

HENRY JAMES

*The American Volunteer
Motor-Ambulance Corps in France*

SIR,
Several of us Americans in London are so interested in the excellent work of this body, lately organised by Mr. Richard Norton and now in active operation at the rear of a considerable part of the longest line of battle known to history, that I have undertaken to express to you our common conviction that our countrymen at home will share our interest and respond to such particulars as we are by this time able to give. The idea of the admirable enterprise was suggested to Mr. Norton when, early in the course of the War, he saw at the American Hospital at Neuilly scores of cases of French and British wounded whose lives were lost, or who would have incurred lifelong disability and suffering, through the long delay of their removal from the field of battle. To help energetically to remedy this dire fact struck him at once as possible, and his application of energy was so immediate and effective that in just three weeks after his return to London to take the work in hand he had been joined by a number of his countrymen and of others possessed of cars, who had offered them as ambulances already fitted or easily convertible, and had not less promptly offered themselves as capable chauffeurs. To this promptly gathered equipment, the recruiting of which no red tape had hampered and no postponement to committee-meetings had delayed, were at once added certain other Cars of purchase—these made possible by funds rapidly received from many known and unknown friends in America. The fleet so collected amounted to some fifteen Cars. To the service of the British Red Cross and that of the St. John Ambulance it then addressed itself, gratefully welcomed, and enjoying from that moment the valuable association of Colonel A. J. Barry, of the British Army, who was already employed in part on behalf of the Red Cross. I have within a few days had the opportunity to learn from this zealous and accomplished coadjutor, as well as from Mr. Norton himself, some of the particulars of their comprehensive activity, they each

having been able to dash over to London for a visit of the briefest duration. It has thus been brought home to me how much the success of the good work depends on American generosity both in the personal and the pecuniary way—exercised, that is, by the contribution of Cars, to which personal service, that of their contributors, attaches itself, and of course by such gifts of money as shall make the Corps more and more worthy of its function and of the American name.

Its function is primarily that of gathering in the wounded, and those disabled by illness (though the question is almost always of the former), from the *postes de secours* and the field hospitals, the various nearest points to the Front, bestrewn with patient victims, to which a motor-car can workably penetrate, and conveying them to the base hospitals, and when necessary the railway stations, from which they may be further directed upon places of care, centres of those possibilities of recovery which the splendid recent extension of surgical and medical science causes more and more to preponderate. The great and blessed fact is that conditions of recovery are largely secured by the promptitude and celerity that motor-transport offers, as compared with railway services at the mercy of constant interruption and arrest, in the case of bad and already neglected wounds, those aggravated by exposure and delay, the long lying on the poisonous field before the blest regimental *brancardiers* or stretcher-bearers, waiting for the shelter of night, but full also of their own strain of pluck, can come and remove them. Carried mostly by rude arts, a mercy much hindered at the best, to the shelter, often hastily improvised, at which first aid becomes possible for them, they are there, as immediately and tenderly as possible, stowed in our waiting or arriving Cars, each of which receives as large a number as may be consistent with the particular suffering state of the stricken individual. Some of these are able to sit, at whatever cost from the inevitable shake over rough country roads; for others the lying posture only is thinkable, and the ideal Car is the one which may humanely accommodate three men outstretched and four or five seated. Three outstretched is sometimes a tight fit, but when this is impossible the gain in poor *blessés assis* is the greater—wedged together though broken shoulder or smashed arm may have to be with a like

shrinking and shuddering neighbour. The moral of these rigours is of course that the more numerous the rescuing vehicles the less inevitable the sore crowding. I find it difficult to express to you the sense of practical human pity, as well as the image of general helpful energy, applied in innumerable chance ways, that we get from the report of what the Corps has done, and holds itself in readiness to do, thanks to the admirable spirit of devotion without stint, of really passionate work, animating its individual members. These have been found beneficently and inexhaustibly active, it is interesting to be able to note, in proportion as they possess the general *educated* intelligence, the cultivated tradition of tact, and I may perhaps be allowed to confess that, for myself, I find a positive added beauty in the fact that the unpaid chauffeur, the wise amateur driver and ready lifter, helper, healer, and, so far as may be, consoler, is apt to be an University man and acquainted with other pursuits. One gets the sense that the labour, with its multiplied incidents and opportunities, is just unlimitedly inspiring to the keen spirit or the sympathetic soul, the recruit with energies and resources on hand that plead with him for the beauty of the vivid and palpable social result.

