

# Florence Nightingale and Henry Dunant

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## FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE AND HENRY DUNANT by Pierre Boissier



Henry Dunant (block kindly lent by the British Red Cross)

1970 marks at the same time the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Florence Nightingale and, by a happy coincidence, the hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the British Red Cross. Added to this is the fact that the founder of the Red Cross, Henry Dunant, and Florence Nightingale both died in 1910: force of circumstance induces us to imitate history and bring these two outstanding destinies together.

But first of all a few facts.

While our two heroes were enjoying a sheltered and comfortable childhood, what was happening in a world which was both infinitely distant from, and yet very close to the elegant dwellings of their parents?

In the mines, in the factories and in the mills children, less than ten years old, sometimes worked as much as sixteen hours a day, all too often under the supervision of overseers armed with

whips. And in order to recover the outlay of the machines more quickly, night shifts were set up which also required child labour. The mothers of these children were, of course, also at work in the factories and in the mines where they dragged and pushed the trolleys along the galleries too low for horses. On emerging from these dark places, unhealthy places of work, where it was necessary to keep pace with the rhythm of indefatigable machines that ran too quickly, many of these workers of all ages collapsed with fatigue on the road home: the road that led to the slums in which sickness and hunger took its monstrous toll of this crowded mass of humanity. It is hardly necessary to add that holidays, insurance and pensions were things unheard of at that time.

It is often thought that there was nothing, and could be nothing, worse than the circumstances of these underprivileged classes in the first half of the nineteenth century, but this is not true. There were the soldiers.

In the barracks of England and France, although filled with selected and stalwart young men, the mortality rate was double that of the whole population with its old people (old people under fifty years of age!) and its infants, of whom barely half survived childhood. So much for the barracks in peace time, when all's well and everything is easy, but what of the armies in campaign? Statistics, which were just beginning to be drawn up, show that, for one soldier killed by the enemy, seven or eight others died through the carelessness, negligence and stupidity of the commissariat. In fact, the armies destroyed themselves. To look after the relatively few war-wounded and the countless sick there were ridiculously few doctors and medical orderlies. In the French army, not unlike the English army in this respect, there were  $4\frac{1}{2}$  veterinary surgeons to a thousand horses and 0.8, less than one, doctor to a thousand men.

It is clear that the army took even less interest in preserving the life of a soldier than the industrialist in preserving the life of the worker. How can this difference be explained? It could be the subject of a long and interesting study. It is striking indeed to observe that, in the eighteenth century, the army medical services were proportionately far bigger. In France, under Louis XV, there were 40 surgeons to a divisional hospital, under Napoleon I there were only 10 and under Napoleon III the figure dropped to four. This was partly the result of the compulsory military service which gradually spread over continental Europe after the French Revolution. When the soldier costs nothing, no-one cares about him. The battle field was often far away, nobody knew what was going on and it was easy to spread the idea that all those who failed to return had died a heroic death fighting for their country, when in reality the majority of them perished through the pure negligence of their commanders. To this can be added the

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fact that everywhere the army was "the great mute", a body with no voice to complain, and without a spokesman. There was no Frederick Engels for the soldier.

It was into this closed and unknown world of the army that first Florence Nightingale and, a few years later, Henry Dunant were to venture. They were to penetrate the monster's lair, pit themselves against it, fight it bare-handed and compel it to give ground. They were to transform the life of the soldier.

They both did a quantity of other things. You all know—since there is nothing new that I can tell you about her—that Florence Nightingale extended her action to the civilian hospitals, that one of her great passions was for the training of nurses and that her indefatigable pen filled volumes of philosophical and theological works. It was the same with Dunant who very actively supported the causes of international arbitration, pacifism and feminism. But we shall not follow them on their various crusades. I am going to limit myself to what was not only the great concern of their lives, but also their meeting point: the soldiers.

## The Supernatural Calling of Florence Nightingale

French encyclopaedias often say that Florence Nightingale was one of the forerunners of the Red Cross. Is this true? Can it be said that Dunant continued the work of Florence Nightingale? Here is the argument which will lead us to compare what they did. However, on the way, we will pursue a second and perhaps more attractive objective: the comparison, not of two careers, but of two temperaments and of two destinies.

