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## A WORD OF INTRODUCTION

*May 26th.*

It is a bold thing, I fear, to offer the public yet more letters based on a journey through the battle-fields of France—especially at a moment when impressions are changing so fast, when the old forms of writing about the war seem naturally out of date, or even distasteful, and the new are not yet born. Yet perhaps in this intermediate period, the impressions of one who made two journeys over some of the same ground in 1916 and 1917, while the great struggle was at its height, and on this third occasion found herself on the Western front just two months after the Armistice, may not be unwelcome to those who, like myself, feel the need of detaching as soon as possible some general and consistent ideas from the infinite complexity, the tragic and bewildering detail, of the past four years. The motive which sent me to France three months ago was the wish to make clear to myself if I could, and thereby to others, the true measure of the part played by the British Empire and the British Armies in the concluding campaigns of the war. I knew that if it could be done at all at the present moment—and by myself—it could only be done in a very broad and summary way; and also that its only claim to value would lie in its being a faithful report, within the limits I had set myself, of the opinions of those who were actually at the heart of things, *i.e.*, of the British Higher Command, and of individual officers who had taken an active part in the war. For the view taken in these pages of last year's campaigns, I have had, of course, the three great despatches of the British Commander-in-Chief on which to base the general sketch I had in mind; but in addition I have had much kind help from the British Headquarters in France, where officers of the General Staff were still working when I paid a wintry visit to the famous Ecole Militaire at the end of January; supplemented since my return to London by assistance from other distinguished soldiers now at the War Office, who have taken trouble to help me, for which I can never thank them enough.<sup>[1]</sup> It was, naturally, the aim of the little book which won it sympathy; the fact that it was an attempt to carry to its natural end, in brief compass, the story which, at Mr. Roosevelt's suggestion, I first tried to tell in *England's Effort*, published in 1916. *England's Effort* was a

bird's-eye view of the first two years of the war, of the gathering of the new Armies, of the passing into law, and the results—up to the Battle of the Somme—of the Munitions Act of 1915. In this book, which I have again thrown into the form of letters—(it was, in fact, written week by week for transmission to America after my return home from France)—I have confined myself to the events of last year, and with the special object of determining what ultimate effect upon the war was produced by that vast military development of Great Britain and the Empire, in which Lord Kitchener took the first memorable steps. It seemed to me, at the end of last year, as to many others, that owing, perhaps, to the prominence of certain startling or picturesque episodes in the history of 1918, the overwhelming and decisive influence of the British Armies on the last stage of the struggle had been to some extent obscured and misunderstood even amongst ourselves—still more, and very naturally, amongst our Allies. Not, of course, by any of those in close contact with the actual march of the war, and its directing forces; but rather by that floating public opinion, now more intelligent, now more ignorant, which plays so largely on us all, whether through conversation or the press.

My object, then, was to bring out as clearly as I could the part that the British Armies in France, including, of course, the great Dominion contingents, played in the fighting of last year. To do so, it was necessary also to try and form some opinion as to the respective shares in the final result of the three great Armies at work in France in 1918; to put the effort of Great Britain, that is, in its due relation to the whole concluding act of the war. In making such an attempt I am very conscious of its audacity; and I need not say that it would be a cause of sharp regret to me should the estimate here given—which is, of course, the estimate of an Englishwoman—offend any French or American friend of mine. The justice and generosity of the best French opinion on the war has been conspicuously shown on many recent occasions; while the speech in Paris the other day of the If Dean of Harvard as to the relative parts in the war—on French soil—of the Big Three—and the reception given to it by an audience of American officers have, I venture to think, stirred and deepened affection for America in the heart of those English persons who read the report of a remarkable meeting. But there is still much ignorance

both here at home and among our Allies, on both sides of the sea, of the full part played by the forces of the British Empire in last year's drama. So it seemed to me, at least, when I was travelling, a few months ago, over some of the battle-fields of 1918; and I came home with a full heart, determined to tell the story—the last chapter in *England's Effort*—broadly and sincerely, as I best could; It was my firm confidence throughout the writing of these letters that the friendship between Britain, France, and America—a friendship on which, in my belief, rests the future happiness and peace of the world—can only gain from free speech and from the free comparison of opinion. And in the brilliant final despatch of Sir Douglas Haig which appeared on April 12th, after six letters had been written and sent to America, will be found, I venture to suggest, the full and authoritative exposition of some at least of the main lines of thought I have so imperfectly summarised in this little book.

