

THE
CORNHILL

July ~ December, 1918~19

vol. 39, No. 231

THE SPIRIT OF THE WAR: AT ETON.

THE school year which is now drawing to a close will be marked in the annals of Eton by the absence of some public events. The summer half has flowed on without its great interruptions. The Fourth of June was remarkable only for the emptiness of field and street; the match at Lord's has been abandoned, and a single day's cricket at Winchester will be the final contest of the Eleven; the race at Henley has been reminiscent of the days of our grandfathers. And yet, within the circle of our private custom, in spite of the sudden withdrawal of the senior boys and the early ascendancy of their successors, how gently has the daily repetition of work and play softened the edges of last autumn's excitement!

For when I walk round the Playing-fields on a half-holiday, there is now an irony in the scene which cuts sharply at times through all other emotions and prompts the question: *Is this so? Is this the real life around me, and the war an evil dream?* What could be more peaceful to the eye and ear? The calm succession of overs, the punctual and leisurely crossing of the fieldsmen to and fro, the pleasant cries of triumph from the younger boys in distant games, the stillness of Nature through the warm afternoon, all these are what they have been year by year. Is this the great school in mourning for over three hundred of her sons? Two boys pass me in grave discussion, and I gather that someone's chances of his Upper Sixpenny are less than they were. A few minutes later some small friends engage me in talk. Apparently the result of one of the junior matches has been so unexpected as to throw all former calculations into confusion. Very soon I have forgotten all else myself, absorbed in the living enthusiasm of my young informants; and I know that this is the very soul of Eton, living unshaken and apart, gathering unconscious strength for battle in the fields of peace. On the river, too, and at Athens and Cuckoo Weir no evil thing has chilled the boys' delight or disturbed the paradise of their play. And there, too, the muscles are hardening, and there, too, are born the happiness and courage which may one day be stronger than death. Youth still pipes and sings, and the raging of nations does but suggest a fresh theme for his song. There may now be a keener interest in the development of aeroplane and submarine; but this is nothing but the intensifying of an instinct

THE SPIRIT OF THE WAR: AT ETON.

implanted in all boys. And they may now gaze more delightedly at the illustrated papers because here their old curiosity is fed and the shock of armies is presented as a spectacle of chemical or mechanical skill.

We with older eyes scan the record of war's horrors and feel they may scarcely be mentioned in the presence of those who see only the glorious vision. Private losses may not wholly subdue our thoughts amid the imperious clamour of the public life of school. From bitter news at breakfast we pass into pupil-room to decide the trivial suits of the day, to deal with belated work and perhaps to display irritation over the repeated violation of a grammatical rule. For here, as out of doors, the energies of childhood are little disturbed by the rumours of war. The work has to be done expeditiously, and the stern fight for freedom is waged with pens and books. The *Cæsar* lesson may call forth a comical groan at the Hunnish behaviour of Ariovistus, or a modern military term may touch to brighter life the tactics of Xenophon, or Zeppelins may be strangely dressed in Latin verse. But such colouring of the work is only the fine dust carried over land and sea from some far volcano and falling in close or garden where no tremor has been felt. It has its counterpart in the short-lived chatter of protest after chapel against the hymn in which God has been invoked to bless 'the Fatherland.' Such incidental topics are springs of momentary laughter and interest, no more nor less than the rumoured invention by a science master of a bomb that is to end the war. Yet it is true that in school their occurrence makes many a dry spot green again. Our old friend the Chersonese has once more set the nations by the ears; ancient cities of Asia Minor stir in their sleep; and Beersheba, unready and half ashamed, blinks foolishly beneath a fresh blaze of admiration from the eyes of English boys. In the higher forms the revolution of the wheel of history secures a studious attention, and those who are about to leave are ready to talk gravely of England's past and future, and have recognised, in the great crisis of their life now at hand, the sovereign worth of character beyond all physical and intellectual endowments; but such speech as this is reserved for private conference; nothing during the year has left a happier impression than the total absence of blatant patriotism or foolish triumph. Even the increased work of the officers' training corps has been rendered as a matter of course; the half-holiday on Thursday lost its games so simply and quietly that there seemed to have been no change at all; masters who had retired returned,

THE SPIRIT OF THE WAR : AT ETON.

and were at once the familiar figures in uniform ; and others, who had never thought to carry arms, stepped into the ranks, and were soon, as officers, filling the gaps caused by the absence of younger colleagues. For the staff is now without its youth, and a wider interval is left between man and boy, bridged perhaps with stronger sympathy and a closer sense of union, but none the less reminding us daily of what we owe to the livelier spirits of those who still see so clearly, the many features of boyhood which are more and more dimly discerned in middle age. And already there is inscribed on our roll of honour the name of a young tutor who had kindled many a flame by his enthusiasm and originality and promised to be a leader in education. His fierce ardour carried him to the front in the first hours of the war. He lives with us in the stories of 'his wonderful activity in the trenches and of his influence with his men ; and the tricolor, recaptured by him from the German lines, hangs proudly in the school library, the treasured trophy of his impetuous courage.

