

# ATLANTIC MONTHLY

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## A NATURALIST IN PARIS

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I

THE end of the fourth winter of war finds a front-line trench within eighty miles of the city of Paris. Forty minutes in a swift Spad brings one from the Tour Eiffel to temporary Boche-land. With the right wind a salvo of heavy German guns rattles the windows on the Bois de Boulogne. And yet Paris, to the seeker of truth about the war, is a veritable tower of Babel. Sources of information are as unstable as weather-cocks; the wires of truth are crossed and short-circuited. The probable length of the war; the present morale of the French, the English, the Germans; the relation between the French and American poilus — these can be estimated with equal clarity and greater accuracy from a newspaper in the Waldorf, or a Wall Street rumor, than from inquiries or researches in Paris.

The reason for this is an explanation also of the relative scarcity of first-rate literature concerning the war — namely, a lack of perspective; a proximity in time and space respectively, which beclouds larger generalizations and emphasizes the individual, magnifying moods, coloring enthusiasms, encouraging a vain attempt to interpret a palimpsest of emotions. In my little red French dictionary *futur* is the next word to *futilité*; and at present

Paris is no place for a prophet. He may take his choice of two methods: to stay at home and study the present turn of the wheel in corresponding past cycles of human history and philosophy; or to lie on his stomach on half-frozen mud in helmet and gas-mask, beside a horizon-blue-clad poilu, and seek for his answer in the whine of the five-point-nine *arrivés*, or the muffled *chanson* of the troglodyte reserves crowded in their subterranean burrows.

In these days when the very life and existence of individuals and nations are at hair-trigger poise, it is well to have lived in Paris and at the Front. One longs to be in both places at once. Yet there is a veritable monotony of excitement in the first lines: we can kill in only a certain number of ways, and one has a fixed number of limbs and organs to be injured. But behind the lines, in Paris, the ways of living, of physical and mental healing, of readjustment, of temporary despair and sorrow, of eternal hope, of selfishness and altruism . . . these are myriad in number and wholly absorbing in interest.

Three things impress the American on the first day of his arrival in Paris: the deliciousness of the crusty war-bread, the world's congress of uniforms and insignia, and the apparent callousness and disregard of the war on the part of the Parisians. The first-mentioned impression merely deepened with time; and in fact the abundance and excellent quality of the food in general was a constant source of surprise. In New York I had become accustomed to meatless and wheatless days, and had only just escaped the



heatless ones; but here I learned that the Latin cannot deny his stomach as can the Anglo-Saxon. But in scores of other ways he puts to shame our economies and self-sacrifice.

This apparent abundance of food has another, sadder explanation, in the lack of money among the greater part of the population, who are thus unable to purchase as much as in more normal times. Hence food, although less in quantity, accumulates rapidly and is at the command of the minority. Candy and chocolate stores are closed two days of the week, while sugar and bread are scarce enough to be given special thought. The Baron de — would be delighted to have you take déjeuner with Madame la Baronne and himself; then follows a little postscript, '*Apportez un peu de pain si vous le voulez*' — and we trudge Baronwards with four inches of the most excellent war-bread in our pocket!

The uniforms and insignia were as confusing as water-marked postage-stamps or sub-specific variations of birds. The tunic of an Anzac who had been detailed from his company to ground work in aviation, and at present was serving in a tank, bore considerable resemblance to that of Joseph. I was glad to learn that the flaming scarlet trousers and caps of the French soldiers were worn on the boulevards only from motives of economy, and would be exchanged for uniforms of faded blue when they left for the front. One's love of symbolism was aroused by the spread wings of the airmen and the rampant dragon of the men of the tanks; but why a scarlet patch with a hole, sewed on the back of overcoat and tunic, should indicate that the

Canadian within was an erector of light railways was unfathomable.

