

**EDITH
WHARTON**

THE MARNE: A
TALE OF THE
WAR

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The Marne: A Tale of the War

I

Ever since the age of six Troy Belknap of New York had embarked for Europe every June on the fastest steamer of one or another of the most expensive lines.

With his family he had descended at the dock from a large noiseless motor, had kissed his father good-bye, turned back to shake hands with the chauffeur (a particular friend), and trotted up the gang-plank behind his mother's maid, while one welcoming steward captured Mrs. Belknap's bag, and another led away her miniature French bull-dog—also a particular friend of Troy's.

From that hour all had been delight. For six golden days Troy had ranged the decks, splashed in the blue salt water brimming his huge porcelain tub, lunched and dined with the grown-ups in the Ritz restaurant, and swaggered about in front of the children who had never crossed before, and didn't know the stewards, or the purser, or the captain's cat, or on which deck you might exercise your dog, or how to induce the officer on the watch to let you scramble up for a minute to the bridge. Then, when these joys began to pall, he had lost himself in others deeper and dearer. Another of his cronies, the library steward, had unlocked the book-case doors for him, and, buried for hours in the depths of a huge library armchair (there weren't any to compare with it on land), he had ranged through the length and breadth of several literatures.

These six days of bliss would have been too soon over if they had not been the mere prelude to intenser sensations. On the seventh morning—generally at Cherbourg—Troy Belknap followed his mother, and his mother's maid, and the French bull, up the gang-plank and into another large noiseless motor, with another chauffeur (French, this one) to whom he was also deeply attached, and who sat grinning and cap-touching at the wheel. And then—in a few minutes, so swiftly and smilingly was the way of Mrs. Belknap smoothed—the noiseless motor was off, and they were rushing eastward through the orchards of Normandy.

The little boy's happiness would have been complete if there had been more time to give to the beautiful things that flew past them: thatched villages with square-towered churches in hollows of the deep green country, or grey shining towns above rivers on which cathedrals seemed to be moored like ships; miles and miles of field and hedge and park falling away from high terraced houses, and little embroidered stone manors reflected in reed-grown moats under ancient trees.

Unfortunately Mrs. Belknap always had pressing engagements in Paris. She had made appointments beforehand with all her dressmakers, and, as Troy was well aware, it was impossible, at the height of the season, to break such engagements without losing one's turn, and having to wait weeks and weeks to get a lot of nasty rags that one had seen, by that time, on the back of every other woman in the place.

Luckily, however, even Mrs. Belknap had to eat; and during the halts in the shining towns, where a succulent luncheon was served in a garden or a flowery courtyard, Troy had time (as he grew bigger) to slip away alone, and climb to the height where the cathedral stood, or at least to loiter and gaze in the narrow crooked streets, between gabled cross-beamed houses, each more picture-bookishly quaint than its neighbours.

In Paris, in their brightly-lit and beflowered hotel drawing-room, he was welcomed by Madame Lebuc, an old French lady smelling of crape, who gave him lessons and took him and the bull-dog for walks, and who, as he grew older, was supplemented, and then replaced, by an ugly vehement young tutor, of half-English descent, whose companionship opened fresh fields and pastures to Troy's dawning imagination.

Then in July—always at the same date—Mr. Belknap was deposited at the door by the noiseless motor, which had been down to Havre to fetch him; and a few days later they all got into it, and while Madame Lebuc (pressing a packet of chocolates into her pupil's hand) waved a damp farewell from the doorway, the Pegasus motor flew up the Champs Élysées, devoured the leafy alleys of the Bois, and soared away to new horizons.

Most often they were mountain horizons, for the tour invariably ended in the Swiss Alps. But there always seemed to be new ways (looked out by Mr. Belknap on the map) of reaching their destination; ways lovelier, more winding, more wonderful, that took in vast sweeping visions of France from the Seine to the Rhone. And when Troy grew older the vehement young tutor went with them, and once they all stopped and lunched at his father's house, on the edge of a gabled village in the Argonne, with a view stretching away for miles toward the Vosges and Alsace. Mr. and Mrs. Belknap were very kind people, and it would never have occurred to them to refuse M. Gantier's invitation to lunch with his family; but they had no idea of the emotions stirred in their son's eager bosom by what seemed to them merely a rather inconvenient deviation from their course. Troy himself was hardly aware of these emotions at the time, though his hungry interest in life always made him welcome the least deflection from the expected. He had simply thought what kind jolly people the Gantiers were, and what fun it was to be inside one of the quaint stone houses, with small window-panes looking on old box-gardens, that he was always being whisked past in the motor. But later he was to re-live that day in all its homely details.

