

# FEAR

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Gabriel Chevallier

TRANSLATED BY MALCOLM IMRIE

Introduced by John Berger





Ouvrage publié avec le soutien du Centre national du livre  
Published with the support of the Centre national du livre

A complete catalogue record for this book can be obtained from the  
British Library on request

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First published as *La Peur* in 1930 by Editions Stock, Paris

First published in this paperback edition in 2012 by Serpent's Tail

First published in English in 2011 by Serpent's Tail,

an imprint of Profile Books Ltd

3A Exmouth House

Pine Street

London EC1R 0JH

website: [www.serpentstail.com](http://www.serpentstail.com)

ISBN: 978 1 84668 727 3

eISBN: 978 1 84765 643 8

Designed and typeset by [sue@lambledesign.demon.co.uk](mailto:sue@lambledesign.demon.co.uk)

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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# THE WOUND

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*'I am not a sheep, which means I am nothing'*

Stendhal

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## THE PROCLAMATION

*'The danger in these strong communities, founded on similar, steadfast individual members, is an increasing, inherited stupidity, which follows all stability like its shadow.'*

Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, I, 224 (trans. Helen Zimmern)

THE FIRE WAS ALREADY SMOULDERING somewhere down in the depths of Europe, but carefree France donned its summer costumes, straw hats and flannel trousers, and packed its bags for the holidays. There wasn't a cloud in the sky – such an optimistic, bright blue sky. It was terribly hot and drought was the only possible worry. It would be so lovely out in the countryside, or down by the sea. The scent of iced absinthe hung over the café terraces and gypsy orchestras played popular tunes from the *The Merry Widow*, which was then all the rage. The newspapers were full of details from a big murder trial that everyone was talking about; would the woman who some were calling the 'blood clot' be condemned or acquitted, would the thundering Labori, her lawyer, and the crimson-faced, raging little Borgia in a tail-coat, who had once led us (saved us, some said) carry the day?<sup>3</sup> We could see no further than that. Trains were packed and the booking offices did a roaring trade in round-trip tickets: the well-to-do were looking forward to a two-month holiday.

Then, all of a sudden, bolts of lightning pierce the perfect sky,

one after another: ultimatum... ultimatum... ultimatum... But France, gazing at the clouds gathering in the east, says: 'That's where the storm will be, over there.'

A clap of thunder in the clear sky above the Île-de-France. Lightning strikes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Priority! The telegraph is working flat out, for reasons of state. Post offices send out telegrams in cipher, marked 'Urgent'.

The proclamation is posted up on every town hall in the country.

The shouting starts: 'It's official!'

Crowds of people swarm on to the streets, pushing and shoving, running in all directions.

Cafés empty. Shops empty. Cinemas, museums, banks, churches, bachelor flats and police stations empty.

The whole of France now stands gazing at the poster and reads: 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity – General Mobilisation.'

The whole of France stands on tiptoe to see the poster, all squeezed together in a fraternal huddle, dripping with sweat beneath a burning sun, and repeats the word 'mobilisation' without understanding it.

A voice goes off in the crowd like a firecracker: IT'S WAR!

And then France goes into a spin, rushing along the streets and boulevards that are too narrow for such crowds, through the villages, and out across the countryside: war, war, war...

Hey! Over there! War!

The country policemen bang their little drums and all the churches ring all the bells in their ancient Romanesque towers and tall, fine Gothic steeples. All together now! War!

The sentries in their tricolour sentry-boxes present arms. The mayors put on their sashes. The prefects put on their old uniforms. The generals assemble their staff. The ministers, in a tizzy, consult each other. War! Whatever next?

No one can keep still. Not the bank clerks, not the drapers' assistants or the factory workers or the dressmakers or the typists

or even the concierges. We're closing! We're closing! The ticket offices are closed, the strong-rooms are closed, the factories and the offices are closed. The steel shutters are down. We are all off to see what's happening!

Military men take on a great importance and smile at the public acclaim. Career officers tell themselves: 'Our hour has come. No more grovelling around in the lower ranks for us.'

In the teeming streets, men and women, arm in arm, launch themselves into a great dizzy, senseless farandole, because it's war, a farandole which lasts through part of the night that follows this extraordinary day on which the posters went up on the town hall walls.

