

“The Battle Cry of Peace”

Letter to the New York *Evening Post*, 12 October 1915

Sir: That mysterious title, “The Battle Cry of Peace,” has intrigued my curiosity ever since I first saw it. Variants, just as elusive, such as “The War Cry of Friendship,” “The Death Rattle of Life,” “The Love Song of Hate,” have been running through my mind, until at last I have been obliged to see the motion-picture play itself in the hope that I should thus solve the problem. Alas, the meaning still escapes me, but I am able to suggest to Commodore J. Stuart Blackton,* of Oyster Bay, Long Island (mark you, Oyster Bay), that a far more appropriate name for his play would be “The Trumpet Call of the Bull Moose.” The educational value of this rare and refreshing entertainment has been so highly praised by the National Security League, and the Army League, and the American Legion, that I feel that I ought to testify publicly to the several important lessons which I have learned from this film. The following facts stand out clearly in my mind:

(1) That Mr Hiram Maxim, like Noah of old (to whom I imagine Mr Maxim bears a close physical resemblance), is a wonderful old gentleman, whose prophecies of impending doom are shockingly disregarded by his

* James Stuart Blackton (1875–1941) was English. He emigrated to the US as a very young man. Working as a reporter/artist for the New York *Evening World* he was sent in 1896 to interview Edison who had just unveiled his Vitascope, one of the first film projectors. Realizing the commercial potential of films, Blackton founded the Vitagraph Film Co for which he wrote the script of “Battle Cry”. He never bore the title “Commodore” – this is Fuller’s irony.

light and frivolous countrymen and women, with the exception of a choice little group of about a score of patriots who, like all audiences shown in moving pictures, make up in enthusiasm and unanimity what they lack in numbers.

(2) That the pacifists, most of whom appear to be very unpleasant-looking foreign spies, are in full control of the destinies of this unhappy country. These facts should surely be brought to the notice of Miss Jane Addams, who may not be aware either of the atrocious spies with whom she is supposed to be associating or of the great strength of the peace movements. That, anyway, will encourage her!

(3) That the invading army, when it comes, will spend most of its time smashing the furniture (most of it very ugly stuff) in our homes, and making very violent and disagreeable love to young American ladies, whose abhorrence of the enemy is doubtless greatly increased by the hideous uniform he wears. It is also very clear – and here is a crumb of comfort for poor Mr Maxim – that the enemy’s soldiers are very bad marksmen, for they completely fail to hit the target when shooting at him with a machine-gun at a distance of about ten yards.

(4) That according to some ingenious diagrams which are presented on the screen during the progress of the play, like the powder in the jam, the population of America may be represented by a man about as tall as the Statue of Liberty but, alas, the army and navy of this miserable country are represented by a little figure about the size of a baby kewpie. This distressing fact, and others equally gloomy from Commodore Blackton’s point of view, were received with roars of

laughter by the audience, which may be supposed is what usually happens, for there quickly appeared on the screen a reproachful message from the gallant Commodore himself, saying, more in sorrow than in anger, "Ah, but this is no laughing matter."

(5) Washington, Napoleon, Lincoln, Grant, and Lee, when they appear on the screen to give their hearty support to Gen. Leonard Wood, Col. Roosevelt, Capt. Jack Crawford (the Poet Scout), and the Rev. Dr Lyman Abbott, in their plea for preparedness and a billion-dollar loan, are seen to be very pleasant and friendly, not to say familiar gentlemen, obviously of like passions to ourselves.

(6) That it is clearly the Commodore's opinion that here as in Europe war is an old man's game, for all the chief supporters of this plea for "preparedness" are either septuagenarians or octogenarians, beginning with the fiery old Irishman, a veteran of the Civil War, who begins the play, exciting our admiration by his vigor and enthusiasm rather than by what he says. Then various pictures show us Mr Maxim, Dr Lyman Abbott, and a group of hoary admirals, including apparently a twin brother of von Tirpitz (to whose appeals for a bigger navy nobody but the hero listens), and, lastly, eight hundred members of the G. A. R. all waving little American flags and looking very self-conscious and uncomfortable.

(7) To correct the unfortunate impression that the American Legion is not a thoroughly democratic institution, we are shown some stirring pictures of the quiet heroism and self-sacrifice with which, on receiving the call to service, the clubman leaves his club, the taxi driver his taxi, and the golfer his golf.

(8) At this very improving entertainment even the programme is not without its lessons. It begins with an earnest and pathetic, not to say maudlin, address by the gallant Commodore to the "Mothers of America" to whom the play is dedicated "with respect, reverence, and admiration." Though not a mother myself, I could not refrain from reading this soul-stirring appeal so full of simple home truths like, "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world," and "let us have peace," and "we must be the champions of the laws of humanity." But it is surely a somewhat doubtful compliment that the Commodore pays to his naval and military friends when he tells the mothers of America that "no body of men are half so anxious for peace as are the army and navy!"

On the second page of the programme is set out prominently a quotation from the writings of the prophet Ezekiel (doubtless the Rev. Lyman Abbott discovered this choice for the Commodore . . . "what damned error but some sober brow will bless it and approve it with a text"). [*Merchant of Venice*, Act II sc.ii] On the same page, the Fire Notice caught my eye. I imagine we do not have to thank the Commodore for this warning, though indeed the note of preparedness is struck here also – but in another key. This fire notice ends with the words which seem to me to have a deeper significance than is intended: "In case of disturbance of any kind, to avoid the dangers of panic, walk, do not run." Here, I think, Fire Commissioner Adamson gives us better advice than does either the Prophet Ezekiel or the Commodore Blackton.

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