

OUR FRIENDS THE FRENCH.*

The *Grande Place* is steeped in the mellow sunshine of early evening. The air is luminous—there is a hint of gold in it; the shadows on the *pavée* square are long and exquisitely soft.

The buildings—mostly of three or four storeys in height—present an unbroken front on each side of the vast square. Many of them have been painted in colours once bright, but now subdued as a consequence of war time economies. But the window-boxes and shutters are still gay, and there are red-tiled roofs that are joyous amid their more sombre neighbours. The total effect is quaint and picturesque enough. Islanded at one end of the square stands the *hotel de ville*, a building massive, substantial, gracefully proportioned, its clock tower a landmark for miles around. In its material properties the building seems to typify this thriving populous town of the *Pas de Calais*.

* This sketch was written at St. Omer in the Spring of 1916, when the Verdun battle was at its fiercest. At that time the Glasgow Highlanders were engaged in guarding the British Lines of Communication, the Battalion Headquarters being at St. Omer.

British soldiers and French civilians in almost equal numbers move to and fro on the great square, in leisurely fashion for the most part, for in the evening there is little business traffic here. Occasionally one hears the tramp of mailed boots on the paving stones, and one may see a little party of soldiers, probably dressed in dongaree overalls, returning to their billets after a fatigue. Sometimes a military band gives a concert in the square, and then you will see Tommies and Poilus and French civilians gathered together into one friendly crowd listening to the music.

Between the hours of six and eight the *estaminets* are full of British soldiers, resting and refreshing themselves after the labours of the day. The *Estaminet La Belle Vue* faces directly on the *Grande Place*. The two broad high windows, which together with the doorway fill its entire frontage, are open. Within, the air is cool and fresh, and the sunlit square presents a pleasing panorama to the eyes.

In one of the window spaces which project balcony-wise over the footpath a half-dozen British officers, lounging around a small table, are discussing Benedictine and the latest war rumours; in the other several Tommies slake their dusty throats with French beer at two

sous a glass, or, if it happens to be pay-day, with English stout at twelve sous a glass—the while they express critical opinions on the performances of the opposing teams in the inter-regimental football match played two days previously, or on the appearance and dress of any attractive morsel of femininity who may chance to cross the square.

“Crickey! She’s got lotsa powder on ’er face, that little bit o’ fluff ’as,” one will say: “I kin see it glistenin’ from ’ere.”

“Narrabit of it,” another will respond: “that’s o’ny sweat.”

At little tables scattered about the spacious floor other men in khaki are seated quietly gossiping, and on a raised platform at the farther end of the room two earnest sons of Mars stump to and fro and round and round a lumpy billiard table without ever making any appreciable addition to their scores despite their extravagant use of Madame’s chalk.

One side of the *auberge* is occupied by French civilians—men whose ages range from forty-odd to eighty. Practically the same men come evening after evening, for this hospitable house is in the nature of a social club to them. For two or maybe three hours they will sit chatting intently and cheerfully among themselves, dis-

cussing the latest trend of the war as it is gathered from the *Paris Matin* or *Le Journal du Nord*, and tracing with stubby forefingers the maps illustrative of the march of events.

To the British listener, depressed a little by the party spite, the rancorous political hostilities, the malign abuse of individuals, which to-day inform the London press, the conversation of these amiable *bourgeois* is tonic and refreshing. Their faith in *Père Joffre* and his generals and in the Ministers of State is so implicit, so profound; their confidence in the ultimate achievement of the Allies' aims is so unquestioned, so essential, so obsessive. Do things go ill for France? No matter! It is but for the moment; the luck of war: but the end will be the same. If they ever have doubts they do not express them—not even by a tone or inflexion of the voice.

At intervals of a few days a German aeroplane or aeroplanes will appear over the town, and bombs may be dropped and civilians killed; and in the evening the "old boys" will still meet at *La Belle Vue*, and if there is a hint of mournful solemnity in their voices as they speak of the innocent victims of the raid, and if there is an added bitterness in their references to *ces Allemands sacrés*, there is no shade of pessimism. Although every night they hear the rumbling of

the guns up in the area of the conflict they have no fear; and if their eyes are daily saddened by the spectacle of maimed and broken youth—if their own best and dearest pay the full price for love of country—yet do they never flinch or falter in their determination or their high hopes. If they are weary of war it is not with the weariness of enervation or spent zeal. France was war-weary ere ever August 1st, 1914, dawned: her past history she has written in blood, and the story of her Greatest Glory she is writing now in blood, writing at the dictate of Honour.

One used to think of France—(the impression may have been a wrong one, but there it was)—as a youth (for France is always young), of brilliant parts, clever, gay, cynical, with light laughter on the lips and love of ease and pleasure in the heart: doing some things well—oh, very well—yet not throwing the weight of his whole being into the business of life: a little lethargic, a little easy-going, a little *enervé*. But to-day we see France as a strong man stripped to the buff, his muscles steeled, his every sense alert and directed towards one end: his mind bent on a single purpose—a purpose that is a passion. Bruised and bleeding from a hundred wounds, yet he falters not in the grim struggle—he fights for very life itself—and in his blows is the

strength that cometh from consciousness of right: and in his eyes is the light of a great courage, a noble pride, a high hope, and on his set lips the seal of the Will-to-conquer.

France—La Belle France, to revert to the feminine appellation that is usual—has created for herself a new soul, and has won a greater glory than she has yet known.