Let us first take note of this fact: Florence Nightingale and Henry Dunant were to be precipitated into the world of war, she aged 34 years and he 31, in an abrupt and unexpected manner. Indeed what could be more unexpected than that this national of a neutral country and, even more incredible, this woman of breeding, should one day emerge on a battle-field? Without being aware of it, had they not both prepared themselves for this discovery of the horrors of war which was to give a new meaning to their lives?

They had, both of them in their own way, broken with their environment.

The hardest, the most heart-rending and the most heroic breakaway was that of Florence Nightingale, because she had started higher up. Well born, wealthy, witty and very attractive, she had everything needed for success and brilliance in the well-planned life that opened before her. At her own insistence she was allowed to learn Greek and Latin, but her role in society was to shine in drawing-rooms. One fine day a marriage would be arranged for her, which would meet with approval of Society, but Flo looked anything but pleased. She was willing to dance and take part in quadrilles and charades, but her heart was not in it. At seventeen she knew that God had called her to serve. But whom and how? It was not yet clear to her, but she was already a being apart.

Gradually those around her discovered with horror what this vocation was to be: to care for the sick. This was a decision which would not have been well received even in the humblest circles. For service in the hospitals was, at that time, undertaken by women of scant virtue, drunkards for the most part, almost always brutal, utterly unscrupulous, in short the nearest possible thing to a prostitute — of the lowest class of course, the others have their charm — and from the dregs of society.

Out of consideration for her family, Florence Nightingale first chose to keep up appearances. It was in secret that she embarked upon reading everything that had been written on nursing and hospital techniques. These dry tomes enthralled her. Who would ever have thought that this elegant young lady would methodically acquire such immense knowledge?

However, theory must be put into practice. Once again ruses were necessary. Her parents travelled a lot and, obtaining their reluctant permission to indulge some of her whims, she found a means of gaining entry into hospitals here and there. Finally, since London society would remain ignorant of the fact, they even resigned themselves to allowing her to go to Germany for periods of instruction at the House of

Deaconesses at Kaiserwerth, where she submitted happily to the iron discipline and the appalling hours of work in this model establishment.

But this double life became psychologically and morally intolerable and Florence Nightingale made the break final to take up the position that was hers by right, that of a leader. In 1853 she took over the management of a big London hospital. A few hours were enough to make it clear to both personnel and patients that Miss Nightingale knew the job better than anyone and that there was no question of argument.

## The Business Misfortunes of Dunant

The young Dunant also began with a mystic period. This was partly due to the influence of Pastor Gaussen, an ardent and enthusiastic Revivalist, who stuffed the brains of his young pupils with an improbable prophetic hotch-potch. But, like Florence Nightingale, he made his début in a perfectly reassuring way. He entered a banking house, which brought approval from the puritanical and money-conscious Genevese.

However, Geneva and account books bored him. He left for Algeria where the banking house of Messrs. Lullin and Sautter had interests in the "Compagnie genevoise de Sétif", an agricultural concern. And then came the break. Dunant could not tolerate the manner in which the native labour was used and abused. Very soon there were violent scenes between him and the manager of the Company. He resigned and decided to have his own agricultural property. He declared that the natives in his employment would be happy and well paid, for he had taken the trouble to understand them and had grown to be really fond of them. He had taken lessons in Arabic and had explored not only Algeria but also Tunisia, about which, in 1858, he wrote a remarkable book which shows his respect for Islam.

He decided on a well-chosen site in Kabylia: Mons Djemila. He had machines sent from London to grind his wheat, machines of such good quality that, after more than a century, they are still going strong. It only remained to obtain the concessions for land and water, without which it would neither be possible to produce the wheat nor to turn the mills. As a rule the settlers obtained such concessions without any difficulty at all, and if the local populace showed signs of resisting, the army knew how to bring them to heel.

However, Dunant had been guilty of the worst imprudence by letting it be known that, at Mons Djemila, the natives would be well treated and well paid. The other settlers and the military government, immediately realised that



this trouble-maker was going to spoil the labour market. Such a man could not, and must not, succeed. So he was refused the concessions for which he had asked and, like Florence Nightingale, Dunant found himself swimming against the current.