II

They were at St Moritz—as usual.

He and M. Gantier had been for a tramp through the Val Suvretta, and, coming home late, were rushing into their evening clothes to join Mr. and Mrs. Belknap at dinner (as they did now regularly, Troy having reached the virile age of fifteen, and having to justify the possession of a smoking-jacket and patent-leather shoes). He was just out of his bath, and smothered in towels, when the tutor opened the door and thrust in a newspaper.

"There will be war—I must leave to-morrow."

Troy dropped the towels.

War! War! War against his beautiful France! And this young man, his dearest friend and companion, was to be torn from him suddenly, senselessly, torn from their endless talks, their long walks in the mountains, their elaborately planned courses of study—archæology, French literature, mediæval philosophy, the Divine Comedy, and vistas and vistas beyond—to be torn from all this, and to disappear from Troy Belknap's life into the black gulf of this unfathomable thing called War, that seemed suddenly to have escaped out of the history books like a dangerous lunatic escaping from the asylum in which he was supposed to be securely confined!

Troy Belknap was stunned.

He pulled himself together to bid a valiant farewell to M. Gantier (the air was full of the "Marseillaise" and Sambre-et-Meuse, and everybody knew the Russians would be in Berlin in six weeks); but once his tutor was gone the mystery and horror again closed in on him.

France, his France, attacked, invaded, outraged; and he, a poor helpless American boy, who adored her, and could do nothing for her—not even cry, as a girl might! It was bitter.

His parents, too, were dreadfully upset; and so were all their friends. But what chiefly troubled them was that they could get no money, no seats in the train, no assurance that the Swiss frontier would not be closed before they could cross the border. These preoccupations seemed to leave them, for the moment, no time to think about France; and Troy, during those first days, felt as if he were an infant Winkelried, with all the shafts of the world's woe gathered into his inadequate breast.

For France was his holiday world, the world of his fancy and imagination, a great traceried window opening on the universe. And now, in the hour of her need, all he heard about her was the worried talk of people planning to desert her!

Safe in Paris, Mr. and Mrs. Belknap regained their balance. Having secured (for a sum that would have fitted up an ambulance) their passages on a steamer sailing from England, they could at length look about them, feel sorry, and subscribe to all the budding war charities. They even remembered poor Madame Lebuc, stranded by the flight of all her pupils, and found a job for her in a refugee bureau. Then, just as they were about to sail, Mrs. Belknap had a touch of pneumonia, and was obliged to postpone her departure; while Mr. Belknap, jamming his possessions into a single suitcase, dashed down to Spain to take ship at Malaga. The turn affairs were taking made it advisable for him to get back as quickly as possible, and his wife and son were to follow from England in a month.

All the while there came no news of M. Gantier. He had rejoined his depot at once, and Troy had had a post-card from him, dated the 6th of August, and saying that he was leaving for the front. After that, silence.

Troy, poring over the morning papers, and slipping out alone to watch for the noon communiqués in the windows of the Paris *Herald*, read of the rash French advance in Alsace, and the enemy's retaliatory descent on the region the Belknaps had so often sped over. And one day, among the names of the ruined villages, he lit on that of the little town where they had all lunched with the Gantiers. He saw the box-garden with the horn-beam arbour where they had gone to drink coffee, old M. Gantier ceremoniously leading the way with Mrs. Belknap; he saw Mme. Gantier, lame and

stout, hobbling after with Mr. Belknap; a little old aunt with bobbing curls; the round-faced Gantier girl, shy and rosy; an incredibly dried and smoked and aged grandfather, with Voltairian eyes and sly snuff-taking gestures; and his own friend, the eldest of the three brothers; he saw all these modest beaming people grouped about Mme. Gantier's coffee and Papa Gantier's best bottle of "*Fine*," he smelt the lime-blossoms and box, he heard the bees in the lavender, he looked out on the rich fields and woods and the blue hills bathed in summer light. And he read: "Not a house is standing. The curé has been shot. A number of old people were burnt in the Hospice. The mayor and five of the principal inhabitants have been taken to Germany as hostages."

