

We Stand Above

*Originally published in the December
1917 edition of The International.*

It is a somewhat invidious task; but we suppose that some one has got to do it, and it seems as if that some one had to be ourselves.

In normal times art and literature take care of themselves. Wisdom is justified of her children. Before we have been dead three hundred years somebody is almost sure to notice it. The great mass of people is a homogeneous mass of brainless idiocy. Men are dumb animals, and women only quack. In times of peace the hack journalists are as inconspicuous as they are insignificant; but when war breaks out the hysteria natural to weak minds becomes vocal, and everybody wants to "do his bit" on one side or the other, by squealing when much the best thing to do would be to bury himself.

These little minds have no conception of the great ideas which distinguish man from manikin. They imagine that Rodin was a Frenchman, and Wagner a German. They do not understand that these persons were not men, but Gods. They do not understand that the creations of such men are in the nature of that image of the great Goddess Diana which came down from heaven for us men and for our salvation. They do not understand that Rheims is as sacred as Cologne; that the Kremlin should have been protected from the maniacs, who are trying to translate Bernard Shaw into action, as Jerusalem (if there be anything of artistic value therein) from the British. As a matter of fact, I believe there is nothing but a lot of faked historical monuments camouflaged by the wily Syrian for the exploitation of American tourists of the Chautauqua brand. If this be so, Allenby, go to it!

But as for us, we stand above. I do not know whether Bulgaria is at war with England; but if so, it is evidently the duty to God and man of every Bulgarian to knock the block off General Haig. At the same time, if that Bulgarian does not respect Kings College Chapel, or uses my first edition of Adonais for pipe lights, I will knock *his* block off if I can catch the Bulgar at it. We are warring for Democracy, but also for civilization, apparently owing to our inherent love of paradox. We have here a war within a war. We have not only to fight the foe without, and the foe within, but also the foe that is the worst of all, the overzealous friend. We feel rather as the President feels about the Vigilantes. If well-meaning asses were only mules how useful they might be in batteries! We are out to break the political will of another group of nations, and our worst foes are those of our own people who are giving the show away. We go to war to defend the rights of the little nations, and we imprison Irishmen who can not forget that their mothers were raped by British soldiers. We are particularly strong on Belgium, and her representative complains that there is to be no seat for Belgium on the Allied war council. The Germans go to war for Kultur, yet they cannot find an expedient for contracting out of the shelling of cathedrals. And if these things are done in the green tree of the people in power, what shall be done in the dry tree, and withered sticks of the mediocre. We have our attention taken away from the business of fighting by the miserable grunts of these self-advertising pigs, who are only guinea-pigs in so far as they can always be counted on to sell their souls for a guinea. It is not only useless and stupid to refuse the benefits of those who at the very lowest estimate were our friends, but the absolute destruction of the whole principle of civilization.

Art is long and political life is short. If we are enraged with the Germans for shelling St. Mark's, which they have not yet done, we ought certainly to declare war upon the French because of what Napoleon really

did do to St. Mark's a hundred years ago. In order to carry out this program still more effectively, we can destroy the statues of Lafayette, and burn our Shakespeares on the ground that the English burnt the Capitol at Washington. It is only the pettiest minds that perceive national qualities in works of art. At most, national schools form a convenient classification. If the Dutch, as at times has seemed likely, decide that the German cause is that of liberty, civilization, and progress, and determine to fight on their side, will some patriot immediately discover that Rembrandt did not know how to paint? Would it not be better to make up our minds about it now? Will Mr. Roosevelt decide to change his name to something less compromising? And shall we destroy the institution of marriage because the inhabitants of the Old Kent Road speak of their wives as "my old Dutch"? Shall we turn the feminine of duke into Americaness, to be quite safe, and rather true, anyhow?

I cannot say how deeply I feel about this matter. The insensate screams of the mob threaten to deafen even those few ears which were attuned to the still small voice of wisdom. The danger is enormous. Even defeat would be preferable to a universal iconoclasm. It is not a new story. Again and again the most priceless treasures of antiquity, to say nothing of the structure of the civilizations whence they sprung, have been destroyed utterly and irremediably in the most miserable religious and political quarrels. Was not the library of Alexandria worth more to mankind than the whole Roman Empire? Were not the stained glass windows of the churches of more importance than the entire struggle between Protestant and Catholic? The people who do not understand this are Huns.

This paper is not primarily political. So far as it is so, it is and will be loyal; but it will resent the thesis that in order to be loyal one must be insane. "Battle, murder, and sudden death" is excellent sport, and it is extremely necessary at this moment. The excretory sys-

tem of nature, pestilence, has been constipated by the misguided efforts of medicine and hygiene. We had to get rid of the surplus population, and we chose our own foolish way instead of Nature's wise way. So not a word against war! But the treasures of art, of literature, of music, must this time be preserved for humanity; and we are determined to resist to the death any attack upon those treasures. We are — for the moment — fighting the Germans; but Faust and Siegfried and Zarathustra, the achievement of Kant in philosophy and of Helmholtz in physics, must be put "out of bounds." We stand above.