

The First German Prisoners

[From The London Times.]

WE are now able to realize the state of mind in which they arrive. The army corps to which I belong has already brought its guns into action. We have seen prisoners, and we have observed battlefields, and we have noticed a thing or two. First of all, these prisoners are not the least bit fanatics. Many of them don't know what they are fighting about. They have been told a thousand phantasmagoria—that France had declared war, that the Belgians and the Italians were helping the Germans, &c.; and one of them was tremendously proud at having the Czar Nicholas as his honorary Colonel! They were taken for the most part in isolated patrols, and it happened so often that it was impossible to get others to start off on reconnoissances, since their comrades never came back and they had no desire to share a like fate.

The prisoners are gentle and calm, and follow with their eyes the bits of bread which are passed about near them and which one gives them, and they eat them voraciously. For two days they have only received two rations of coffee. Their appetite is so great that, though in presence of a French officer they will click their heels together properly, they never cease at the same time to munch noisily and to fill out their hollow cheeks.

One feels that they believe us French to be up to every sort of devilment, that we are going to undress them, to take their papers, and they tremble from head to foot in fear of being shot. Even when you give them a cigarette, it does not seem to allay their mistrust. One of them, who was dying of thirst, would not drink the water that was offered him before the gendarme had tasted it in front of him.

They are all astonished at their adventure. They had been told that they were going to enter Maubeuge in company with the Belgians; to seize Maubeuge would be as easy as taking a *café au lait*—and there they are without their *café au lait*!

The officers are absolutely different. Prussian pride gave them an assurance which their mishap has transformed into irritation. A young Baron Lieutenant, like von Forstner, pretended that he couldn't make his bed, and refused to answer before simple soldiers. He couldn't feel anything but the humiliation of being a prisoner, and couldn't get accustomed to his new situation.

We found on the field of battle the medicine chest of a vet., who jotted down his impressions from minute to minute. When he was killed he was writing: "I see the shells bursting with a white smoke in the sky, which is lighted up from the south; luckily my helmet protects me from sunstroke." Evidently he was on an excursion, this veterinary surgeon, and was counting

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on coming to Paris, and had taken the most minute precautions of hygiene and of elegance. He was provided with scent and eau de cologne. He had even brought with him a rose ointment for the nails, and a superb gilt shoulder-belt which was to raise his prestige for when he passed under the Arc de Triomphe. The battery to which he belonged is annihilated now. We could observe on the spot the terrific effect of our artillery, which was very well commanded. Six abandoned guns, of which three are impossible to move, are there on the ground with all their crews, all their officers, all their horses—the pieces still mounted, riddled with splinters. They were taken back to the rear, and attracted all the way along the curiosity of the soldiers, with their sumptuous armorial bearings and their motto, *Ultima regis ratio*.

But this lesson seems to have made a bit of an impression on the Germans who have fled, and it has given a new energy to our troops, because the battery to which we owe this success did not have a single man wounded. The Germans seem to be forty years behind the times. They go on just as in 1870. With childish and barbarous imagination they see *francs-tireurs* everywhere and can't yet believe that we have a regular army quite close to the frontier.

They arrive in a village toward 8 in the morning; three French dragoons are there as patrols. When the German column is within range, the three dragoons bring down the Colonel and dash off at full gallop from the other end of the village. The Germans are furious and swear that they have been attacked by *francs-tireurs*, and that they are going to inflict punishment. They seize the curé, a notable inhabitant, and two or three peasants, and take them off to be present at the burning of their houses, while waiting to be executed themselves.

I have this story from the curé, who arrived to us absolutely done, with his cassock in rags, without a hat on, after a day of shocks such as he has certainly never had in his life before. Although he has got the superb beard of a missionary, they made him march with the chasseurs, hitting him with the butts of their rifles till the moment when the French shrapnel arrived. Then it was *sauve qui peut*. Our brave curé saw all his butchers fall around him. When the noise had finished, five unarmed German chasseurs rushed toward him crying with their great, thick accent, "Catholics, Catholics!" They were Poles who were flying from the army and coming over to our lines. "With my own arms," said the curé proudly, "I made five prisoners."

Altogether bewilderment, softness, and indifference on the part of the men; vanity, cruelty, and foolery on the part of the officers. Those are the virtues which they offered us on first acquaintance. Just compare them with ours!