Of still greater interest than the modern symbolism were the quaint atavistic decorations—generally as useless as most atavisms, and sometimes actually harmful. The horse in modern warfare is almost an anachronism, but evidence of his importance in past wars is widespread. *En voici deux.*

When a regiment as a whole is decorated, the flag receives the decoration, while all the individuals enlisted in the fortunate command are permitted to wear a *foutragère*—which is a braided cord extending from a front button of the tunic over and around the left shoulder and arm. In times long past this shoulder-cord was less decorative and more useful, and, true to its name, was a rope of any sort which the cavalrman kept wrapped around his shoulder to bind up a bundle of forage for his horse's dinner. A second, less remote equine reminder are spurs, which, upon a lieutenant of aviation, seem as appropriate as would sheepskin 'chaps' on a machine-gunner. Many of the officers who stride along the boulevards, booted and spurred, have never thrown leg across a horse's back, and I recall two instances of broken and sprained ankles from spurs catching in the rugs or doors of automobiles.

I have already mentioned the remarkable dorsal insignia of the light-railway men. Another nuchal spot is of real historic interest. A widening patch of black cloth, extending down behind, over and below the collar, and with a zigzag lower border, characterizes the Welsh Fusiliers, but does not indicate a vital interest in captive balloons or submarine engines. In days gone by, the men of all British regiments wore

powdered wigs with dangling pigtails, and to prevent the powder and grease from soiling the back of the coats, a bit of special cloth was always worn behind. To this day the Welsh Fusilier preceding you down the avenue de l'Opéra, although with hair close-cropped and in khaki undress, still exhibits this link with the wars of our forefathers. Wigs and matchlocks have gone — but the grease-patch is still there.

The subject is inexhaustible, and there are many sides to it. One phase of intense interest is the readoption of armor and missiles long since discarded, such as steel helmets and various weapons for infighting. In a little curiosity shop in Montparnasse, I was attracted by the excellent quality and low price of a steel battle-axe and mace, both of small size but most beautifully damascened, and handled with tanned snake-skin. Later an Anzac friend brought me two more, and told me of twenty-seven being captured in one raid on the Boche trenches. There was no doubt of their age and authenticity; but how they ever made their way from the Orient to the Boche front is a mystery. They are powerful weapons and well adapted for trench-warfare as it is waged in 1918, in competition with bayonets, daggers, and brass knuckles.

Walking along the boulevards of Paris one feels somehow as if one had slipped back into mediæval times, the emphasis of color and ornament is so reversed. Almost every man is clad in bright hues, or with some warm splash or stripe, and most are adorned with medals and citations. So many women are in dark colors, if not in crape, that one's thought of their costumes in general is of sombreness of hue.

How distinctly national traits and characteristics are emphasized by the self-consciousness of uniforming! Individuality is lessened, nationality is augmented almost to caricature. The British Imperialist strides along, the least self-conscious of all; here soldiering is a fine art, so thoroughly mastered that he can spare time for every detail of dress. He is a fashion-plate of neatness, glossy leather, and shining metal, with cane of correct length and exact material. However carefully one has groomed one's self, one feels fairly out at heel when a British colonel passes.

The Anzac or the Canadian private gives us a thrill of the open air. We sense the great spaces, ozone-laden, which have given these men the vitality that seems to fill their frames. On leave they throw off all military stiffness, individuality creases their uniforms, tips their caps a bit awry. A British officer looks askance at the hand in the pocket, but he will not soon forget the fineness of profile of the New Zealand triumvirate who just passed.

The most conservative Briton admits that nothing can equal the Canadians in offensive work, but in defense they are hopeless. They go doggedly ahead and, in spite of any percentage of casualties, take whatever objective is pointed out. Then they dig in like fox-terriers — each man a hole to himself; and if left to their own devices, there they would take root, like lines of newly planted saplings, with no thought of consolidation, or aught but stalking above ground through machine-gun fire when a cigarette light is needed. An officer of artillery told of two instances not far from the 'Wipers' salient where a heavy bar-



rage was maintained for the express purpose of confining a Canadian advance to the indicated objective, and not allowing them to keep on, headed for the Rhine and annihilation.