So there they were, the two of them, oblivious of the fate that was lying in wait for them, masters of their own destiny and, above all, free. They both felt called very urgently not to fetter themselves. This was a basic feature of their character which was expressed notably by celibacy, we may even go so far as to say chastity, and which was to lay both of them open to the absolutely unjust and uncalled for mockery of those who attributed to them the same inclination for which Oscar Wilde paid so dearly later on.

### The Appalling Conditions Prevailing in European Armies

In order to improve the conditions of the soldiers it was necessary, first of



Florence Nightingale  
(*Florence Nightingale Hospital*)

all to verify it. Florence Nightingale and Henry Dunant went directly to the very worst: she to Crimea and he, three years later, to Italy.

The Crimean War is too well-known for us to recount here all its vicissitudes. However, let us note a few facts. The two armies, French and English, which disembarked in 1854 at Gallipoli had two things in common: the courage of their soldiers and the crass stupidity of their commissarists. The latter was made particularly evident by an almost utter disregard for health and medical care. Not only was nothing done to provide suitable food, clothing and accommodation for the troops, but there was no provision made to care for those who were stricken with diseases both foreseeable and avoidable, nor to dress the wounds of the injured. Supplies needed by the too few doctors were almost non-existent,

to such an extent that French surgeons were seen buying old surgical instruments in the flea market of Constantinople.

The inevitable, of course, came to pass. Scurvy, the causes of which were well known and which could easily have been prevented, claimed tens of thousands of victims, as did typhus and a host of other illnesses, almost all due to the exhausted state of the troops. The sick, infectious or not, were packed in among the wounded in enormous pseudo-hospitals. Contagion and gangrene ran riot there, powerfully aided in their deadly work by an administrative confusion that had a touch of genius. A joke was going round the armies that when God the Father created the heavens and the earth, one of His quartermasters called out to Him: "Stop Lord! You are going to upset chaos".

But here is a contrast. The French military administration, giving proof in this case of remarkable efficiency, took measures, that were crowned with success, to stop this dreadful scandal getting back to France. A "cabinet noir", a censorship office, was set up, which mercilessly censored all letters, even those of the generals. No criticism got through. Paris knew nothing and neither did Emperor Napoleon III. On the other hand, the English army tolerated the presence of journalists and the stink of "hospital gangrene" was wafted back to London: to London and to Florence Nightingale.

Her mind was quickly made up: she would go to the Crimea. She made her wish known to her old friend Sydney Herbert, at that time Secretary at War (there was also a Secretary of War), in a letter which crossed with one from Herbert asking her to go there, furnished with extensive powers.

The work of "the Lady with the Lamp" is well-known. Working day and night under inconceivable conditions, braving the hostility of those in charge, she was to save the British army. Two figures make this clear. During the second winter of the campaign, after the fall of Sebastopol, throughout the period when active hostilities had practically ceased, the French lost, through sickness and the incompetence of the medical services, 21,191 men, while the English lost only 606. The difference was Florence Nightingale.

This is one of the most extraordinary achievements in the entire military history of every country and of all time.

### Dunant's Vocation

How different were the circumstances that led Dunant to the theatre of war in Italy?

In 1859 the unfortunate owner of

the mills at Mons Djemila was in desperate straits. The offices in Algeria and the ministries in Paris continued to unite against him and to refuse him his wheat fields and his water. What could he do? There remained only one solution: to appeal to the highest possible authority: to Napoleon III himself. But, as a crowning misfortune, the Emperor was waging war against Austria in Lombardy. It couldn't be helped: Dunant had no choice but to run after him. This is how it happened that our philanthropic colonist arrived on the 24th June, at a small town called Castiglione. This was the very spot to which the wounded of the bloodiest battle Europe had known since Waterloo had dragged themselves. The battle of Solferino had only just ended when Dunant arrived at the rendezvous that fate had arranged for him.

Nothing had changed in the French army since the Crimea. Let us rather say that the Commissariat had followed its natural downward path. The lack of preparation had become such that some troops arrived on the scene of action in civilian clothes and it was necessary to strip the trousers from the Austrian dead on the battle field in order to obtain the white breeches that were needed.

