

АРТУР КОНАН ДОЙЛ

A VISIT TO THREE FRONTS:
JUNE 1916

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Arthur Conan Doyle

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PREFACE

In the course of May 1916, the Italian authorities expressed a desire that some independent observer from Great Britain should visit their lines and report his impressions. It was at the time when our brave and capable allies had sustained a set-back in the Trentino owing to a sudden concentration of the Austrians, supported by very heavy artillery. I was asked to undertake this mission. In order to carry it out properly, I stipulated that I should be allowed to visit the British lines first, so that I might have some standard of comparison. The War Office kindly assented to my request. Later I obtained permission to pay a visit to the French front as well. Thus it was my great good fortune, at the very crisis of the war, to visit the battle line of each of the three great Western allies. I only wish that it had been within my power to complete my experiences in this seat of war by seeing the gallant little Belgian army which has done so remarkably well upon the extreme left wing of the hosts of freedom.

My experiences and impressions are here set down, and

may have some small effect in counteracting those mischievous misunderstandings and mutual belittlements which are eagerly fomented by our cunning enemy.

Arthur Conan Doyle.

Crowborough,

July 1916.

A GLIMPSE OF THE BRITISH ARMY

I

It is not an easy matter to write from the front. You know that there are several courteous but inexorable gentlemen who may have a word in the matter, and their presence 'imparts but small ease to the style.' But above all you have the twin censors of your own conscience and common sense, which assure you that, if all other readers fail you, you will certainly find a most attentive one in the neighbourhood of the Haupt-Quartier. An instructive story is still told of how a certain well-meaning traveller recorded his satisfaction with the appearance of the big guns at the retiring and peaceful village of Jamais, and how three days later, by an interesting coincidence, the village of Jamais passed suddenly off the map and dematerialised into brickdust and splinters.

I have been with soldiers on the warpath before, but never have I had a day so crammed with experiences and impressions as yesterday. Some of them at least I can faintly convey to the reader, and if they ever reach the eye of that gentleman at the Haupt-Quartier they will give him little joy. For the crowning impression of all is the enormous imperturbable

confidence of the Army and its extraordinary efficiency in organisation, administration, material, and personnel. I met in one day a sample of many types, an Army commander, a corps commander, two divisional commanders, staff officers of many grades, and, above all, I met repeatedly the two very great men whom Britain has produced, the private soldier and the regimental officer. Everywhere and on every face one read the same spirit of cheerful bravery. Even the half-mad cranks whose absurd consciences prevent them from barring the way to the devil seemed to me to be turning into men under the prevailing influence. I saw a batch of them, neurotic and largely be-spectacled, but working with a will by the roadside. They will volunteer for the trenches yet.

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If there are pessimists among us they are not to be found among the men who are doing the work. There is no foolish bravado, no under-rating of a dour opponent, but there is a quick, alert, confident attention to the job in hand which is an inspiration to the observer. These brave lads are guarding Britain in the present. See to it that Britain guards them in the future! We have a bad record in this matter. It must be changed. They are the wards of the nation, both officers and men. Socialism has never had an attraction for me, but I should be a Socialist to-morrow if I thought that to ease a tax on wealth these men should ever

suffer for the time or health that they gave to the public cause.

'Get out of the car. Don't let it stay here. It may be hit.' These words from a staff officer give you the first idea that things are going to happen. Up to then you might have been driving through the black country in the Walsall district with the population of Aldershot let loose upon its dingy roads. 'Put on this shrapnel helmet. That hat of yours would infuriate the Boche' – this was an unkind allusion to the only uniform which I have a right to wear. 'Take this gas helmet. You won't need it, but it is a standing order. Now come on!'