Italian officers, slender and dark, are swathed in close-fitting puttees and uniforms, while Serbian giants swing proudly along. We turn and watch the latter: they are seldom seen, their race is scattered, their numbers pitifully few. Belgians are everywhere and of many types — one thinks of them *en masse* as sturdy soldiers in khaki, each with a tassel swaying from his cap. Even the composite American offers a more concrete type — reminding one most of the Colonials, but always more or less self-conscious. There was no doubt as to the resolution and enthusiasm with which they had plunged into military life in this fourth year; but the grip on rifle and sword was a bit unsteady as yet; palms were moulded more accurately to plough or axe, the habit of fingers was still too facile with pen or brush or lever. Raw as we seemed to the game, nothing but assurance of the ultimate worth and skill of these big, clean men ever came to one's ears from any of their allied brethren. One loved them all the more to see approaching groups searching nervously for any officer's insignia which they might miss. And for a lieutenant unconsciously to lift his cap to a fellow countrywoman, was a delight.

The Americans at the present time were the newest recruits to this world-game of war, but the past masters were not of the Continent of Europe. Down the Bois de Boulogne would come a quartet of great Sikhs; handsome as

etchings, proud as only Sikhs can be, unconscious as camels, with turban ends swaying, patrician descendants of forbears who were warriors when Britons and Gauls roamed as nomad tribes.

As any vista of trees or sea or plain is always in contrast with the blue of the sky, so the ever-changing patterns and colors of the various Allied nations were always seen against one tint — the horizon blue of the omnipresent *poilu*. He combined many qualities; yet whether perfectly groomed officer or disheveled *arrivé* from the tranches, he was the embodiment of patience and ability, of consecrated devotion, of unalterable determination. There passed Athos, Porthos, and Aramis — not the revelers, the youthful seekers of combats, but the veterans of later years. D'Artagnan I have seen, too, — but not in Paris, — and his eyes will haunt me forever.

## II

This great assemblage of soldiers was strange in many ways. During all my stay in Paris I heard never a note of martial music — no beat of drum or note of bugle. Scarcely a flag in the whole city, except dingy *drapeaux* on official buildings. Never a parade — only twice the muffled beat of feet, marching to their own rhythm: once of *poilus* off for the front, once of a company of Americans fresh from the *gare*.

And this thought brings me to the third vivid impression which Paris gives — the apparent abstracted life and thought of the Parisians. In New York I had been accustomed to miles of waving flags and banners, to frantic protestations of patriotism on every



hand, to bands and glaring posters and headlines, to the public materialization of endless socks and sweaters between the Bronx and Bowling Green. I had, perhaps unconsciously, expected to find the same thing leavened with French art and enthusiasm. A day sufficed to reorient my thoughtlessness. France is naturally no longer inspired with the white-hot spirit of exaltation and enthusiasm which infused her during the first part of the war; nor, on the other hand, in this fourth year is there manifest the slightest desire to make any but a satisfactory end. But our entrance has caused a relaxation, a certain sub-conscious shifting of a part of the responsibility; and as at present we are in evidence more as casuals than as legions, there is an air of suspense, of waiting, which is omnipresent.

In Paris one realized at last the meaning of the 'business of war.' It had entered into every phase of life. As our men commute to business, so the poilus commute to the trenches, each trip of uncertain length; and in place of competition, financial or otherwise, they go to a business of life and death. Few men could show the same vigor and enthusiasm as do these poilus. For years they had faced high adventure that most men know, if at all, only in an annual vacation. To myself and to others whose life-work carries them into dangers from the elements and from savage men, war held no absolute novelty. But think of the gunner formerly a traveling salesman for women's hosiery, of the stretcher-bearer who was a floor-walker in a department store! Did the florist whom



I met ever conceive that he would be removed from sausage-balloon duty because of unconquerable air-sickness?

Think of the children in Paris old enough to talk and walk, who have never known a world free from universal war, and it will be easier to realize the daily, monthly, yearly labor and worry which have worn for themselves ruts deep into the life-routine and emotions of this Latin people. As the medical student loses all sensitiveness concerning the handling of human fingers and feet and hands, so the participants in the war, without being really callous or insensitive, come to take danger, wounds, disability, as incidents, not finalities.

One's geography of Paris would read: the city is bounded on the north by supply dépôts, on the south by hospitals, and on the west by aerodromes. Its principal imports and exports are bandages, crape, wooden legs, and Colonials; its products are war-bread, war-literature, faith, and hope.