The ten letters were written at intervals between February and May. It seemed better, in republishing them, not to attempt much recasting. They represent, mainly, the impressions of a journey, and of the conversations and reading to which it led. I have left them very much, therefore, in their original form, hoping that at least the freshness of "things seen" may atone somewhat for their many faults.

Fields of Victory



## CHAPTER I

### FRANCE UNDER THE ARMISTICE

*London, February, 1919.*

A bewildering three weeks spent in a perpetually changing scene—changing, and yet, outside Paris, in its essential elements terribly the same—that is how my third journey to France, since the war began, appears to me as I look back upon it. My dear daughter-secretary and I have motored during January some nine hundred miles through the length and breadth of France, some of it in severe weather. We have spent some seven days on the British front, about the same on the French front, with a couple of nights at Metz, and a similar time at Strasburg, and rather more than a week in Paris. Little enough! But what a time of crowding and indelible impressions! Now, sitting in this quiet London house, I seem to be still bending forward in the motor-car, which became a sort of home to us, looking out, so intently that one's eyes suffered, at the unrolling scene. I still see the grim desolation of the Ypres salient; the heaps of ugly wreck that men call Lens and Lieviny and Souchez; and that long line of Notre Dame de Lorette, with the Bois de Bouvigny to the west of it—where I stood among Canadian batteries just six weeks before the battle of Arras in 1917. The lamentable ruin of once beautiful Arras, the desolation of Douai, and the villages between it and Valenciennes, the wanton destruction of what was once the heart of Cambrai, and that grim scene of the broken bridge on the Cambrai—Bapaume road, over the Canal du Nord, where we got out on a sombre afternoon, to look and look again at a landscape that will be famous through the world for generations: they rise again, with the sharpness of no ordinary recollection, on the inward vision. So too Bournon Wood, high and dark against the evening sky; the unspeakable desolation and ruin of the road thence to Bapaume; Bapaume itself, under the moon, its poor huddled heaps lit only, as we walked about it, by that strange, tranquil light from overhead, and the lamps of our standing motor-car; some dim shapes and sights emerging on the long and thrice-famous road

from Bapaume to Albert, first, the dark mound of the Butte de Warlencourt, with three white crosses on its top, and once a mysterious light in a fragment of a ruined house, the only light I saw on the whole long downward stretch from Bapaume to Albert. Then the church of Albert, where the hanging Virgin used to be in 1917, hovering above a town that for all the damage done to it was then still a town of living men, and is now a place so desolate that one shrinks from one's own voice in the solitude, and so wrecked that only the traffic directions here and there, writ large, seem to guide us through the shapeless heaps that once were streets. And, finally, the scanty lights of Amiens, marking the end of the first part of our journey.

These were the sights of the first half of our journey. And as they recur to me, I understand so well the anxious and embittered mood of France, which was so evident a month ago;<sup>[2]</sup> though now, I hope, substantially changed by the conditions of the renewed Armistice. No one who has not seen with his or her own eyes the situation in Northern France can, it seems to me, realise its effects on the national feeling of the country. And in this third journey of mine, I have seen much more than Northern France. In a motor drive of some hundreds of miles, from Metz to Strasburg, through Nancy, Toul, St. Mihiel, Verdun, Châlons, over the ghastly battle-fields of Champagne, through Rheims, Chateau-Thierry, Vaux, to Paris, I have always had the same spectacle under my eyes, the same passion in my heart. If one tried to catch and summarise the sort of suppressed debate that was going on round one, a few weeks ago, between Allied opinion that was trying to reassure France, and the bitter feeling of France herself, it seemed to fall into something like the following dialogue:

"All is well. The Peace Conference is sitting in Paris."

"Yes — *but what about France?*"

"President Wilson and Mr. Lloyd George have gradually brought the recalcitrant elements into line. The League of Nations is a reality."

