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THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS COMMITTEE AND THE NATIONAL RED CROSS SOCIETIES. (Continuation.)

Dunant's critics, even the most benevolent of them, have often reproached him with being an unpractical kind of visionary, and if one considers his ideas and schemes as a whole, there is much justice in their strictures. It also cannot be denied that he was poor in executive and administrative ability. But so far as the Red Cross is concerned, and that, after all is the only thing it is fair to judge him by, nothing could have been more extraordinarily far- and clear-sighted than his vision of it, first and last. His picture of what the national societies should be, brushed in in the pages quoted above, is as brief as it is complete, witness the fact that nothing essential has been either taken from, or added to it in the eighty years during which the movement has become a part of every nation's life, and a great power in the world. And when one further takes into account that he had no precedent to guide him, for nothing like it had ever been suggested or attempted before, Dunant stands acquitted of every charge of woolly-mindedness.

A well-meaning but vague idealist would have imagined a network of societies founded by compassionate souls in many countries, their common aim being to follow any army as a Samaritan auxiliary, offering their help on any battlefield whatever. But Dunant was a realist; he knew, none better, that for practical purposes it is every nation's, as it is every individual's, belief that charity begins at home; he also knew that no movement had a chance of success if it asked more of the average human being than he was able to give. The societies must therefore be national, not only in name but in fact. Each must exist for the benefit of its own wounded, and to complement the medical services of its own army; it must rely for its resources, both material and spiritual, upon its own people, and stand or fall with their response to the Red Cross idea. The deeper that idea struck root in the general consciousness, the more secure the national society's position would be, the higher its standing with the civil and military authorities, and the greater its usefulness to its own sufferers and others'.

The idea of voluntariness, which was the essence of the system, was closely bound up with the national character of the societies; for just as everyone who cared to go out and nurse his or her nation's wounded in war-time could join the societies and undergo the necessary training beforehand, so the people as a whole must be brought to feel that their society lived by their free and spontaneous effort to finance its generous undertakings. Thus all the enterprises of a national society would always be largely determined by popular approval or disapproval, and in that sense also the Red Cross of every country would be the people's affair to encourage or neglect.

A less experienced observer than Dunant might easily have underestimated the importance of the national societies' relations with their governments and armies. He, however, realised fully how indispensable it was to win the suffrage of generals and war ministers before the civilian relief work could show what it was worth. To be tolerated merely would never be enough; the new auxiliaries must be welcomed.

There were plenty of reasons why the military instances should look askance at the idea of a civilian

ambulance brigade seeking admission to the front lines. It needs no great effort of imagination to tell how so fantastic an innovation must have struck professional soldiers. On the other hand, if they were to refuse their co-operation, the whole plan would fall to the ground. So Dunant, during his missionary tour of Europe in the wake of his book, was at endless pains to overcome the opposition of influential army personages whose opinion stood high with kings and governments. The para-military character of the voluntary aid movement was given symbolic emphasis in the circumstance that its most eminent sponsor was the Swiss General Dufour. This noted soldier, the hero of a celebrated campaign conducted with equal gallantry, humanity and skill, had espoused Dunant's cause with a warmth that did not exclude a good deal of scepticism as to whether headquarters staffs could ever be got to accept it. There can be no doubt that his advocacy of the new idea went far towards reassuring both its military and political opponents.

For once the optimists were right. The historic conference which produced the Geneva Convention rewarded Dunant's great preparatory efforts. In all the countries he had visited, his noble, selfless purpose, his persuasive genius, his tact and irresistible personal charm, sowed a seed which sprouted instantly in the form of voluntary relief societies ready to burst into activity the moment the necessary guarantees were forthcoming. The national part of Dunant's appeal had been heard and answered; the time had come for the international part to show results even more brilliant and astonishing.

"Would it not be desirable . . . to formulate some international principle to be duly consecrated in a solemn agreement which, once approved and ratified would serve as a basis upon which to found Relief Societies for the Wounded?"

In the realisation of the Red Cross idea, the credit of the national societies belongs to Dunant alone. But in the international achievement he was only one of five. Perhaps no movement ever came into the world under a more favourable constellation, and in the whole concourse of providential circumstances that attended it, none was more unique than the combined existence and availability at precisely the right moment of the four other Genevese citizens who associated themselves with Dunant in his unprecedented enterprise.

(To be continued.)

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