

At the Root

by H. P. Lovecraft

Written 1918

To those who look beneath the surface, the present universal war drives home more than one anthropological truth in striking fashion; and of the verities none is more profound than that relating to the essential immutability of mankind and its instincts.

Four years ago a large part of the civilised world laboured under certain biological fallacies which may, in a sense, be held responsible for the extent and duration of the present conflict. These fallacies, which were the foundation of pacifism and other pernicious forms of social and political radicalism, dealt with the capacity of man to evolve mentally beyond his former state of subservience to primate instinct and pugnacity, and to conduct his affairs and international or interracial relations on a basis of reason and good-will. That belief in such capability is unscientific and childishly naive, is beside the question. The fact remains, that the most civilised part of the world, including our own Anglo-Saxondom, did entertain enough of these notions to relax military vigilance, lay stress on points of honour, place trust in treaties, and permit a powerful and unscrupulous nation to indulge unchecked and unsuspected in nearly fifty years of preparation for world-wide robbery and slaughter. We are reaping the result of our simplicity.

The past is over. Our former follies we can but regret, and expiate as best we may by a crusade to the death against the Trans-Rhenane monster which we allowed to grow and flourish beneath our very eyes. But the future holds more of responsibility, and we must prepare to guard against any renascence of the benevolent delusions that four years of blood have barely been able to discard forever the sentimental standpoint, and to view our species through the cold eyes of science alone. We must recognise the essential underlaying savagery in the animal called man, and return to older and sounder principles of national life and defense. We must realise that man's nature will remain the same so long as he remains man; that civilisation is but a slight coverlet beneath which the dominant beast sleeps lightly and ever ready to awake. To preserve civilisation, we must deal scientifically with the brute element, using only genuine biological principles. In considering ourselves, we think too much of ethics and sociology - too little of plain natural history. We should perceive that man's period of historical existence, a period so short that his physical constitution has not been altered in the slightest degree, is insufficient to allow of any considerable mental change. The instincts that governed the Egyptians and the Assyrians of old, govern us as well; and as the ancients thought, grasped, struggled, and deceived, so shall we moderns continue to think, grasp, struggle, and deceive in our inmost hearts. Change is only superficial and apparent.

Man's respect for the imponderables varies according to his mental constitution and environment. Through certain modes of thought and training it can be elevated tremendously, yet there is always a limit. The man or nation of high culture may acknowledge to great lengths the restraints imposed by

conventions and honour, but beyond a certain point primitive will or desire cannot be curbed. Denied anything ardently desired, the individual or state will argue and parley just so long - then, if the impelling motive be sufficiently great, will cast aside every rule and break down every acquired inhibition, plunging viciously after the object wished; all the more fantastically savage because of previous repression. The sole ultimate factor in human decisions is physical force. This we must learn, however repugnant the idea may seem, if we are to protect ourselves and our institutions. Reliance on anything else is fallacious and ruinous. Dangerous beyond description are the voices sometimes heard today, decrying the continuance of armament after the close of the present hostilities.

The specific application of the scientific truth regarding man's native instincts will be found in the adoption of a post-bellum international programme. Obviously, we must take into account the primordial substructure and arrange for the upholding of culture by methods which will stand the acid test of stress and conflicting ambitions. In disillusioned diplomacy, ample armament, and universal military training alone will be found the solution of the world's difficulties. It will not be a perfect solution, because humanity is not perfect. It will not abolish war, because war is the expression of a natural human tendency. But it will at least produce an approximate stability of social and political conditions, and prevent the menace of the entire world by the greed of any one of its constituent parts.

The Lovecraft Library wishes to extend its gratitude to Eulogio García Recalde for transcribing this text.