it would involve another protracted struggle, a new fight against the tradition which identified wifehood with the imprisoning limitations of a kitchen and four walls, against the prejudices and regulations which still made success in any field more difficult for the married woman than for the spinster, and penalised motherhood by demanding from it the surrender of disinterested intelligence, the sacrifice of that vitalising experience only to be found in the pursuit of an independent profession. But tired as I was of conflict, I felt that I must not shrink from that fight, nor abandon in cowardice the attempt to prove, as no theories could ever satisfactorily prove without examples, that marriage and motherhood need never tame the mind, nor swamp and undermine ability and training, nor trammel and domesticise political perception and social judgment. To-day, as never before, it was urgent for individual women to show that life was enriched, mentally and spiritually as well as physically and socially, by marriage and children; that these experiences rendered the woman who accepted them the more and not the less able to take the world's pulse, to estimate its tendencies, to play some definite, hard-headed, hard-working part in furthering the constructive ends of a political civilisation.

The demonstration would not, I was well aware, be easy; for me and my contemporaries our old enemies—the

Victorian tradition of womanhood, a carefully trained conscience, a sheltered youth, an imperfect education, lost time, blasted years—were still there and always would be; we seemed to be for ever slaying them, and they to be for ever rising again. Yet even these handicaps I no longer resented, for I was ceasing at last to feel bitterness against the obstacles that had impeded for half a lifetime my fight for freedom to work and to create. Dimly I perceived that it was these very handicaps and my struggle against them which had lifted life out of mediocrity, given it glamour, made it worth while; that the individuals from whom destiny demands too much are infinitely more vital than those of whom it asks too little. In one sense I was my war; my war was I; without it I should do nothing and be nothing. If marriage made the whole fight harder, so much the better; it would become part of my war and as this I would face it, and show that, however stubborn any domestic problem, a lasting solution could be found if only men and women would seek it together.

She meets George upon his return from the U. S., where he had been teaching—

I was half-way up the train and had almost abandoned hope, when I came upon him in the process, like myself, of exploring the corridor—very tall, very thin, a little dishevelled, and forgetful, in his urgent seeking, of the haughty air worn by young dons who deliberately go steerage. Quite suddenly he saw me and started eagerly forward, his hands outstretched and his face a radiance of recognition beneath his wide-brimmed hat. And as I went up to him and took his hands, I felt that I had made no mistake; and although I knew that, in a sense which could never be true of him, I was linked with the past that I had yielded up,

inextricably and for ever, I found it not inappropriate that the years of frustration and grief and loss, of work and conflict and painful resurrection, should have led me through their dark and devious ways to this new beginning.