Behind the Front

Impressions of a Tourist in Western Europe.

Originally published in two parts in the December 29, 1915 and January 5, 1916 editions of The Fatherland.

It would serve no useful purpose to tell just how I reached France. The interest begins on one's arrival.

The France one knew of old is not so changed until one approaches Paris, except for the immense numbers of English raw recruits. The government has very sensibly turned over empty barracks to the British military authorities. There everything is in order — not lodging only, but paradegrounds and all other necessaries; in addition many non-commissioned officers of the French army past fighting age are being used to instruct the young English officers in their duties. There are also many bilingual English civilians employed in various capacities. The new Tommy Atkins is being taught a fair amount of elementary French, and especially the principles of their drill. He is also learning to know the general characteristics of the countryside. Evidently the British expect to be fighting on French soil for the next year or two. This being granted, one must admit that the arrangement is intelligent. I was told that when these troops are comparatively in shape, they are drafted back to England for regimentation, equipment and drafting to various points. With the exception of the few old sergeants, of whom mention is made above, there are practically no French troops visible in any of the country through which I passed, and even the unfit have been called up, unless actually disabled, and are being employed on work of secondary importance such as guarding railroads and bridges.

The feeling among the people of all classes is distinctly good. There is, of course the most intense hatred

for the enemy — which in England hardly exists, as will be explained later — but with it goes a certain smiling confidence, like a prize-fighter in the 19th round of a winning mill. Their heads are bloody, but unbowed, as Henley might have said. Every one believes that the undoubted fact of the check on the charming instance of the Gallic spirit. Père Boncier, who had kept a "gargotte" for forty years, just off the Faubourg Montmartre, was sent a piece of German war bread by his son. There must have been enchantment in the loaf; the old man had the idea of his life. He bundled off to the Government and contracted for the whole supply of German bread that might be captured. Now "tout Paris" goes to feed at the horrible little restaurant in order to gloat over the misery of the wicked Bosche! It is very childish and very Parisian.

I only remained in Paris long enough to see a few old friends, and inquire how fate was treating them and theirs. My real goal was England; the contradictory accounts of the spirit of the people, and of what had actually happened in the Zeppelin raids, had excited my curiosity to the highest point.

So I took the long odds, and went over to London. As luck would have it, I missed a big raid by twenty-four hours. The moment was ideal; every one was full of the subject. British insularity, by the way, is completely abrogated; one talks to one's fellow-passenger in a railroad car as if he were one's longlost brother. Everyone is madly eager for every scrap of news, false or true; it is one of several unexpected results of the censorship. Nobody knows what is happening; official reports may or may not be true; they are certainly doctored. When one thinks of the great outcry that was made in the beginning of the war against Wolff's Bureau, which was supposed to be disseminating false news, the joke is apparent. The Germans have acquired a reputation for truth-telling, if for nothing else. All their claims have proved true in the long run. And though even now the average

Englishman will not admit it except in his most secret chamber, he has a subconscious feeling that it is so, which manifests itself in intense disquiet and distrust.

The Londoner is not really so concerned with the results of the raids on London as he might reasonably be. He is haunted by the fear of something worse which he does not know. He is afraid about the Navy. For all he knows, the big dockyards may have been destroyed, and half the ships put out of action.

However, the damage in London itself is bad enough. Liverpool Street Station was wrecked in one raid; an attempt on Ludgate Hill Station resulted in the gutting of a block just south of St. Paul's and one high explosive bomb missed the station by a few yards only, and destroyed dozens of small shops. The attack on Charing Cross was not very successful; indeed, a bomb missed Bernard Shaw's house by about fifty yards; too cruel had they hit it! But the worst damage was in the Hoxton district. I did not see it myself, but my secretary happens to live quite close, and had been up all night watching the assault and the resulting fires when she came to meet me. There appears to have been a high wind blowing; the houses — it is a district of mean streets — caught fire and the brigade was unable to cope with the conflagration. There is a gutted patch of London five or six blocks wide, and the best part of half a mile in length. Hundreds, probably thousands, must have perished. It is not clear why this district should have been selected for attack; it seems probable that the Zeppelins had lost their bearings.

The effect on London was not great; Hoxton was a place which it was the truest kindness to destroy!

Part II

For some reason or other in their last Zeppelin raid on London the Germans appear to have decided to make the damage as widespread as possible, instead of con-

centrating it in one quarter. A house close to my lawyer's office in Chancery Lane was entirely destroyed, and the *Morning Post* Building and several banks were seriously damaged. There is good hope that a certain building was destroyed which contains the only evidence of my owing somebody 5,000 pounds. Further afield there was a great deal of damage to the docks, and still more to Woolwich Arsenal. Owing to the capital importance of the position the greatest secrecy was observed about it. I took special pains to inquire on this point, and though, of course, it was impossible to gain access to the arsenal itself, the immense amount of mourning in the districts where the workmen live indicated that many men must have been killed. An anti-aircraft battery at Enfield was destroyed, and it was rumored that the small arms factory there had been hit. A great deal of damage was done at Croydon, especially at its suburb Addiscombe, where my aunt lives. Unfortunately, her house was not hit; otherwise I should not have to trouble to write this article. Count Zeppelin is respectfully requested to try again. The exact address is Eton Lodge, Outram Road.

