

# LET'S FACE THE FACTS

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7

Address to the Men and Women  
of Canada

BY

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over a national network of  
the Canadian Broadcasting  
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*Following is the full text of the radio speech delivered by Hendrik Willem van Loon in the series "Let's Face the Facts" on Sunday night, November 10:*

I would like to speak to you tonight about a curious historical phenomenon which respects neither time nor space but which was the same in the days when Belshazzar watched the handwriting on the wall and failed to understand it. For it was only two years ago when the statesmen of Europe's great democracies completely failed to understand the printed matter in that curious book called "My Battle" in which—undoubtedly for the first time in the annals of history—a criminal publicly announced at what particular hour on which particular day he intended to break into which particular house on which particular street and what acts of cruelty and violence he then intended to commit.

But what was even more incomprehensible was the fact that this book was translated into every known language, was sold by the millions, was widely read, but that nobody felt the slightest need of doing something about it. It was the case of a firebug threatening to set fire to a hospital and announcing his plans to the police and the police saying, "That is interesting," and then doing nothing about it.

Now if there had only been one such incident, we could have dismissed it as the sort of unexplainable mental blindness which sometimes overtakes pilots or switchmen who run their ship on a rock or let a train run into an open switch, all the time apparently knowing what they are doing and yet helpless to do otherwise. Such cases, however, occur so rarely that they are chiefly of interest to our alienists and to the judges who, with a very faulty knowledge of psychiatry, have to send these poor devils to jail for a number of years. But what of the fact-blindness we ourselves have witnessed these last few years? The plan of attack on Norway dated back to the Great War of 1914 and everybody in Scandinavia knew about it. But when Norway was invaded, both the Allies and the Norwegians seemed completely surprised. They had been looking at such a menace for more than twenty years but they had never "taken it in" to use a most graphic description. They had just never taken it in.

## KNEW OF INVASION

After that, the neutral nations of Europe might have realized that the highwaymen in Berlin meant business. I knew about the planned invasion—details and all—of the Netherlands two weeks before it happened. I have no private lines of information. There was nothing mysterious about it. Most newspapermen in New York knew about it. I cabled friends in Holland—told them to come to America—we would be glad to have them stay with us—for they were cheerful Nazi-haters and would hardly survive having to live under the Nazi yoke. They laughed at my suggestion. I got letters written the night before the invasion. Those letters said, "Don't be foolish. We are safer over here than you are in America where there may be a Bolshie revolution at any moment. You read the headlines in your sensational American press. There is nothing to the story about a German invasion, for Herr Hitler has given us his word of honour that he will do nothing against us."

And mind you—these were bright people—people who knew their world—who had long since realized that the solemn oath of Adolf Hitler, the specialist in perjury, was worth about as much as a share in the Panama Canal of poor old de Lesseps. But they were fact-blind. Their eyes must have seen the danger that was threatening them, but somehow or other what their eyes saw failed to register itself upon their brains—upon their consciousness, and they were destroyed because of their blindness to the existing facts.

However, let us not blame them too easily. It is true that from our point of view they were pretty dumb. But in the first place, future generations may come to the conclusion that just now we are just as unwilling to recognize facts as the people in Europe, whose blindness we deplore. And all of history is there to show us that fact-blindness is an affliction which has been practically universal ever since the beginning of time.

After all, we cannot exactly accuse the contemporaries of Pericles of having been lacking in intelligence. Most of the thoughts we think today—most of the science we have—are but a continuation of the thoughts and the science of the days of Pericles. And it was then that the science of politics was discovered—of politics which according to Aris-

totle was the science which endeavoured to discover what was good for organized society.

But that magnificent fabric of human intelligence came sadly to an end—an end which probably could have been avoided—because no one apparently was able to draw the logical conclusions from an endless number of plainly visible facts—all of which warned the Greeks in unmistakable terms: "Cease quarrelling among each other—unite your forces or you will all of you perish at the hands of your mighty Macedonian neighbour."

## DOWNFALL OF GREECE

The downfall of Greece is usually explained upon the ground that the Greeks were top-heavy mentally and that like most artistic and intellectual people, they had no gift for practical politics. Very well, let us look at the practical politicians—let us look at the Romans. They were hardly an emotional people. Their art and their science they imported from Greece. They were too busy to bother about such trifles. Administering an empire was their business. Giving the world law and order was the beginning and the end of their ambition. They were practical men of business with both feet on the ground. But when certain danger-signs began to make themselves not only visible but also audible and finally tangible, they proved themselves to be no more clear-sighted than those long-haired Greek philosophers and artists whom—in their heart of hearts—they despised as cordially as a fox-hunting squire despises his nephew who has gone in for ballet dancing. And after four centuries of endlessly repeated warnings, they and their noble empire went just as beautifully to pieces as the Athens of Pericles, only that the ruins are not quite as attractive.