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In the estaminet, when their talk is done, the "old boys" fall to playing cards. Marguerite—a pleasant-faced lass and a sensible one—moves hither and thither supplying them with refreshments and exchanging a cheery word with each. Their requirements are modest, for a single glass of beer or wine or maybe two will suffice them for the entire evening—at a cost of a penny or two. Henri, the waiter, resplendent in an evening suit, a spotless white apron, and the tiniest and glossiest of fair moustaches, also bustles around in attendance on Madame's guests. He says "Good evening, t'ank you!" to every British soldier who enters, and he has, I think, the winsomest smile that I ever saw on a man's face. One likes to speak with the seventeen-years-old Henri, if only for the charm of his smile. The one thing he will not do for a British soldier is to converse with him in French.

Henri insists on speaking in English, even though his interlocutor may use French. "I know that I spik ver' bad," he says, "but I learn—*comme ça*." A statement there is no disputing.

Madame presides over the destinies of the establishment from a high stool behind the bar. There is not much that happens within the four walls that escapes her observant eyes, especially if it affects the till. In all the Pas de Calais there is no more shrewd woman of business—and that is saying much, for the typical woman of the French *bourgeoisie* has an excellent head for *affaires*. Yet Madame is affable to her customers, and from her high throne smiles expansively and nods a greeting to each as they enter. Her most austere moods occur at those times when a succession of five-franc notes finds its way into the till, necessitating the giving of change: then her manner becomes frigid in the extreme. All French shopkeepers are reluctant to change five-franc notes, and in consequence one begins to think of these in the same terms as ten-pound notes, although their value is only three and sevenpence.

Madame is not so gifted lingually as Henri. Her English vocabulary, so far as I know, comprises four words only. But these she uses every night and at the same moment according to

the clock. The very instant that the minute hand proclaims it to be eight o'clock, Madame's voice resounds shrilly through the room—"Eighto-cloke!" And a moment later—"Time, pleece!"

That is the signal for all British soldiers to withdraw and betake themselves to their billets. Should one delay for even a few moments a military policeman pops his head in the doorway and gives utterance to the identical words that Madame has used: and thereby one learns how Madame acquired her mastery of the English tongue.

M'sieu le Maire is a portly individual and jolly, as all portly individuals should be. His cheeks are of a jolly red colour, his eyes have a jolly twinkle that even communal worries have been unable to quench, and his mouth, when it is not hidden by the huge black bowl of his favourite pipe, is seen to be expressive of jollity too.

Yet his life for the past twenty months has been one of many cares. At first there was the danger and the likelihood that the town would be overrun by the German hordes, and when that evil had been averted by the gallantry of the troops there was need for the wise and far-

seeing conduct of communal affairs, to reassure the people and to set them an example in municipal thrift and efficiency. Now he has to assist the British military authorities by every means in his power to secure billets for the troops, while at the same time safeguarding the interests of the populace, and it need hardly be said that these negotiations call for the display of infinite tact and resource. Also, *M'sieu le Maire's* two sons have been in the fighting line since the war began, and both have been wounded. Yet his good humour and flow of cheerful spirits have never abated.

The war is long, he says: the time is a sad and anxious one for all: but the end will be worth all the pain and sacrifice: no matter what price we pay, it will be cheap when measured with the result, which is the liberation of Europe.

I have visited the home of *M'sieu le Maire* and met there the gracious lady who is his wife. In her own way she is no less active than her husband in the cause of France; her days are spent in the service of various charitable organisations in aid of the French troops. The first time I entered the *salon* I found her seated at the window intent on mending some garments for one of her sons at the front.

M'sieu has a hobby : he is collecting souvenirs of the sojourn of the British soldiers in the town. His collection of cap badges, shoulder numerals, tunic buttons, etc., is the largest and most comprehensive that I have ever seen in the possession of a private individual. It is his intention to present them to the local museum after the war, when they will be to future generations a witness and a memento of the days when the town harboured within its bounds the friendly warriors of *Angleterre*.

One evening *M'sieu* and I went to a theatre together. Lest you have an erroneous conception of the place I should add that it was an old riding school, and comprised four bare brick walls, a roof, and an earthen floor. But a stage had been erected at one end, with a curtain that rolled up and down, rough benches had been brought in, and—Voilà ! A theatre ! French civilians were only admitted when accompanied by British soldiers, and on this particular evening *M'sieu le Maire* was my protégé. The play, which was presented by the officers and men of a regiment stationed here, was an ambitious production, and was in the nature of a revue. It was an aggregation or a hash-up of scenes from various revues now running in London, the humour being specially adapted for soldiers.

Costumes had been imported from London, scenery had been specially painted, the "prettiest" men of the battalion had assiduously studied all the tricks of femininity for weeks on end, and now, arrayed in the shortest and fluffiest of frocks, they reproduced them for the benefit of their pals. *M'sieu le Maire* was enchanted; if he did not understand much of the dialogue he appreciated the bright music and the dancing and the impassioned love-making. (There's always plenty of this last when the heroine is a soldier.) He sat with his opera glasses fixed to his eyes and chuckled to himself; he laughed loud and long whenever the audience laughed, and often when every other soul but himself was silent; and none applauded so frequently or vigorously as he.

"That was good—very good," said he, when at eight o'clock we were taking our homeward way. "It is the first play I have seen since the war began. If only Madame could have come, how she would have amused herself! It is so gay, so lively—one forgets that there is a war. And these demoiselles so charming, so adorable. O, là, là! You English are such droll fellows, such *comiques*! It is to laugh!"