"Yes — *but what about France?* Has the President been to see these scores of ruined towns, these hundreds of wiped-out villages, these fantastic wrecks of mines and factories, these leagues on leagues of

fruitful land given back to waste, these shell-blasted forests, these broken ghosts of France's noblest churches?"

"The President has made a Sunday excursion from Paris to Rheims. He saw as much as a winter day of snow and fog would allow him to see. France must be patient. Everything takes time."

"Yes!—so long as we can be sure that the true position is not only understood, but felt. But our old, rich, and beautiful country, with all the accumulations on its soil of the labour, the art, the thought of uncounted generations, has been in this war the buffer between German savagery and the rest of Europe. Just as our armies bore the first brunt and held the pass, till civilisation could rally to its own defence, so our old towns and villages have died, that our neighbours might live secure. We have suffered most in war—we claim the first thought in peace. We live in the heart and on the brink of danger. Our American Allies have a No Man's Land of the Atlantic between them and the formidable and cruel race which has wreaked this ruin, and is already beginning to show a Hydra-like power of recuperation, after its defeat; we have only a river, and not always that. We have the right to claim that our safety and restoration, the safety of the country which has suffered most, should at this moment be the first thought of Europe. You speak to us of the League of Nations?—By all means. Readjustments in the Balkans and the East?—As much as you please. But here stands the Chief Victim of the war—and to the Chief Victim belongs of right the chief and first place in men's thoughts, and in the settlement. Do not allow us even to *begin* to ask ourselves whether, after all, we have not paid too much for the alliance we gloried in?"

Some such temper as this has been showing itself since the New Year, in the discontent of the French Press, in the irritation of French talk and correspondence. And, of course, behind the bewildered and almost helpless consciousness of such a loss in accumulated wealth as no other European country has ever known before, there is the ever-burning sense of the human loss which so heavily deepens and complicates the material loss. One of the French Ministers has lately said that France has lost three millions of population, men, women, and children, through the war. The fighting operations alone have cost her over a million and a half, at least, of the

best manhood of France and her Colonies. *One million and a half!* That figure had become a familiar bit of statistics to me; but it was not till I stood the other day in that vast military cemetery of Châlons, to which General Gouraud had sent me, that, to use a phrase of Keats, it was "proved" upon "one's own pulses." Seven thousand men lie buried there, their wreathed crosses standing shoulder to shoulder, all fronting one way, like a division on parade, while the simple monument that faces them utters its perpetual order of the day: "Death is nothing, so long as the Country lives. *En Avant!*"

And with that recollection goes also another, which I owe to the same General—one of the idols of the French Army!—of a little graveyard far up in the wilds of the Champagne battle-field—the "Cimetière de Mont Muret," whence the eye takes in for miles and miles nothing but the trench-seamed hillsides and the bristling fields of wire. Here on every grave, most of them of nameless dead, collected after many months from the vast battle-field, lie heaped the last possessions of the soldier who sleeps beneath—his helmet, his haversack, his water-bottle, his *spade*. These rusty spades were to me a tragic symbol, not only of the endless, heart-wearing labour which had produced those trenched hillsides, but also of that irony of things, by which that very labour which protected the mysterious and spiritual thing which the Frenchman calls *patrie*, was at the same time ruining and sterilising the material base from which it springs—the *soil*, which the Frenchman loves with an understanding tenacity, such as perhaps inspires no other countryman in the world. In Artois and Picardy our own British graves lie thickly scattered over the murdered earth; and those of America's young and heroic dead, in the battle-fields of Soissons, the Marne, and the Argonne, have given it, this last year, a new consecration. But here in England our land is fruitful and productive, owing to the pressure of the submarine campaign, as it never was before; British farming and the American fields have cause to bless rather than to curse the war. Only in France has the tormented and poisoned earth itself been blasted by the war, and only in France, even where there are no trenches, have whole countrysides gone out of cultivation, so that in the course of a long motor drive, the sight of a solitary plough at work, or merely a strip of newly ploughed land amid the rank and endless waste, makes one's heart leap.

No!—France is quite right. Her suffering, her restoration, her future safety, as against Germany, these should be, must be, the first thought of the Allies in making peace. And it is difficult for those of us who have not seen, *to feel*, as it is politically necessary, it seems to me, we should feel.