It starts just like a festival.

Only the cafés stay open.

And you can still smell the scent of iced absinthe, the scent of peacetime.

Women are crying. Why? A foreboding? Or just nerves?

War!

Everyone is getting ready. Everyone is going.

What is war?

No one has the foggiest idea...

It's more than forty years since the last one. The few surviving witnesses, identifiable by their medals, are old men who talk a lot of drivel, whose youth has deserted them and are well on their way to a place in Les Invalides.<sup>4</sup> It was not because we lacked valour that we lost the war of 1870 but because we were betrayed by Bazaine,<sup>5</sup> think the French. Ah, if it hadn't been for Bazaine...

In recent years we have learned of other, more distant wars. The one between the English and the Boers, for example. We know about that one mainly through the caricatures of Caran d'Ache<sup>6</sup> and the engravings in illustrated magazines. The courageous president Kruger led the Boers in their resolute resistance;

we admired him for it, and hoped he would triumph, so as to upset the English who burned Joan of Arc and made a martyr of Napoleon on Saint Helena. Then there was the Russo-Japanese war, Port Arthur and all that. Those Japanese must be formidable soldiers; they beat the famous Cossacks, our allies, who, it must be said, lacked railways. The colonial wars do not seem to us to be very alarming. They evoke expeditions to the heart of the desert, pillaging Arab encampments, the Spahis with their red burnous, Arabs firing Damascene muskets into the air and galloping off on their little horses kicking up the golden sand. As for the Balkan wars, the province of journalists, they didn't bother us. Living in the centre of Europe as we do, and convinced of the superiority of our civilisation, we consider that these regions are inhabited by coarse, inferior people. To us their wars resemble brawls between hooligans on suburban wastelands.

War was far from our thoughts. To imagine it, we had to refer back to History, to what little we knew of it. This was reassuring. For History offered us a past packed with glorious wars, great victories and ringing declarations, with a cast of remarkable and celebrated figures: Charles Martel,<sup>7</sup> Charlemagne, Saint Louis<sup>8</sup> sitting under an oak tree on his return from Palestine, Joan of Arc who kicked the English out of France, the hypocrite Louis XI who put people in cages while kissing his devotional medals, the gallant Francois I ('All is lost save honour'), Henri IV, good-natured and cynical ('A kingdom is well worth a Mass'<sup>9</sup>), the majestic Louis XIV, prolific producer of bastards, indeed all our skirt-lifting, jingoist kings, our eloquent revolutionaries, and Bayard, Jean Bart, Condé, Turenne, Moreau, Hoche, Masséna... And towering over them all, the mirage of Napoleon, in which the brilliant Corsican looms through the cannon smoke in his simple military uniform surrounded by his marshals, his dukes, his princes, his scarlet kings, in all their plumes and finery.

It must be said that after bothering all of Europe with our turbulence over so many centuries we have calmed down with

age. But if anyone should dare to challenge us, we are ready for them... And now the die is cast, we must go to war! We are not afraid, to war we will go. We are still French, are we not?

Men are stupid and ignorant. That is why they suffer. Instead of thinking, they believe all that they are told, all that they are taught. They choose their lords and masters without judging them, with a fatal taste for slavery.

Men are sheep. This fact makes armies and wars possible. They die the victims of their own stupid docility.

When you have seen war as I have just seen it, you ask yourself: 'How can we put up with such a thing? What frontier traced on a map, what national honour could possibly justify it? How can what is nothing but banditry be dressed up as an ideal, and allowed to happen?'

They told the Germans: 'Forward to a bright and joyous war! On to Paris! God is with us, for a greater Germany!' And the good, peaceful Germans, who take everything seriously, set forth to conquer, transforming themselves into savage beasts.

They told the French: 'The nation is under attack. We will fight for Justice and Retribution. On to Berlin!' And the pacifist French, the French who take nothing at all seriously, interrupted their modest little *rentier* reveries to go and fight.