At Castiglione Dunant found the wounded in a state of almost total neglect. There they were, 9,000 of them, littering the streets, the squares and the churches. A few doctors, five in all, without help, without material for dressings, could only give them a ridiculously small measure of assistance. There was neither bedding nor organised food supplies. Dunant knew nothing about medicine, but he acted as a gentleman. He interrupted his journey and, for almost a week, he did his best to help these abandoned men. Day and night he gave of himself. He brought water to those parched with thirst, he supported the heads of the dying and listened to their last wishes, he made clumsy attempts to apply some dressings with only the shirt-tails of the wounded themselves for bandages. Then he took to the road again, having failed in his endeavour to approach the Emperor, and returned to Paris at the end of an unsuccessful business trip.

The immense difference between our two characters is obvious. Florence Nightingale went to the Crimea because she wanted to care for the wounded. She had at her disposal the means, a team of nurses, money and definite powers. She was highly qualified for this task which she carried on for eight months. Now Dunant was the exact opposite. He arrived quite by chance on a business trip; he was the image of the incompetent amateur and he only remained with the wounded five days. But in both cases the scene was the same. Castiglione was Dunant's Scutari.

But here again we come to a fundamental resemblance between our two heroes. They were not, like thousands of others who had witnessed the same scenes, to return home and try to forget it all. No. Their lives from then on belonged to the wounded. They would have only one aim in life, to change the established order, to substitute intelligence for stupidity and feeling for indifference.

Yes, their aims were identical, but we shall see that they differed completely in their choice of means. From identical scenes they drew diametrically opposed conclusions.

Florence Nightingale's reasoning was simple: the military administration was badly organised; it must be reorganised.

England has never suffered from army-worship. We can even say that in the nineteenth century it was looked down upon. In the Crimea the generals themselves reproached Florence Nightingale for wanting to "spoil the brute". Rarely criticised, and of no concern either to the public or to Parliament, the Ministry of War had settled into an unchanging routine and a solid mediocrity. Florence Nightingale was to fight David's battle against this Goliath and victory was to be hers. As Le Nôtre in the seventeenth century had redesigned the gardens of France, so Florence Nightingale was to give a "new look" to the English hospitals. Her influence was to spread as far as the Canadian garrisons at the time of the war of Secession, then to India during the revolt of the Sepoys.

### The Inception of the Red Cross

Let us now return to Dunant. Let us pass from one extreme to the other. Like Florence Nightingale he had seen how the administration of the armies worked and the spirit that animated it. This was enough to convince him of two things: that reform was impossible and that, in consequence, a new institution must be created, of a private nature, which would make up for the deficiencies of the military administration.

His idea was simple: in every country of the world societies should be established which, in peace time, would train what he called "volunteer relief workers" and accumulate as much equipment as possible: surgical instruments, dressings, ambulances, etc. If war should break out, these societies would be ready for action; they would proceed at once, with all the means at their disposal to the scene of operations. Side by side with the medical services of their respective armies, they would collect the wounded from the battle field, dress their wounds and evacuate them to the rear.

Like Florence Nightingale, Dunant put his ideas on paper, in a book that he called "Un Souvenir de Solferino": "*A Memory of Solferino*". But the work was not intended for specialists only, because, as we already know, Dunant had abandoned the idea of convincing the military authorities. He addressed himself to the public: to the fathers and mothers of present and future soldiers, and also to those fathers and mothers of soldiers who were the kings and queens of Europe. His style is brilliant, his story full of colour and his descriptions are sometimes of an almost unbearable realism. The work attained its objective. It was spoken of with emotion in drawing-rooms where, thanks to him, there came to light that dark side of war: that aspect of which one never spoke.

It was beyond the powers of any one man to embark alone on the creation of the societies suggested by Dunant. So four Genevese citizens rallied round Dunant and decided with him to invite all the sovereigns of Europe to send to Geneva experts and representatives to whom the great idea could be submitted. This conference took place in 1863 and marked the foundation of the Red Cross.