The boys who are shortly going to Sandhurst or to regiments in the new army have taken advantage of special instruction in signalling and other military sciences ; and, now that the army examination is over, two shifts go to work at the munitions factory at Slough. 'It will be rather fun,' they say ; and they would dislike nothing more than any attempt to advertise this offering of their time or to hear it belauded in the language of the cheap patriot. In the same natural spirit has been given the friendly kindness of all to the Belgian boys who have been domiciled in Eton. Their different dress and language and habits attracted some special attention at first, but have long since been accepted as normal features of the school. To these new-comers the liberty of English education at first seemed incredible. They have now drunk deep of its delights, have caught our manners and speech, and have rowed for long afternoons on our river ; and already their possible usefulness in the football sides of next half is matter for common discussion.

War may shake cities and empires, but at school the study of history has so firmly linked it with our traditional love of duty that the day's routine seems fitted to the times and more manly and decent than ever. There is no self-consciousness in its performance, but the lines of ordinary business come out more sharply. Everyone must do his best, though there is no need to change custom and law. School, chapel, drill, play—here is the hallowed alternation of

THE SPIRIT OF THE WAR : AT ETON.

obediënce and liberty, the loom on which has been woven the robe of noblest manhood: The many-coloured scene of *absence*, the din of bells at lock-up, the lists on the cricket notice-board and the scramble to see them, the lists of heats in Spottiswoode's window and the talk of best and worst station, the lessons learnt in the school library, the shouting for lower boys in the houses—all are the same. And on all of this is set the seal of sanction by old Etonians who return from the blood and smoke of battle, and win rest in the familiar scenes, and bless with outspoken joy 'for their brethren and companions' sake' the peace of their true home. 'This is all right,' they say; 'How splendid to find everything going on just the same!' And no one who has seen the light in their eyes, as they speak, could ever wish to bring across it even the smallest cloud of disappointment. 'What? No Harrow match? Why on earth not?' Then, after hearing the official explanation: 'Why, what *has* the war got to do with it?' Nothing can satisfy their wonder at this strangest thing of all. We who are leading our ordinary lives may sometimes be aware of a momentary doubt as to the feelings of these heroes when they come suddenly into the midst of our comforts and pleasures from the jaws of death. But they stride away, like Achilles in the asphodel meadow, delighted to hear that all is well, and they leave with us fresh courage and faith drawn from their presence.

The old Etonians are the messengers who pass to and fro between this world of happy dreams and the terrible realities which they have seen and heard. They are the living proof of the existence of war. But they bring with them no shadow or chill. Their radiant confidence would put to shame any pessimist if they found him here, though they talk quite simply of the facts and never minimise the gravity of the conflict. Many who were playing in the house matches last year have returned wounded, or on leave, the pride and admiration of their friends and the pattern to all alike of what all must now be, travellers along the only road to manhood. Even death is spoken of without reserve. It is the ordinary chance, the counted cost, the price willingly paid. Every day the boys still at school, as they pass into chapel, see the long roll of Etonians who have fallen, and the thought that shapes itself most distinctly is this: *We share their honour*. And those who have given their lives for us can wish for no brighter crown for their deeds than this piety inspired in their younger brothers. The angel of death comes not here in black shrouds to move terror and tears, but rather as Milton's great seraph walking through Eden, mantled and zoned in regal ornament and 'colours dipt in heaven,' bringing word to man of the prowess of the warrior sons of God. With splendid pride

THE SPIRIT OF THE WAR : AT ETON.

does Eton honour the memory of her children, and she gives the stately answer to her comforters, *Idcirco genueram*. More humble are the prayers of boy and master on Wednesday evening, when an informal service is held in chapel ; more nearly then do we know the worth of the lives which are in danger, and more anxious is our litany as we ask the Father to keep our loved ones in His care. Then it is that the boys think tenderly of fathers and brothers fighting, and of mothers and sisters working, and are brought face to face with the grave peril to their homes. But such thoughts are hidden in the inmost shrine of their hearts ; though sometimes the smaller boys, after the receipt of good news, give vent to their glory. ' Sir ! my father is called a colonel in the list of addresses, and he is really a brigadier-general ! ' ' Sir ! my uncle and cousin have both got a D.S.O., and mother says another cousin ought to have had it.'

There are two sides to the picture ; and at Eton the brighter side is seen. No one who lives here would wish to turn the colours to the wall. Buoyant against all depression the young life of England leaps to its ideals, and the fairest promise shines in the mirth and gaiety which attend the rush of boys from school even when the chapel bell tolls at noon. It is this joy which gives them the unquenchable spirit and lights their eyes with fearless honour in the day of battle. ' Children in play,' they are ' lions in fight,' and their inspiration is drawn in the royal garden of lilies where they lift up their hearts in the springtime of life.

A. B. RAMSAY.