The year before the war, he remembered, old M. Gantier was mayor!

He wrote and wrote, after that, to his tutor; wrote to his depot, to his Paris address, to the ruin that had been his home; but had no answer. And finally, amid the crowding horrors of that dread August, he forgot even M. Gantier, and M. Gantier's family, forgot everything but the spectacle of the Allied armies swept back from Liège, from Mons, from Laon, from Charleroi, and the hosts of evil surging nearer and ever nearer to the heart of France.

His father, with whom he might have talked, was gone; and Troy could not talk to his mother. Not that Mrs. Belknap was not kind and full of sympathy: as fast as the bank at home cabled funds she poured them out for war charities. But most of her time was spent in agitated conference with her compatriots, and Troy could not bear to listen to their endlessly reiterated tales of flight from Nauheim or Baden or Brussels, their difficulties in drawing money, hiring motors, bribing hotel-porters, battling for seats in trains, recovering lost luggage, cabling for funds, and their general tendency to regard the war as a mere background to their personal grievances.

"You were exceedingly rude to Mrs. Sampson, Troy," his mother said to him, surprised one day by an explosion of temper. "It is so natural she should be nervous at not being able to get staterooms; and she had just given me five hundred dollars for the American ambulance."

"Giving money's no use," the boy growled, obscurely irritated; and when Mrs. Belknap exclaimed, "Why, Troy, *how callous*—with all this suffering!" he slunk out without answering, and went downstairs to lie in wait for the evening papers.

The misery of feeling himself a big boy, long-limbed, strong-limbed, old enough for evening clothes, champagne, the classics, biology, and views on international politics, and yet able to do nothing but hang about marble hotels and pore over newspapers, while rank on rank, and regiment on regiment, the youth of France and England, swung through the dazed streets and packed the endless trains—the misery of this was so great to Troy that he became, as the days dragged on, more than ever what his mother called "callous," sullen, humiliated, resentful at being associated with all the rich Americans flying from France.

At last the turn of the Belknaps came too; but, as they were preparing to start, news came that the German army was at Lille, and civilian travel to England interrupted.

It was the fateful week, and every name in the bulletins—Amiens, Compiègne, Rheims, Meaux, Senlis—evoked in Troy Belknap's tortured imagination visions of ancient beauty and stability. He had done that bit of France alone with M. Gantier the year before, while Mrs. Belknap waited in Paris for belated clothes; and the thought of the great stretch of desolation spreading and spreading like a leprosy over a land so full of the poetry of the past, and so rich in a happy prosperous present, was added to the crueller vision of the tragic and magnificent armies that had failed to defend it.

Troy, as soon as he was reassured about his mother's health, had secretly rejoiced at the accident which had kept them in France. But now his joy was turned to bitterness. Mrs. Belknap, in her horrified surprise at seeing her plans again obstructed, lost all sense of the impending calamity except as it affected her safety and Troy's, and joined in the indignant chorus of compatriots stranded in Paris, and obscurely convinced that France ought to have seen them safely home before turning her attention to the invader.

"Of course I don't pretend to be a strategist," whimpering or wrathful ladies used to declare, their jewel-boxes clutched in one hand, their passports in the other, "but one can't help feeling that if only the French Government had told our Ambassador in *time*, trains might have been provided...."

"Or why couldn't *Germany* have let our Government know? After all, Germany has no grievance against America...."

"And we've really spent enough money in Europe for some consideration to be shown us ..." the woeful chorus went on.

The choristers were all good and kindly persons, shaken out of the rut of right feeling by the first real fright of their lives. But Troy was too young to understand this, and to foresee that, once in safety, they would become the passionate advocates of France, all the more fervent in their championship because of their reluctant participation in her peril.

("What did I do?—Why, I just simply *stayed in Paris*.... Not to run away was the only thing one *could* do to show one's sympathy," he heard one of the passport-clutchers declare, a year later, in a New York drawing-room.)