So it was with the Austrians, the Belgians, the English, the Russians, the Turks, and then the Italians. In a single week, twenty million men, busy with their lives and loves, with making money and planning a future, received the order to stop everything to go and kill other men. And those twenty million individuals obeyed the order because they had been convinced that this was *their duty*.

Twenty million, all in good faith, following God and their prince... twenty million idiots... like me!

Or rather, no, I did not believe this was my duty. Nineteen



years old and I had not yet come to believe that there was anything great or noble in sticking a bayonet into a man's stomach, in rejoicing in his death.

But I went all the same.

Because it would have been hard for me to do anything else? No, that is not the real reason and I should not make myself out to be better than I am. I went against all my convictions, but still of my own free will – not to fight but out of curiosity: to see.

Through my own behaviour I can explain that of a great many others, especially in France.

In just a few hours, war turned everything upside down, spread the semblance of disorder everywhere – something the French always enjoy. They set off without any hatred at all, drawn by an adventure from which everything could be expected. The weather was lovely. This war was breaking out right at the beginning of August. Ordinary workers were the most eager: instead of their fortnight's annual holiday, they were going to get several months, visiting new places, and all at the expense of the Germans.

A great medley of clothes, customs and classes, a great clamour, a great cocktail of drinks, a new force given to individual initiatives, a need to smash things up, to leap over fences, to break laws – all this, at the start, made the war acceptable. It was confused with freedom, and discipline was then accepted in the belief that it was lacking.

Everywhere had the atmosphere of a funfair, a riot, a disaster and a triumph; a vast, intoxicating upheaval. The daily round had come to a halt. Men stopped being factory workers or civil servants, clerks or common labourers, in order to become explorers and conquerors. Or so at least they believed. They dreamed of the North as if it were America, or the pampas, or a virgin forest, of Germany as if it were a banquet; they dreamed of laying waste to the countryside, breaking open wine barrels, burning towns, the white stomachs of the blonde women of Germania, of pillage and plunder, of all that life normally denied them. Each individual

believed in his destiny, no one thought of death, except the death of others.

In short, the war got off to a pretty good start, with the help of chaos.

In Berlin those who wanted all this make an appearance on the palace balconies, in their finest uniforms, in postures suitable for the immortalising of famous conquerors.

Those who are unleashing on us two million fanatics, armed with rapid-fire artillery, machine guns, repeater rifles, hand grenades, aeroplanes, chemicals and electricity, shine with pride. Those who gave the signal for the massacre are smiling at their coming glory.

This is the moment when the first – and last – machine gun should have done its work, emptied its belt of bullets on to that emperor and his advisors, men who believe themselves to be strong, superhuman, arbiters of our destinies, and who are nothing but miserable imbeciles. Their cretinous vanity is destroying the world.

Meanwhile in Paris those who did not know how to prevent all this, who are surprised and overwhelmed by it, run around consulting each other, advising each other, rushing out reassuring communiqués, and mobilising the police against the spectre of revolution. The police, zealous as ever, strike down anyone who is not displaying sufficient enthusiasm.

In Brussels, in London, in Rome, those who feel threatened assess the balance of forces, weigh up their chances, and choose their camp.

And millions of men, because they believed what they were taught by emperors, legislators and bishops in their legal codes, their manuals of instruction and their catechisms, by historians in their history books, by ministers on their platforms, teachers in their colleges, and decent, ordinary people in their living rooms,

these millions of men form countless flocks that shepherds with officers' braids lead to the slaughterhouses, to the sound of music.

In a few short days, civilisation was wiped out. In a few short days, all our leaders became abject failures. For their role, their only role that mattered, was precisely to prevent all this.

If we did not know where we were going, they, at the very least, should have known where they were leading their nations. A man has the right to be stupid on his own account, but not on behalf of others.

On the afternoon of 3 August, I take a walk through the city with Fontan, a friend the same age as me.