I had become familiar with the poilus at the front, the never-to-be-forgotten sight of a regiment of blues coming from trench-duty — besmeared with blood and mud, grimy and unshaven, with faces heavy-eyed and deep-lined. Dress and men are all forgotten in those eyes, weary with a world of weariness, but terrible with the memory of things seen, and the vision of coming achievement. When we meet the *arrivés* in Paris, as they pile off the train at the Gare de l'Est, they are transformed, as much as soap, razor, fresh uniforms, and puttees will permit. But the eyes are unchanged. When I look back in future years to

memories of this war, it will be the eyes of the soldiers which remain most vivid. It is not anything which lends itself to definite phrasing, but an impersonal peering into the distance. They look at you, yet their gaze is beyond, there is an abstraction wholly lacking in the glance of the civilian. Their eyes never smile. The whole face may break into a hearty appreciation of something witty, *spirituel*, but the eyes still search the distance. They are surcharged with some supersense thing, something apart from the direct contact with their surroundings and home.

The women at the station wait quietly. One wishes that they would weep, or show their anxiety and fear with more human emotion. Many are already in black; but as the mob of men in faded blue comes surging out, they simply stand at the sides and wait. Peasant women in strange, white-starched, outstanding head-dresses, women of caste, women painted and women of natural beauty — all wait. Now and then one turns and goes out with a soldier. Their hands are clasped together, and they chatter as only Parisians can, but they seldom look at each other. Now that the moment of moments is past, the outside world again rushes into their consciousness.

After watching forty or fifty couples and groups meet and pass on, one wonders casually how so many of the men happened to marry such young wives. Another thought, and I look closer and know the truth. In the instant of meeting the wives have banished the hunted; gnawing fear and their faces have become young. But the men are young only behind their faces. Four years of this terrible work has

trebled the ravages which time would have demanded of that period.

Now and then two gaunt trenchmen come out arm in arm, — they are always in twos, — unshaven, with mud but scraped from their clothes, reckless-looking, more deeply lined than the rest, and almost always with glittering *croix de guerre* pinned on their discolored tunics. Some have the caps of Zouaves, and they look about them only with curiosity. There is no one to meet them. Two such giants stopped near me — terrible men, who might have been welcomed as worthy additions to the crew of Henry Morgan himself. I wondered upon what wild revels they would launch, and listened.

*'Que voulez-vous? Un cinema?'*

*'Mais oui, c'est très bien.'*

And out they trudged.

I turned to go and then wished I had not, for I almost stumbled over a very tiny boy, clad in a dirty blue smock, who at this instant reached up to a big-bearded *poilu*, and said, in a half-understanding voice, as if he had been told to say it, *'Maman est morte.'* The *poilu* looked at me, or rather beyond me, took the tiny hand held out to him, and went out into the street with no word, no change of expression.

I was used to the sight of the women who slipped away alone, but this was a reversal of tragedy which was not in the routine of the ruck of war. I wondered whether hereafter the bearded *poilu* would return, heedless of his appearance, and would go to a cinema with some lonely comrade. I have never been back to the Gare de l'Est and I do not wish to, but I should like to have every slacker, every pacifist,

every doubter of the necessity of pushing the war through to a complete decision, look into the eyes of these soldiers. Their bodies are weary, their souls firmer than ever.

### III

These are some of the direct objective reflections of the struggle waged from the two opposing lines of ditches, a few miles to the north. Between flights and my visits to the Front, I watched Paris obliquely, from a corner of my eye, and at times almost forgot the war in the great joy of little things.

One day I remember as being particularly rich in small adventures.

After an unusually high and futile flight I motored back to Paris one gray morning, and was seized with the desire to visit my old stamping grounds in the Jardin des Plantes. Six years ago, in happier times, I had trudged day after day between the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle and the Hôtel Lutetia, until I knew every rue and alley by heart. And now in the Parc Zoölogique I found curiously accurate reflections of national conditions outside.

I was greeted by a most forlorn moulting stork, who sadly clattered his beak, appearing the very embodiment of hopelessness. Indeed, for most of his class he was a true prophet, for I found the birds to be in scant numbers and of very ordinary interest. A peacock in a high tree made repeated feints and false starts at flight. He was facing the east and may have had it in mind to depart this dreary France and seek his native Indian *terai*. A marabou stood listlessly and tore off



bits of bark, champing them with closed eyes as if imagining a *poisson*

*to be continued*