One little chunk of that empire remained. Constantinople managed to prolong its existence for almost a thousand years, after Rome had become what Warsaw is today. The rest of Europe knew it as a bulwark which defended the West from the encroachments of the East. Constantinople was the outpost which protected Christianity from its arch-enemy, Mohammedanism. During the last five centuries of their independent existence, the Byzantines never ceased to warn the rest of Europe of what would happen should they allow their city to fall into the hands of the heathen. Instead of recognizing the danger



that threatened them from the side of the Moslems, the eastern European powers did their best to ruin the Byzantine Empire, wasted their energies upon the Crusades—on the whole the most useless and wasteful military effort of all time—and allowed the Turk to establish himself along the banks of the Bosphorus. The result was hundreds of years of misery. Even as late as the year 1683, seventy-five years after Champlain had laid the foundation of the city of Quebec, the heart of Europe was once more threatened as a result of this fact-blindness of the people of the Middle Ages and then it was only the miracle of Johan Sobieski's timely arrival with his Polish army which saved Vienna from destruction.

### CHURCH WAS WARNED

In the meantime, the Reformation had taken place. Three hundred years before this event took place, the Church had received unmistakable warnings that a very thorough reform was necessary if that ancient establishment were to survive. Here was probably the wisest and most forward-looking organization of all times—an organization which had all the best brains of the civilized part of Europe at its disposal. The warnings that something would sooner or later have to be done were unmistakable. And even those least willing to bring about any changes recognized that certain reforms were necessary. But with typical fact-blindness, Europe allowed itself to be drawn into a century of hideous religious warfare before the question was settled—to no one's entire satisfaction.

Meanwhile, a little incident. When news reached the Rialto of Venice that a Genoese in command of a Spanish squadron had found a new road to the Indies, all shares dropped 50 per cent. But they soon recovered. And did thereupon Venice and Genoa try to get hold of this new route, buy up ships, sink money into the new colonial venture? They did not! They saw the handwriting on the ticker and they read it correctly but their will was lamed and nothing was done.

But until recently the most flagrant case of historical fact-blindness was the great French Revolution, the one that did not mix its principles with any Vichy. For more than half a century there had been warnings that a collapse of the old royal structure was imminent unless there was

an immediate overhauling of the decrepit old building. The creaking had become so loud that even the people living in the *luxurious* front rooms must have noticed that something was amiss when the chandeliers began to fall down and the evil smells from the basement commenced to spread through the living quarters of the charming ladies and gentlemen who until then had had only one worry—whether last year's sable coat would still be good enough for this year's season at the opera.

And what did they do? They went on dancing until they danced themselves to the guillotine. And even when their heads went tumbling into Monsieur Sanson's basket, they had not quite realized what had happened to them.

### AN OLD AILMENT

I had better stop. The list is getting too long and my time is limited, but from these few examples it ought to be fairly clear that fact-blindness is a very old ailment and one of the most disastrous afflictions that ever hit the human race, for it is responsible for the death of more millions of people, for the disappearance of more empires, kingdoms, satrapies, sultanates, republics, business organizations and political parties, than any other form of wholesale violence that attacks the human race and makes it go forth to slay its fellow-men.

There you have a description of the malady.

Now let us try to discover what causes this fatal form of blindness?

I used to think that it was really a kind of intellectual cataract, because it was usually found among very old nations. But upon further investigation, I discovered that the ailment is by no means restricted to the very old. Young people, young nations, are just as apt to suffer from this particular kind of blindness as their older neighbours.

Now while delving deep into this problem, I hit upon an interesting little pamphlet devoted to a subject with which I was, alas, sadly familiar but which I had always thought was due to my own lack of intelligence—the subject of proof-reader's blindness. As every author knows, it is no earthly use reading your own proof for you will never see nothing—which is not elegant English but which expresses exactly what I mean. You will happily read the same

jumble of letters a dozen times and never notice that you have given the dimensions of the pyramids in such a way that they are a mile long and a mile wide and three-quarters of an inch high. And why do you do that? Because you are suffering from something which here and now I offer to the learned gentlemen of the medical profession as *mens clausa* or shut mind.

You, the author, knew how high the pyramids should be. You have looked it up a dozen times in all sorts of architectural and archeological hand-books until you were sure you had found the correct height. Thereupon you had quietly closed your mind upon the subject, for it was now a *fait accompli*—an accomplished fact—goodbye, dear old pyramids! You are so high—neither higher nor lower—and that is that! But the printer, thinking of something else when he came to your pyramidal dimensions, made Mr. Cheop's handiwork three-quarters of an inch high. And you yourself, with your mind firmly shut upon the subject, had read right straight across that hopeless blunder because the facts had so firmly established themselves in your mind that your mind had become definitely closed upon the subject.

### FATAL FACT-BLINDNESS

Applying this proof-reader's blindness to the problem under discussion, prolonged and painstaking investigations through the history of the last 5,000 years have brought me to the conviction that our deplorable and fatal fact-blindness is merely the result of that shut mind, which affects everybody who has become so thoroughly familiar with a certain fact that he can no longer imagine any other way in which that fact can manifest itself. I once had the privilege of being torpedoed. It did not kill me but in fifteen minutes of time I learned more about by fellow-men than I had learned from thirty years spent in reading books. Especially about the quiet courage and the dignity of those very simple souls—the stewards and the sailors and the stokers—a category of human beings whom until then I had always taken more or less for granted and who now suddenly revealed themselves as belonging to that same class of men and women whose behaviour in the London of today has not only filled the hearts of



all the world with an unparalleled admiration, but who, by their sublime behaviour, have assured us that all is still well with the British nation and that the Nazis are barking up the wrong tree—or perhaps it would be more correct to say that they are dropping their bombs down the wrong chimney—when they hope to destroy England by attacking the most defenceless part of the population.

