

After Twelve Months of War.

BY

The Rt. Hon. C. F. G. MASTERMAN

(formerly Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
and a Member of the British Cabinet).



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Just a year ago, on Tuesday, August 4, those men who were entrusted with the awful responsibility of the government of the British Empire, assembled to ratify a demand which they knew must mean a declaration of war. It was a company of tired men, who for twelve hot summer nights, without rest or relaxation, had devoted all their energies to avert this thing which now had come inevitably to pass. No one who has been through the experience of those twelve days will ever be quite the same again. It is difficult to find a right simile for that experience. It was like a company of observers watching a little cloud in the East, appearing out of a blue sky, seeing it grow day by day until all the brightness had vanished and the sun itself had become obscured. It was

like the victim of the old mediæval torture enclosed in a chamber in which the walls, moved by some unseen mechanism, steadily closed on him day by day, until at the end he was crushed to death. It was most like perhaps those persons who have walked on the solid ground and seen slight cracks and fissures appear, and these enlarge, and run together and swell in size hour by hour until yawning apertures revealed the boiling up beneath them of the earth's central fires, destined to sweep away the forests and vineyards of its surface and all the kindly habitations of man.

And all this experience—the development of a situation heading straight to misery and ruin without precedent—was continued in the midst of a world where the happy, abundant life of the people flowed on unconcerned, and all thoughts were turned towards the approaching holidays and the glories of triumphant summer days.

THE FATEFUL WEEK.

I remember leaving a Cabinet which was in practically perpetual session, in the middle

of the most fateful week Europe has ever seen, with almost sounding in my ears the physical noise of the messages pouring in by wireless and code from Paris and Berlin and Vienna and Petrograd—Europe falling to pieces like a great house falling—to fulfil an engagement in an immense political meeting at a provincial city. I remember devoting the bulk of my speech to this problem of war, possibly immediate and dreadful. I think half the audience thought that I was insane and the other half that the Government was so anxious not to make any pronouncement on the Irish questions and other controversies of moment that they would only talk about subjects which had no meaning or relevance to the controversies of the day. I remember a few days later coming out from conferences in which, within, we all realised that the end had come, to find under the hot August sunlight great crowds of silent men and women crowding Whitehall and all the way from Downing Street to Parliament: just waiting, hour after hour, in a kind of awe and expectation, to know whether the world in which they had lived and moved all their

lives, had ceased to exist. I wonder how many of them to-day have gone out into regions in which the raging of nation against nation must count as a very little thing.

It will be twenty years or thirty—it may be a century—before the history of the Cabinet meetings held during all those twelve days can be disclosed. But it is breaking no Cabinet secret to assert to-day, on the anniversary of the final apparent failure, that all the thought and passionate effort in the mind of every member of that body was the preservation of the European peace. Europe had suddenly become paralysed, like the caterpillar which is suddenly stung by the fly which desires a habitation for its children.. The Chancelleries of Europe—as can be read in the official papers—seem simultaneously to have thrown up the sponge and simply waited for the inevitable collapse. Only Sir Edward Grey refused, without some struggle, to accept so desperate a conclusion. Every day, almost every hour, he showered proposals amongst the Ambassadors. He endeavoured to mobilise the forces which

still made for peace. He pleaded for time. He pleaded for a Conference of disinterested Powers. He pleaded for any alternative proposition : when refused one he proffered another. He was willing to perform almost any act, to violate even the stiff diplomatic conventions, to drop the "formulas" of conventional communication, in order to get back to the world of reality—so long as Europe might be saved.

THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR WAR.

He failed ; but it was no inglorious failure : and the efforts remain recorded to-day and will be approved to-morrow with an intensity increasing with the realisation of how rightly the British Cabinet apprehended the magnitude of the destruction into which, with a kind of light-heartedness and (it must be confessed) with a kind of insolence, the Germanic Powers were hurrying the civilisation of the West. God alone can fix the ultimate responsibility of a war which, even it were concluded to-day, would demand a generation for recovery : and the end is not yet. But

one can surely safely prophesy that those who so lightly brushed aside a year ago the British Foreign Secretary's requests, even for a few hours' delay, must now, after a year of it, feel some sentiments of self-reproach and misery: that if only the inexorable course of time could be put back a year their decisions would certainly be otherwise. The proclamation of war was cheered by delirious crowds in Berlin and Vienna. I wonder what kind of a crowd, in either capital, could be gathered together to cheer that proclamation to-day!

Looking back on the whole course of those negotiations embodied for history to judge in the "White Book," which, I suppose, is the most interesting volume produced for many centuries, one can now understand what it was difficult to understand in the changing hours of that terrific strain—something of the German attitude towards the proposals of the British Cabinet. Starting, as at least the War Party started, in Berlin and Vienna, with the firm conviction that "England would not fight," they must have thought all Sir Edward Grey's efforts to be but a series of gigantic "bluffs"

— proposal after proposal put forward, which could be as cheerfully and blandly set aside as the proposals of a helpless child. I think that attitude explains more than anything else the combination of truculence and contempt which runs through all the German communications, and caused those who received them in London from day to day and hour to hour, to think that God must have made them quite blind.