Troy, from the height of his youthful indignation, regarded them all as heartless egoists, and fled away into the streets from the sound of their lamentations.

But in the streets was fresh food for misery; for every day the once empty vistas were filled with trains of farm-waggons, drawn by slow country horses, and heaped with furniture and household utensils; and beside the carts walked lines of haggard people, old men and women with vacant faces, mothers hugging hungry babies, and children limping after them with heavy bundles. The fugitives of the Marne were pouring into Paris.

Troy dashed into the nearest shops, bought them cakes and fruit, followed them to the big hippodrome where they were engulfed in the dusty arena, and finally, in despair at his inability to do more than gape and pity, tried to avoid the streets they followed on their way into Paris from St. Denis and Vincennes.

Then one day, in the sunny desert of the Place de la Concorde, he came on a more cheering sight. A motley band of civilians, young, middle-aged, and even grey-headed, were shambling along together, badged and beribboned, in the direction of the Invalides; and above them floated the American flag. Troy flew after it, and caught up with the last marchers.

"Where are we going?... Foreign Legion," an olive-faced "dago" answered joyously in broken American. "All 'nited States citizens.... Come and join up, sonnie...." And for one mad moment Troy thought of risking the adventure.

But he was too visibly only a schoolboy still; and with tears of envy in his smarting eyes he stood, small and useless, on the pavement, and watched the heterogeneous band under the beloved flag disappearing in the doorway of the registration office.

When he got back to his mother's drawing-room the tea-table was still surrounded, and a lady was saying: "I've offered *anything* for a special train, but they won't listen...." And another, in a stricken whisper: "If they *do* come, what do you mean to do about your pearls?"

III

Then came the Marne, and suddenly the foreigners caught in Paris by the German advance became heroes—or mostly heroines—who had stayed to reassure their beloved city in her hour of need.

"We all owe so much to Paris," murmured Mrs. Belknap, in lovely convalescent clothes, from her sofa-corner. "I'm sure we can none of us ever cease to be thankful for this chance of showing it...."

She had sold her staterooms to a compatriot who happened to be in England, and was now cabling home to suggest to Mr. Belknap that she should spend the winter in France and take a job on a war charity. She was not strong enough for nursing, but she thought it would be delightful to take convalescent officers for drives in the Bois in the noiseless motor. "Troy would love it too," she cabled.

Mr. Belknap, however, was unmoved by these arguments. "Future too doubtful," he cabled back. "Insist on your sailing. Staterooms November tenth paid for. Troy must return to school."

"Future too doubtful" impressed Mrs. Belknap more than "Insist," though she made a larger use of the latter word in explaining to her friends why, after all, she was obliged to give up her projected war work. Meanwhile, having quite recovered, she rose from her cushions, donned a nurse's garb, poured tea once or twice at a fashionable hospital, and, on the strength of this effort, obtained permission to carry supplies (in her own motor) to the devastated regions. Troy of course went with her, and thus had his first glimpse of war.

Fresh in his mind was a delicious July day at Rheims with his tutor, and the memory of every detail noted on the way, along the green windings of the Marne, by Meaux, Montmirail and Epernay. Now, traversing the same towns, he seemed to be looking into murdered faces, vacant and stony. Where he had seen the sociable gossiping life of the narrow streets, young men lounging at the blacksmith's, blue-sleeved carters sitting in the wine-shops while their horses shook off the flies in the hot sunshine of the village square, black-pinafores children coming home from school, the fat curé stopping to talk to little old ladies under the church porch, girls with sleek hair calling to each other from the doorways of the shops, and women in sunburnt gingham bending over the village wash-trough or leaning on their rakes among the hayricks—where all this had been, now only a few incalculably old people sat in the doorways and looked with bewildered eyes at strange soldiers fulfilling the familiar tasks.

This was what war did! It emptied towns of their inhabitants as it emptied veins of their blood; it killed houses and lands as well as men. Out there, a few miles beyond the sunny vineyards and the low hills, men were dying at that very moment by hundreds, by thousands—and their motionless young bodies must have the same unnatural look as these wan ruins, these gutted houses and sterile fields.... War meant Death, Death, Death—Death everywhere and to everything.