Those men and the stewardesses were accustomed to danger and their minds had remained open and therefore they knew what to do. Far different was the reaction of those of my fellow-passengers who had always lived in the safety of an established society in which when one paid for a first-class passage one had come to expect a completely safe transportation. They simply could not understand that there were certain emergencies—certain acts of God—when even a first-class passenger in a cabin deluxe might be obliged to climb into an overcrowded life-boat and pull an oar just like a stoker or the fellow who used to bring you your shaving water in the morning. Their minds which had been definitely shut upon the subject simply refused to accept an entirely different fact—the fact that you either rowed for dear life or drowned.

#### WHAT IS THE CURE?

Having now diagnosed the ailment of fact-blindness and having—at least to my own satisfaction—demonstrated the cause of the affliction, there remains the question which will interest every intelligent listener most of all: what is the cure? The cure, my good listeners, is the same as the cure for a shut safe or a shut oyster: open it up! That is easily said, but how is it done? The answer to this question is really very simple. We have got to train our younger generations the way we train our physicians and engineers—train them to judge every case on its own merits, train them never to take anything for granted. That is the secret of all true knowledge—a constant and uninterrupted desire for more knowledge, a constant doubt, an incessant insistence upon further experiments and an absolute unwillingness to take anything for granted. But alas, within the realm of politics, we have never yet regarded it as a science in and by itself. As a result of this we

allowed emotion to take the place of experiment and there is nothing that will contribute more to a mind that is shut than the emotions.

And so, believing—believing absolutely and without a moment of doubt in the ultimate victory of the cause of human freedom—in the cause that will once more give the average man his chance to live his own life in his own way and that will make him, and not the state, the beginning and end of a desirable form of life, I would like to make a suggestion to my listeners. This time we were almost caught napping. This time we almost perished because we were stricken with a deplorable case of fact-blindness. Let us watch that never again in the future, calamity almost overtakes us because, having eyes, we yet failed to see, and having ears, we yet failed to hear.

#### KEEP MINDS OPEN

Let us train every one of our citizens to keep his mind wide open. It may take years to train them in that knowledge of the past which alone can prevent them from repeating all the mistakes of the past. Let us teach them to study history and to use their historical knowledge not merely as an amusing pastime for their leisure hours but as the best possible protection against that old and dangerous affliction known as fact-blindness.

And now before I bid you farewell I would like to make one remark of a personal nature which shows our Canadian friends that on the part of this speaker there is no blindness when it comes to recognizing the great kindness and the generous hospitality with which the Canadian people have opened their hearts and homes to their guests from the Low Countries. As one born in the old Netherlands, though now living in the New Netherlands, I feel it my duty to tell you how greatly this gracious act on the part of the Canadian people has been appreciated by all those who hail from that part of the world which fell as one of the first victims of the Nazi onslaught, but which in every part of the world is continuing the good fight, having as a nautical people long since learned that the tide which has run in must also of necessity run out again.

#### A PERSONAL MESSAGE

And here I would like to tell you a little story. It is really a

personal aside to Her Royal Highness, but our Canadian friends will understand it as well as their royal guest.

There is a small town in the land of our birth, Your Highness, a small town which you and I both know. Your mother is not only the Queen of the Netherlands but she is also the Marquess of that ancient city of Veere, of which for a great many years I was a humble citizen. In that little town of Veere, which for almost 500 years was the port of entry for all the merchandise of Scotland, so that even today the names of the streets and the houses bear witness to that long and close association between Scotland and the Netherlands, there lived an honourable and learned notary by the name of Valerius. He spent the latter part of his life collecting all the songs that were sung by our people during the eighty years they fought their war of liberty. One of those songs the good burghers of Veere liked so well that they made the chimes of the tower of their town hall play it whenever the time had come for the clock to strike the hour. And behold . . . in the course of the centuries that melody left our little town and wandered far and wide. Today it has become the Battle Hymn of Freedom of all those who on occasions of great anxiety need some way of giving expression to their belief in the righteousness of their cause.

For four hundred years, Your Royal Highness, that melody was heard across the fertile fields of our beloved old Zeeland. Today it is stilled. But the hour will come—yes, the hour will come and sooner than we dared to hope—when the hymn of prayer of good Valerius will once again be a hymn of praise and benediction—of praise for the freedom that has been regained—of benediction for the names of those who gave their lives that this mighty purpose might be accomplished.

And so good night to you, my friends of Canada, and a good night to Her Royal Highness, and let the music say what I cannot say unto you by means of the spoken word . . . let this music speak and let those stout chords of a steadfast Courage proclaim unto all the world that liberty is not dead—that freedom still lives and, God helping us, will live for ever. Good night.