Very soon afterwards these societies started to appear throughout Europe, under a variety of names at the beginning. Thus the British society was created under the name of the "National Society for Aid to the Sick and Wounded". It was only twenty years later that they adopted the name of Red Cross Societies and that the little group who had founded the movement became the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Dunant, who had the greatest admiration for Florence Nightingale, did not fail to send her his book. True to form, Florence Nightingale reacted with customary vivacity and made her complete disapproval quite clear. "A society of this kind" she wrote to him in January 1863, "would take upon itself duties that are in fact incumbent on the governments of every country". And she added that it would be an error to "wish to relieve these governments of a responsibility that is really theirs and which they alone are in a position to assume". There she was wrong, for the development of the army medical services in many countries was to come about with terrible slowness and, in many places, the Red Cross was to prove to be stronger, better equipped and better organised than the army medical services and was often to arrive first on the battle field and thus save the lives of hundreds of thousands of wounded who, without its help, would have been condemned to die of neglect. We can add that, even today, despite the considerable resources at the disposal of the army medical services, a vast field of action remains

open to the Red Cross, not only behind the lines, but in bombed towns, with refugees and all those who are the indirect victims of conflicts.

But let us go back to the origins of the Red Cross.

A few months after its foundation, Dunant had a new idea. Having made a close study of the contemporary wars (the Crimean War, the Italian campaign, the war of Secession and the war of Schleswig-Holstein), he realised that the belligerents were quite prepared to recognise the special situation of the wounded and those who cared for them. They were not, strictly speaking, enemies as they took no part in the fighting. Consequently, why should they be subjected to the hardships of war? In fact belligerents were prepared to spare such people if they could be assured of reciprocity in this matter, and if it were possible to recognise easily those vehicles and buildings whose sole use was to shelter the wounded. Once again Dunant found a simple and practical solution.

Why not, said Dunant, introduce in all armies a single symbol, the same everywhere and therefore known to all, a symbol which would indicate military hospitals, ambulances and medical personnel? By treaty the states would commit themselves mutually to respect this emblem.

No sooner said than done. In 1864 a diplomatic conference met in the Town Hall of Geneva, in the very room where, at a later date, a court of arbitration was to pass judgment on England in the Alabama case, and adopted the "Geneva convention for the amelioration of the conditions of the wounded in armies in the field". Henceforward ambulances, military hospitals and medical personnel "shall be recognised as neutral and, as such protected and respected by the belligerents". "A distinctive and uniform flag" was adopted: the red cross on a white ground.

This event marked an important date in the history of humanity. War and law had, until that time, been regarded as irreconcilable opposites. Was not war the most eloquent sign of the failure of international law? Dunant and the other founders of the Red Cross maintained, on the contrary, that law could take effect even in war and govern, in certain spheres, the behaviour of the combatants. This was the origin of all the written law of war, the Geneva Conventions and the Hague Conventions.

We have seen how, starting from identical premises, Florence Nightingale and Henry Dunant chose opposite ways. Florence Nightingale reformed the medical service, having found out its deficiencies, while Dunant created a





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new organisation. We could add that Florence Nightingale worked for her own country: it was the British Army that she took to her heart and that she intended to endow with better institutions, whilst Dunant placed himself in international territory straight away. From the very beginning he spoke of "all the countries in the world". The relief societies that he considered an urgent need, he wanted to see everywhere and as for the Geneva Convention, it too should lead to universality. Here is the antithesis: Florence Nightingale's work was national, while all Dunant's plans had an international character. However, it is only fair to Florence Nightingale to add that very soon her work, by its example to others, would extend in its influence far beyond the limits of the Empire. Other states were to be inspired by it, beginning with the Northern American states during the war of Secession.

### Dunant's Exile

Father of the Red Cross and of the Law of war, Dunant experienced the joys of celebrity for a little more than two years. He was in the forefront, received at courts: it was a great triumph of prestige.

But Nemesis is always around the corner. In dedicating himself to the welfare of the wounded, Dunant badly neglected his business which went from bad to worse. Suddenly the abyss opened. A Genevese bank which had lent him money, failed and Dunant fell into complete destitution. He took refuge in Paris, sleeping on benches in public gardens and in station waiting rooms. He suffered hunger, cold and burning humiliation. In 1870-71 during the Siege of Paris and the Commune, he made a heroic and creditable reappearance, saving the wounded and even finding the means to rescue hostages from the Prussians and conduct negotiations between the "Communards" and the "Versaillais". Later on he was to be seen in Plymouth, where he had been invited to give a lecture on arbitration. But he was so weak from hunger that he was taken ill and was unable to finish his speech.

Then oblivion closed over him.

One day he arrived in the small village of Heiden overlooking Lake Constance, and there a charitable institution gave him shelter. He was so poor that, lacking a change of clothing, he had to stay in bed when his clothes were being washed. He spent his last twenty-three years in this exile.