Since I was in France, however, a fortnight ago, the proceedings in connection with the extension of the Armistice, and the new restrictions and obligations laid on Germany, have profoundly affected the situation in the direction that France desires. And when the President returns from the United States, whither he is now bound, he will surely go—and not for a mere day or two!—to see for himself on the spot what France has suffered. If so, some deep, popular instincts in France will be at once appeased and softened, and Franco-American relations, I believe, greatly improved.

No doubt, if the President made a mistake in not going at once to the wrecked districts before the Peace Conference opened—and no one has insisted on this more strongly than American correspondents—it is clear that it was an idealist's mistake. Ruins, the President seems to have said to himself, can wait; what is essential is that the League of Nations idea, on which not Governments only, but *peoples* are hanging, should be rapidly "clothed upon" by some practical shape; otherwise the war is morally and spiritually lost.

Certainly the whole grandiose conception of the League, so vague and nebulous when the President arrived in Europe, has been marvellously brought out of the mists into some sort of solidity, during these January weeks. Not, I imagine, for some of the reasons that have been given. An able American journalist, for instance, writing to the *Times*, ascribes the advance of the League of Nations project entirely to the close support given to the President by Mr. Lloyd George and the British Government; and he explains this support as due to the British conviction "that the war has changed the whole position of Great Britain in the world. The costs of the struggle in men, in money, in *prestige* (the italics are mine), have cut very deeply; the moral effect of the submarine warfare in its later phase, and of last year's desperate campaign, have left their marks upon the Englishman, and find expression in his conduct.... British comment frankly recognises that it will never again be within the power of

Great Britain, even if there were the desire, to challenge America in war or in peace."

In other words, the support given by Great Britain to President Wilson's ideas means that British statesmen are conscious of a loss of national power and prestige, and of a weakened Empire behind them.

Hasty words, I think!—and, in my belief, very wide of the mark. At any rate I may plead that during my own month in France I have been in contact with many leading men in many camps, English, French, and American, and both military and diplomatic, especially with the British Army and its chiefs; and so far from perceiving in the frankest and most critical talk of our own people—and how critical we are of our own doings those know who know us best—any sense of lost prestige or weakened power, my personal impression is overwhelmingly the other way. We are indeed anxious and willing to share responsibilities, say in Africa, and the Middle East, with America as with France. Why not? The mighty elder power is eager to see America realise her own world position, and come forward to take her share in a world-ordering, which has lain too heavy until now on England's sole shoulders. She is glad and thankful—the "weary Titan"—to hand over some of her responsibilities to America, and to share many of the rest. She wants nothing more for herself—the Great Mother of Nations—why should she? She has so much. But loss of prestige? The feeling in those with whom I have talked, is rather the feeling of Kipling's *Recessional*—a profound and wondering recognition that the Imperial bond has indeed stood so magnificently the test of these four years, just as Joseph Chamberlain, the Empire-builder, believed and hoped it would stand, when the day of testing came; a pride in what the Empire has done too deep for many words; coupled with the stubborn resolution, which says little and means everything—that the future shall be worthy of the past.

And as to the feeling of the Army—it is expressed, and, as far as I have been able to judge from much talk with those under his command, most truly expressed, in Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig's December despatch—which came out, as it happens, the very day I had the honour of standing at his side in the Commander-in-Chief's

room, at G.H.Q., and looking with him at the last maps of the final campaign. "The effect of the great assaults," says the Field-Marshal, "in which, during nine days of battle (September 26th—October 5th), the First, Third, and Fourth Armies stormed the line of the Canal du Nord, and broke through the Hindenburg line, upon the subsequent course of the campaign, was decisive.... Great as were the material losses the enemy had suffered, the effect of so overwhelming a defeat upon a *morale* already deteriorated, was of even larger importance." Again: "By the end of October, the rapid succession of heavy blows dealt by the British forces had had a cumulative effect, both moral and material, upon the German Armies. The British Armies were now in a position to force an immediate conclusion." That conclusion was forced in the battle of the Sambre (1st to 11th November). By that "great victory," says Sir Douglas Haig, "the enemy's resistance was definitely broken;" and thus "in three months of epic fighting the British Armies in France had brought to a sudden and dramatic end the great wearing-out battle of the past four years."