Not the least of the good offices open to our helpers are the odds and ends of aid determined by wayside encounters in a ravaged country, where distracted women and children flee from threatened or invaded villages, to be taken up, to be given the invaluable lift, if possible, in all the incoherence of their alarm and misery; sometimes with the elder men mixed in the tragic procession, tragi-comic even, very nearly, when the domestic or household objects they have snatched up in their headlong exodus, and are solemnly encumbered with, bear the oddest misproportion to the gravity of the case. They are hurried in, if the Car be happily free, and carried on to comparative safety, but with the admirable cleverness and courage of the Frenchwoman of whatever class essentially in evidence in whatever contact; never more so, for instance, than when a rude field hospital has had of a sudden to be knocked together in the poor schoolhouse of a village, and the mangled and lacerated brought into it on stretchers, or on any rough handcart or trundled barrow that has been im-

pressed into the service, have found the *villageoises*, bereft of their men, full of the bravest instinctive alertness, not wincing at sights of horror fit to try even trained sensibilities, handling shattered remnants of humanity with an art as extemporised as the refuge itself, and having each precarious charge ready for the expert transfer by the time the Car has hurried up. Emphasised enough by the ceaseless thunder of the Front the quality of the French and the British resistance and the pitch of their spirit; but one feels what is meant none the less when one hears the variety of heroism and the brightness of devotion in the women over all the region of battle described from observation as unsurpassable. Do we take too much for granted in imagining that this offered intimacy of appreciation of such finest aspects of the admirable, immortal France, and of a relation with them almost as illuminating to ourselves as beneficent to them, may itself rank as something of an appeal where the seeds of response to her magnificent struggle in the eye of our free longings and liberal impulses already exist?

I should mention that a particular great Army Corps, on the arrival of our first Cars on the scene, appealed to them for all the service they could render, and that to this Corps they have been as yet uninterruptedly attached, on the condition of a reserve of freedom to respond at once to any British invitation to a transfer of activity. Such an assurance had already been given the Commissioner for the British Red Cross, on the part of Mr. Norton and Colonel Barry, with their arrival at Boulogne, where that body cordially welcomed them, and whence in fact, on its request, a four-stretcher Car, with its American owner and another of our Volunteers in charge, proceeded to work for a fortnight, night and day, along the firing line on the Belgian frontier. Otherwise we have continuously enjoyed, in large, defined limits, up to the present writing, an association with one of the most tremendously engaged French Armies. The length of its line alone, were I to state it here in kilometres, would give some measure of the prodigious fighting stretch across what is practically the whole breadth of France, and it is in relation to a fraction of the former Front that we have worked. Very quickly, I may mention, we found one of our liveliest opportunities, Mr.

Norton and Colonel Barry proceeding together to ascertain what had become of one of the field hospitals known to have served in a small assaulted town a few days before, when, during a bombardment, Colonel Barry had saved many lives. Just as our Volunteers arrived a fresh bombardment began, and though assured by the fleeing inhabitants, including the mayor of the place, who was perhaps a trifle over-responsibly in advance of them, that there were no wounded left behind—as in fact proved to be the case—we nevertheless pushed on for full assurance. There were then no wounded to bring out, but it was our first happy chance of bearing away all the hopeless and helpless women and children we could carry. This was a less complicated matter, however, than that of one of Colonel Barry's particular reminiscences, an occasion when the Germans were advancing on a small place that it was clear they would take, and when pressing news came to him of 400 wounded in it, who were to be got out if humanly possible. They were got out and motored away—though it took the rescuing party thus three days, in the face of their difficulties and dangers, to effect the blest clearance. It may be imagined how precious in such conditions the power of the chauffeur-driven vehicle becomes, though indeed I believe the more special moral of this transaction, as given, was in the happy fact that the squad had blessedly been able to bring and keep with it four doctors, whose immediate service on the spot and during transport was the means of saving very many lives. The moral of that in turn would seem to be that the very ideal for the general case is the not so quite inconceivable volunteer who should be an ardent and gallant and not otherwise too much preoccupied young doctor with the possession of a Car and the ability to drive it, above all the ability to offer it, as his crowning attribute. Perhaps I sketch in such terms a slightly fantastic figure, but there is so much of strenuous suggestion, which withal manages at the same time to be romantic, in the information before me, that it simply multiplies, for the hopeful mind, the possibilities and felicities of equipped good-will. An association of the grim-mest reality clings at the same time, I am obliged to add, to the record of success I have just cited—the very last word of which seems to have been that in one of the houses of the

little distracted town were two French Sisters of Mercy who were in charge of an old bedridden lady and whom, with the object of their care, every effort was made in vain to remove. They absolutely declined all such interference with the fate God had appointed them to meet as nuns—if it was His will to make them martyrs. The curtain drops upon what became of them, but they too illustrate in their way the range of the Frenchwoman's power to face the situation.