By a special favour, the staff-officer who accompanied them managed to extend their trip to the ruined château of Mondement, the pivot on which the battle had turned. He had himself been in the thick of the fight, and standing before the shattered walls of the old house he explained the struggle for the spur of Mondement: the advance of the grey masses across the plain, their capture of the ridge that barred the road to Paris; then the impetuous rush of General Humbert's infantry, repulsed, returning, repulsed again, and again attacking; the hand-to-hand fighting in court and gardens; the French infantry's last irresistible dash, the batteries rattling up, getting into place on the ridge, and flinging back the grey battalions from the hillside into the marshes.

Mrs. Belknap smiled and exclaimed, with vague comments and a wandering glance (for the officer, carried away by his subject, had forgotten her and become technical); while Troy, his map spread on the top of a shot-riddled wall, followed every word and gesture with eyes that absorbed at the same time all the details of the immortal landscape.

The Marne—this was the actual setting of the battle of the Marne! This happy temperate landscape, with its sheltering woods, its friendly fields and downs flowing away to a mild sky, had looked on at the most awful conflict in history. Scenes of anguish and heroism that ought to have had some Titanic background of cliff and chasm had unrolled themselves among harmless fields, and along wood-roads where wild strawberries grew and children cut hazel-switches to drive home their geese. A name of glory and woe was attached to every copse and hollow, and to each grey steeple above the village roofs....

Troy listened, his heart beating higher at each exploit, till he forgot the horror of war, and thought only of its splendours. Oh, to have been there too! To have had even the smallest share in those great hours! To be able to say, as this young man could say: "Yes, I was in the battle of the Marne"; to be able to break off, and step back a yard or two, correcting one's self critically: "No ... it was *here* the General stood when I told him our batteries had got through ..." or: "This is the very spot where the first seventy-five was trained on the valley. I can see the swathes it cut in the Bavarians as they swarmed up at us a third and fourth time...."

Troy suddenly remembered a bit of *Henry V.* that M. Gantier had been fond of quoting:

And gentlemen in England now abed
Shall think themselves accurst they were not here,
And hold their manhood cheap, when any speaks
That fought with us....

Ah, yes—ah, yes—to have been in the battle of the Marne!

On the way back, below the crest of the hill, the motor stopped at the village church and the officer jumped down. "Some of our men are buried here," he said.

Mrs. Belknap, with a murmur of sympathy, caught up the bunch of roses she had gathered in the ravaged garden of the château, and they picked their way among the smashed and slanting stones of the cemetery to a corner behind the church where wooden crosses marked a row of fresh graves. Half-faded flowers in bottles were thrust into the loose earth, and a few tin wreaths hung on the arms of the crosses.

Some of the graves bore only the date of the battle, with "Pour la France," or "Priez pour lui"; but on others names and numbers had been roughly burnt into the crosses.

Suddenly Troy stopped short with a cry.

"What is it?" his mother asked. She had walked ahead of him to the parapet overhanging the valley, and forgetting her roses she leaned against the low cemetery wall while the officer took up his story.

Troy made no answer. Mrs. Belknap stood with her back to him, and he did not ask her to turn. He did not want her, or any one else, to read the name he had just read; of a sudden there had been revealed to him the deep secretiveness of sorrow. But he stole up to her and drew the flowers from her hand, while she continued, with vague inattentive murmurs, to follow the officer's explanations. She took no notice of Troy, and he went back to the grave and laid the roses on it.

On the cross he had read: "September 12, 1914. Paul Gantier, —th Chasseurs à pied."

"Oh, poor fellows ... poor fellows. Yes, that's right, Troy; put the roses on their graves," Mrs. Belknap assented approvingly, as she picked her way back to the motor.

IV

The 10th of November came, and they sailed.

The week in the steamer was intolerable, not only because they were packed like herrings, and Troy (who had never known discomfort before) had to share his narrow cabin with two young German-Americans full of open brag about the Fatherland; but also because of the same eternally renewed anecdotes among the genuine Americans about the perils and discomforts they had undergone, and the general disturbance of their plans.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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