Much more important than any material damage is the general effect of the war upon the morale of the people. As a professional psychologist I regarded it as my special task to investigate this. I am compelled to say that I found a good deal of difficulty in dealing with my friends, who completely failed to understand my attitude in the war. It will hardly be believed, but I was actually called upon to prove that I was the only patriotic Englishman alive. I had to quote the Bible to them, "Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth." If I had been at the Foreign Office, as I ought to have been, there would have been no war at all. England would have stayed out, and insisted on France staying out. Germany would have been left a free hand to deal with Russia. This policy would have been in accord with that of every English statesman since 1830. England backed the wrong horse. Similarly, most of my subsequent remarks, which

have excited such disapproval, were said (subsequently, but not so well) by Lloyd George and other responsible people. Strongly, however, as I urged these points, I cannot pretend that I convinced my friends. It is the stupidity of England which is losing this war for her. However, they were too busy hating the government to care much what I said. I do not think that I have ever seen such intensity of black, impotent, speechless rage, as one and all displayed. There was a subconscious feeling that the whole thing was a ghastly blunder, and that the details matched the ensemble. None of the known politicians was trusted; such hope as existed was based on outsiders like Lord Derby. The eternal squabbles of the cabinet and the press aroused infinite disgust. During the whole of my visit the *Daily Mail* was attacking the government with an animus which went altogether beyond the bounds of criticism. It was evidently based on personal hatred and ambition. Every one felt this, loathed the situation, and was reduced to a nervous wreck by the feeling that it was impossible to do anything.

There was also a terrible quarrel about the recruiting. Furious campaigns were being waged about the sex problem: "Should married men be called out?"

There was also a deadly fear that the impossible would happen, that England was really being beaten. Unless one has lived in England for a long time, it is impossible to realize how the conviction that England is invincible is part of the national consciousness. It is for this reason that the alarmists have never obtained a hearing. Even people like Lord Roberts, who were respected as experts on every other point, and who would have been listened to attentively if they had laid down the law in any other fashion, were reviled and contemned in the most decided manner whenever they suggested that England might be in danger. The Boer war itself was always thought of as a little war. The issue was never doubtful in the mind of any one in Eng-

land. Even now, such confidence as exists is largely due to the systematic way in which disasters have been minimized. Mons, Antwerp, Loos, Neuve Chapelle, the Dardanelles even, are looked upon with the same sort of annoyance as would occur in America, if the trusted third baseman of the Red Sox dropped a catch. It is still not conceivable that England may really be smashed. And yet, there lurks in the mind of every man the unspoken fear that "der Tag" may really have arrived. There is something of Belshazzar's Feast about every dinner party.

I think the slow-riding dogged courage of the English was sapped by victorianism. It exists, but only in certain limited classes. Too many people are living on their nerves. There is a sort of nightmare effect very largely distributed. The military situation will be discussed, until it is almost discussed away; but just as complacency begins, the thought suddenly arrives: But what about the government? What about the workingman? And the scaffoldings are knocked away from under the optimist. Victorianism had made every one so discontented, so miserable that there does not seem so much to fight for. No doubt the greatest errors were made in the original advertising campaign, with its wheedling and its insults. It rubbed the Englishman up in exactly the wrong way. Advertising is a tradesman's dodge; and England being a nation of shopkeepers, every one knew that it was cheating. Had there been a government in the country at the beginning of the war to seize the reigns of power, declare conscription immediately, and shoot down unhesitatingly any one who objected, there would have been no trouble. Every one would have said: This is the spirit of Cromwell and of Wellington. But all the people in power were temporizers, men of words, vote-catchers, nearly all of them lawyers by profession. In any crisis the only man who can do anything is some rough, practical personality. The very qualities which bring a man to the front in or-

dinary times are those which make him useless in an emergency. The history of every nation is full of such examples, and, of course, from the nature of the case, it is impossible in times of peace to arrange for a supply of such men to be on tap.

As to the trading classes, they express the utmost patriotism, but it is of a rather peculiar kind. It has struck them that the war is doing them immense harm, and they know full well that a peace concluded now would complete their ruin. So they are unanimous for a fight to a finish. They would go themselves if they were not so busy; in the meanwhile, they are volubly indignant with the working classes for not going. In point of fact, the need is no longer men or money or munitions; it is morale. The British Tommy will only follow a gentleman; and most of these have been used up, or belong to the stage-door class. The soldiers' trade has been too long despised in England; it has been fine to be an officer, but to know anything about soldiering has been disgraceful. Those who took their profession seriously have been hazed in the messes. Result: plenty to follow, and none to lead. You can make a very fair private in six months; but a non-com. or a subaltern cannot be turned out in two years, especially with no elder men to instruct them. So the new armies are composed of keen eager men, muddled over until they are perfectly sick of the incompetence of their superiors. They are also disgusted to death at the utter hopelessness of the strategists. The Flanders' proposition was intelligible; but the Dardanelles' folly has made much discontent. Wounded men are full of gristly tales of that disaster; no food, no ammunition, no shelter, no hospitals, "no ruddy nothing," as one Sergeant told me. They were flung out, like shooting so much rubbish, on the shore. Further, they are annoyed at the limitations of the fleet. The average man seems to have thought that the whole peninsula could be blown away by a few hours' bombardment.

The working classes as a whole are far more really patriotic than the bourgeois. But socialism and self-interest have rotted them far more than in Germany, where the party is on paper far stronger. The murmur of the English slave is silent. I talked with many of the revolution. All would welcome any change, but none had any idea of constructive revolt. And at heart I think nobody cared. They were too dull with suffering. Many, however, were whining personal woes, usually something about three and eightpence farthing which they would have if there were a God in heaven or justice on earth. Thousands have enlisted because it seemed at least a quick way out, or offered a sort of chance. But there is nowhere a particle of real enthusiasm in the soul; how can there be, when poverty and puritanism have whittled away the soul for three generations? Can you imagine a British workman going to the Nibelung-ring, as the German does in his millions?

And the wretched treatment that he has been getting all these years of peace and "prosperity" is only accentuated by the war. The big promises are not being kept; he is too ready to find it out; and if anybody would suggest a real remedy, however mad, he would try it. While waiting, he is glad, on the whole, to get peppered.