Outside a café in the centre, an orchestra is blasting out the *Marseillaise*. Everyone removes their hats and stands up to listen. Everyone, that is, except for one frail, humbly dressed little man with a sad face crowned by a straw hat, who sits alone in a corner. One of the bystanders spots him, rushes up and, with a flick of his hand, knocks his hat flying. The man goes pale, shrugs his shoulders and says 'Bravo! Brave citizen!' The other man orders him to stand up. He refuses. Other people come over, surrounding him. The aggressor continues: 'You are insulting the nation, I will not put up with it!' The little man, by now very pale but stubborn, replies: 'And you, in my opinion, are insulting reason but I'll say nothing. I am a free man and I won't celebrate war.' Someone shouts: 'Give the coward a damn good hiding!' People run up from behind him, walking sticks are raised, tables overturned, glasses broken. In no time at all, a mob has formed. Those at the back, who haven't seen anything, tell newcomers what is happening. 'He's a spy. He shouted "Long live Germany!"' Indignation grips the mob, drives them on. There is the sound of blows striking home, cries of hatred and of pain. Eventually the café manager scurries over, a napkin still draped over his arm, and pulls them off. The little man, knocked off his chair, lies on the floor among

the spit and cigarette ends. His badly bruised face is unrecognisable, with one eye closed and blackened; blood trickles from his forehead and his open, swollen mouth; he is breathing with difficulty and cannot get up. The manager calls two waiters: 'Get him out of here!' They drag him on to the pavement and leave him there. But then one of the waiters goes back, leans over and shakes him threateningly: 'And what about your bill?' As the unfortunate man doesn't answer, the waiter rifles through his pockets and pulls a fistful of coins from his waistcoat, taking what he considers the right amount with the mob as his witness. 'The bastard would have gone off without paying!' General approval – 'These people are capable of anything! Lucky he was disarmed! He had a gun? He threatened people with a revolver. We're always too nice in France! The socialists are playing Germany's game, no mercy for those wretches. We're not having a repeat of 1870 this time round.'

To mark this great victory, people demand an encore of the *Marseillaise*. They stand and listen, looking down at the little man who is bleeding and whimpering quietly. Beside me I notice a beautiful, pale woman who murmurs to her companion: 'What a dreadful sight. That poor man had the courage...' '...of an idiot,' he interrupts. 'It is folly to go against public opinion.'

'There we see the war's first casualty,' I say to Fontan.

'Indeed,' he says, absently, 'there's a great deal of enthusiasm.'

I am the silent witness of this great frenzy.

From one day to the next, civilians dwindle away, transforming themselves into hastily dressed soldiers who run around town to make the most of their last hours and get themselves admired, and no longer button up their army tunics because this is war. In the evenings, those who have drunk too much insult passers-by, whom they take for Germans. The passers-by see this as a good sign and applaud them.

Wherever you go you hear martial music. Old gentlemen wish they were young, children bitterly wish they were not, and women bemoan the fact that they are only women.

I lose myself in the crowds which fill the approaches to the barracks, these sordid barracks that have become the storage batteries of national energy. I watch the regiments leave for the front. The crowd surrounds them, hugs them, showers them with flowers, and gets them drunk. Every line of soldiers is accompanied by clusters of delirious, dishevelled women, who are crying and laughing, offering their waists and their breasts to these heroes as if to the nation; who kiss the sweating faces of the rough, honest warriors and scream their hatred for the enemy, which makes them look ugly.

I watch the cavalry trot by, the army's aristocracy. The heavy cuirassiers, their breastplates blinding in the sunshine, an unstoppable force in a headlong charge. The dragoons, like medieval jousting preparing for a tournament with their plumed helmets, lances and pennants. The mounted chasseurs of the light cavalry, capering and prancing in their pale blue uniforms, chasseurs of the forward posts, who surge out of a fold in the landscape to cut down an enemy detachment with their sabres, or capture a village in a surprise attack. The artillery makes the houses shake; they say that the 75s fire twenty-five rounds a minute and always hit the target by the third shell. People gaze with respect at the silent muzzles of these little monsters that in a few days' time will be tearing whole divisions to shreds.

The Zouaves and the colonials are especially popular: bronzed, tattooed and fierce, straight-backed despite their huge packs, with wide, godless grins. People think they are bandits who will give no quarter; this is reassuring. And here come the blacks, whom we can spot from a distance by the white teeth shining in their dark faces, these childlike and cruel blacks who decapitate their enemies and cut off their ears to make amulets. A charming little detail. Good old blacks! People offer them alcohol and affection,