For a long time everyone thought that he was dead, until the day when a young Swiss-German journalist discovered that the founder of the Red Cross was living in this village in the Canton of Appenzell. He hurried there at once to find Dunant with a long

white beard and clad in a red dressing-gown, eagerly immersed in writing a book against war which he had entitled "L'Avenir Sanglant" (A Future of Blood and Tears). What a windfall, what a subject for an article! Newspapers all over the world picked it up. The astounding news broke that Henry Dunant was still alive and, overnight he was again covered in glory. Sovereigns wrote to him: he received thousands of messages and, supreme honour, the first Nobel Peace Prize.

In his will, written in a firm hand, Dunant asked that his "mortal remains should be cremated at Zurich with no ceremony whatsoever". So it was that he departed from this world on 30 October 1910, two and a half months after Florence Nightingale, who had expressed exactly the same wish which was no less scrupulously fulfilled.

### The Strange Resemblance of Two Destinies

What has just been said about the second part of Dunant's life brings us to a question that is somewhat strange. Is there not, here again, a comparison to be made with Florence Nightingale?

Dunant disappeared from the scene in the circumstances we have recounted in 1867. This was almost exactly the moment when Florence Nightingale became convinced that she was no longer in a fit state to get up or leave the house. She continued to work furiously from her bed, but, like Dunant, she disappeared so completely from the scene that the public came to believe that she too was dead. For forty-three years they were both to become faceless beings, inhabitants of a single room. The question is whether this is, in truth, merely a coincidence.

It seems obvious that a man who suffers however great a reversal of his fortunes at the age of thirty-nine, is not finished; particularly when he has the intellectual resources, the friends and the backing that Dunant had. In the same way, those who have studied closely the life of Florence Nightingale seem to think that the nervous and physical exhaustion she suffered, resulting from the Crimea war and from the furious attacks she had launched against the administration, was not incurable. It certainly seems that nothing absolutely compelled her to lead the life of a recluse, so what can have been her reason for doing so?

We can but wonder whether certain people who have given of their best and who have attained the goal apparently assigned to them by providence, do not feel unconsciously perhaps, but nonetheless forcefully, that they must disappear from the scene, and that it is only on this understanding that the work they have begun will be carried on by others and come to

fulfilment. For many years Florence Nightingale lived with the idea that her death was imminent. Did she fear it, or was she invoking it?

As regards the Red Cross, the question seems quite clear to me. Great use was made of the symbolic figure of Dunant, bending over the wounded at Castiglione and caring for them, regardless of the colour of their uniform. However, Dunant in flesh and blood, moved by genius to be sure, but too full of ideas, an encumbrance and difficult to integrate into a team, would he not have been a hindrance rather than a help to those who patiently and methodically built up the structure of the Red Cross?

What would have happened if Florence Nightingale had really ceased all activity in the 60s? It is obviously impossible to say, since history cannot be re-written. But it would not be inadmissible to wonder whether the appalling labour to which she subjected herself, accepting neither advice nor opposition, did not in fact impede those in the Ministry of War who wanted reform from taking over and possibly achieving more rapidly the desired result. For the flame that she had kindled in the Crimea could never again be extinguished.

One last word.

We have seen that, in order to transform the lot of the soldiers, Florence Nightingale and Henry Dunant chose divergent, if not opposite ways. Therefore we cannot say that Florence Nightingale was a forerunner of the Red Cross. Let us put her in the place she truly deserves, that of the founder of modern military medical services. This is no less a claim to fame.

However, the future was to show clearly that their work was complementary. It is enough to take a look at one of the ambulances, one of the hospital ships, or one of the helicopters of the British armed forces to be convinced of this. They bear witness to the constant progress that has been carried out on the lines advocated by Florence Nightingale, but what emblem protects them against the attacks of a possible enemy? It is the Red Cross, the emblem of Dunant. That is how their paths meet again and why they are now linked in our memories and in the gratitude of mankind.

*(Mr. Pierre Boissier is Director of the Henry Dunant Institute in Geneva. The present text, the reproduction of an after-dinner speech at the Anglo-Swiss Society, has been graciously communicated to us by Madame René Keller.)*

(PMB)