In the midst of the tragic week of diplomacy the British Foreign Secretary did indeed inform the German Ambassador that this was real and not sham business ; that it was no cowardice or uncertainty which held us back, but merely an apprehension of the enormous nature of the calamity which would come upon the world if war came ; a calamity whose dimensions in destruction of human life, of accumulated treasure, and of moral ideals, is certainly without parallel since the Roman Empire went down before the barbarians, and the Roman civilisation perished. It was not a " war " in the ordinary sense of the word, like the Napoleonic contests, or the last fight between France and Germany : it was

a smashing to pieces, on a scale compared to which every previous war has been mere child's play, of a laboriously created industrial civilisation of centuries. It might mean, before its termination, the destruction of the whole social order, the end of a world. The German Ambassador here was probably under no illusions. But all his warnings were brushed aside, and the greatest war machine in Europe was put in motion, trampling through neutral nations and violated treaties, in conformity with the accepted theory that territories, prosperities, and even the moral spirit of a people could only be maintained by the brutal work of military conquest.

The fact that England disappointed all expectation, and decided—after repeated warnings—to keep its pledged word, has caused a particular fury amongst the Germans, who seemed to think that because they had assumed we should stay inert spectators, therefore it was “perfidious” and an outrage on our part that these expectations were not fulfilled. But I think that history will justify our Government in labouring to the eleventh, the

twelfth, even the thirteenth hour, to prevent the smashing of a civilisation, in which, at the end, the victors can only be a little better off, as they count their losses, than the vanquished. The effort failed, but it was worth the making ; and the result of the effort was that we entered into the struggle a united nation and Empire, whose action was approved by all the neutral Powers of the world.

THE COURSE OF THE WAR.

With our entrance—with the slow but inevitable throttling influence of sea power and the dogged resolution of a nation which never has known that it is beaten—the defeat of Germany was assured ; just as to-day the sane minds of Germany, though Germany occupies Belgium and half Poland, and the flower of industrial France—know that a German victory is impossible ; that the most they can hope for is to treat for terms. We are calculating not the possibility of ultimate success, but the efforts to be taken to make that success as speedy as possible ; to shorten the period of loss and

longing and the destruction of life and treasure. We know that we are fighting with loyal Allies ; but we know that we should fight on even if those Allies were to leave us, or their powers of resistance to be destroyed. England alone, more than once, a hundred years ago, maintained resistance to the Napoleonic domination, after he had stamped out coalition after coalition on the Continent. And England, for months or years, if Germany occupied Paris or Petrograd, and established an Empire from the Urals to Finistiere, would fight on, undismayed, through years or decades, until the purposes for which she entered the war were fulfilled, and she could sheath the sword as honourably and gladly as honourably and reluctantly she drew it ; being, before God, unable to do otherwise just a year ago.

One who had some right to prophesy (not a Minister) informed me then of the course of the war. "A year of preparation : a year of conflict : a year of victory." A military expert dogmatically declared that within two months after its declaration the Germans would be occupying Paris and

Warsaw. They will never occupy the first : they have taken ten months instead of two in reaching the suburbs of the second. No one who had any kind of concern with the British decision believed that this was going to be a short and triumphant contest. There was none of the lightheartedness and optimism which (according to history) has characterised the plunging into former conflicts—no “à Berlin,” no “Pretoria in six months.” Indeed after a year of it, despite losses which have darkened the light in so many homes, and expenditure which the work of many generations will not recover, the position to-day, however grave, would seem to most of us far better than we could have imagined when we decided that we had no alternative but to strike for the honour of England.

A YEAR'S ACHIEVEMENTS.

No one in his wildest dreams—voluntaryist or conscriptionist—would have imagined a year ago to-day that within 12 months we should have 3,000,000 men who have volunteered for service oversea—

a thing unprecedented in any country—in any time. No one would have imagined that we could have raised a thousand millions for war services, and yet maintained the position of London as the centre of the world's financial operations, and our factories and workshops in real if modest prosperity. Few would have imagined that in the first year of the war England (whose strength is on the sea and who has never been a land military Power) in combination with its dependencies and Dominions, giving their best to Imperial service, would be conducting eight simultaneous, and for the most part, successful military campaigns ; would not only have swept off the sea the German fleet and the German mercantile marine, and sealed up the German ports like the locking of a great door ; but would also have conquered practically the whole German Empire abroad, would be battering at the gates of the Dardanelles, traditionally impregnable, and with troops from India, Canada, Australia, New Zealand—each one volunteered—assisting our Allies on the European arena.

No : there has been much to learn since those memorable twelve days and much to unlearn : the fainthearted have found 12 months' endurance more than they could bear, and the hysterical have cried and wept because success has not come more speedily. But to-day in comparison with the possibilities of failure which were in the minds of all who knew the facts last August, the wonder is not that of the littleness of the result, but of the magnitude of the achievement. We may doubt what of Europe may be left at the end of this gigantic calamity. We may mourn over the high hopes of progress and human welfare suddenly cut short by the indescribable calamity of war. We may count the cost in human life—the flower of the nations—young men cut off in what seemed to the ancients the height of human tragedy—before the faces of their parents. But of one thing we never had any doubt at all. We were sure of victory when we launched the ultimatum a year ago, telling Germany to clear out of Belgium or challenge the might of the British Empire. We are sure of victory to-day.