Still another form of high usefulness comes to our Corps, I should finally mention, in its opportunities for tracing the whereabouts and recovering the identity of the dead, the English dead, named in those grim lists, supplied to them by the military authorities, which their intercourse with the people in a given area where fighting has occurred enables them often blessedly to clear up. Their pervasiveness, their ubiquity, keeps them in touch with the people, witnesses of what happens on the battle-swept area when, after the storm has moved on, certain of the lifeless sweepings are gathered up. Old villagers, searched out and questioned, testify and give a clue through which the whereabouts of the committal to thin earth of the last mortality of this, that or the other of the obscurely fallen comes as a kind of irony of relief to those waiting in suspense. This uncertainty had attached itself for weeks to the fate in particular of many of the men concerned in the already so historic retreat of the Allies from Mons—ground still considerably in the hands of the Germans, but also gradually accessible and where, as quickly as it becomes so, Colonel Barry pushes out into it in search of information. Sternly touching are such notes of general indication, information from the Curé, the village carpenter, the grave-digger of the place, a man called so-and-so and a gentleman called something else, as to the burial of 45 dead English in the public cemetery of such and such a small locality, as to the interment somewhere else of "an Englishman believed to be an officer," as to a hundred English surprised in a certain church and killed all but 40, and buried, as is not always their fortune for their kindred, without removal of their discs of identification. Among such like data we move when not among those of a more immediate violence, and all to be in their way scarce less considerately handled. Mixed with such gleanings one

comes upon other matters of testimony of which one hopes equal note is made—testimony as to ferocities perpetrated upon the civil population which I may not here specify. Every form of assistance and enquiry takes place of course in conditions of some danger, thanks to the risk of stray bullets and shells, not infrequently met when Cars operate, as they neither avoid doing nor wastefully seek to do, in proximity to the lines. The Germans, moreover, are noted as taking the view that the insignia of the Red Cross, with the implication of the precarious freight it covers, are in all circumstances a good mark for their shots; a view characteristic of their belligerent system at large, but not more deterrent for the ministers of the adversary in this connection than in any other, when the admirable end is in question.

I have doubtless said enough, however, in illustration of the interest attaching to all this service, a service in which not one of the forces of social energy and devotion, not one of the true social qualities, sympathy, ingenuity, tact and taste, fail to come into play. Such an exercise of them, as all the incidental possibilities are taken advantage of, represents for us all, who are happily not engaged in the huge destructive work, the play not simply of a reparatory or consolatory, but a positively productive and creative virtue in which there is a peculiar honour. We Americans are as little neutrals as possible where any aptitude for any action, of whatever kind, that affirms life and freshly and inventively exemplifies it, instead of overwhelming and undermining it, is concerned. Great is the chance in fact for exhibiting this as our entirely elastic, our supremely characteristic, social aptitude. We cannot do so cheaply indeed, any more than the opposite course is found, under whatever fatuity of presumption, inexpensive and ready-made. What I therefore invite all those whom this notice may reach to understand, as for that matter they easily will, is that the expenses of our enlightened enterprise have to be continuously met, and that if it has confidence in such support it may go on in all the alert pride and pity that need be desired. I am assured that the only criticism the members of the Corps make of it is that they wish more of their friends would come and support it either personally or financially—or, best of all, of course, both. At the moment I write I learn

this invocation to have been met to the extent of Mr. Norton's having within two or three days annexed five fresh Cars, with their owners to work them—and all, as I hear it put with elation, “excellent University men.” As an extremely helpful factor on the part of Volunteers is some facility in French and the good-will to stay on for whatever reasonable length of time, I assume the excellence of these gentlemen to include those signal merits. Most members of the Staff of 34 in all (as the number till lately at least has stood) have been glad to pay their own living expenses; but it is taken for granted that in cases where individuals are unable to meet that outlay indefinitely the subscribers to the Fund will not grudge its undertaking to find any valuable man in food and lodging. Such charges amount at the outside to 1 dollar 75 per day. The expenses of petrol and tyres are paid by the French Government or the British Red Cross, so that the contributor of the Car is at costs only for the maintenance of his chauffeur, if he brings one, or for necessary repairs. Mr. Eliot Norton, of 2, Rector Street, New York, is our recipient of donations on your side of the sea, Mr. George F. Read, Hon. Treas., care of Messrs. Brown Shipley & Co., 123, Pall Mall, S.W., kindly performs this office in London, and I am faithfully yours,

HENRY JAMES.

LONDON, *November 25th*, 1914.