We cross a meadow and enter a trench. Here and there it comes to the surface again where there is dead ground. At one such point an old church stands, with an unexploded shell sticking out of the wall. A century hence folk will journey to see that shell. Then on again through an endless cutting. It is slippery clay below. I have no nails in my boots, an iron pot on my head, and the sun above me. I will remember that walk. Ten telephone wires run down the side. Here and there large thistles and other plants grow from the clay walls, so immobile have been our lines. Occasionally there are patches of untidiness. 'Shells,' says the officer laconically. There is a racket of guns before us and behind, especially behind, but danger seems remote with all these Bairnfather groups of cheerful Tommies at work around us. I pass one group of grimy, tattered boys. A glance at their shoulders shows me that they are of a public school battalion. 'I thought you fellows were all officers now,' I remarked. 'No, sir,

we like it better so.' 'Well, it will be a great memory for you. We are all in your debt.'

They salute, and we squeeze past them. They had the fresh, brown faces of boy cricketers. But their comrades were men of a different type, with hard, strong, rugged features, and the eyes of men who have seen strange sights. These are veterans, men of Mons, and their young pals of the public schools have something to live up to.

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Up to this we have only had two clay walls to look at. But now our interminable and tropical walk is lightened by the sight of a British aeroplane sailing overhead. Numerous shrapnel bursts are all round it, but she floats on serenely, a thing of delicate beauty against the blue background. Now another passes – and yet another. All morning we saw them circling and swooping, and never a sign of a Boche. They tell me it is nearly always so – that we hold the air, and that the Boche intruder, save at early morning, is a rare bird. A visit to the line would reassure Mr. Pemberton-Billing. 'We have never met a British aeroplane which was not ready to fight,' said a captured German aviator the other day. There is a fine stern courtesy between the airmen on either side, each dropping notes into the other's aerodromes to tell the fate of missing officers. Had the whole war been fought by the Germans as their airmen have conducted it (I do

not speak of course of the Zeppelin murderers), a peace would eventually have been more easily arranged. As it is, if every frontier could be settled, it would be a hard thing to stop until all that is associated with the words Cavell, Zeppelin, Wittenberg, Lusitania, and Louvain has been brought to the bar of the world's Justice.

And now we are there – in what is surely the most wonderful spot in the world, the front firing trench, the outer breakwater which holds back the German tide. How strange that this monstrous oscillation of giant forces, setting in from east to west, should find their equilibrium here across this particular meadow of Flanders. 'How far?' I ask. '180 yards,' says my guide. 'Pop!' remarks a third person just in front. 'A sniper,' says my guide; 'take a look through the periscope.' I do so. There is some rusty wire before me, then a field sloping slightly upwards with knee-deep grass, then rusty wire again, and a red line of broken earth. There is not a sign of movement, but sharp eyes are always watching us, even as these crouching soldiers around me are watching them. There are dead Germans in the grass before us. You need not see them to know that they are there. A wounded soldier sits in a corner nursing his leg. Here and there men pop out like rabbits from dug-outs and mine-shafts. Others sit on the fire-step or lean smoking against the clay wall. Who would dream to look at their bold, careless faces that this is a front line, and that at any moment it is possible that a grey wave may submerge them? With all their careless bearing I notice that every man has

his gas helmet and his rifle within easy reach.

A mile of front trenches and then we are on our way back down that weary walk. Then I am whisked off upon a ten mile drive. There is a pause for lunch at Corps Headquarters, and after it we are taken to a medal presentation in a market square. Generals Munro, Haking and Landon, famous fighting soldiers all three, are the British representatives. Munro with a ruddy face, and brain above all bulldog below; Haking, pale, distinguished, intellectual; Landon a pleasant, genial country squire. An elderly French General stands beside them.

British infantry keep the ground. In front are about fifty Frenchmen in civil dress of every grade of life, workmen and gentlemen, in a double rank. They are all so wounded that they are back in civil life, but to-day they are to have some solace for their wounds. They lean heavily on sticks, their bodies are twisted and maimed, but their faces are shining with pride and joy. The French General draws his sword and addresses them. One catches words like 'honneur' and 'patrie.' They lean forward on their crutches, hanging on every syllable which comes hissing and rasping from under that heavy white moustache. Then the medals are pinned on. One poor lad is terribly wounded and needs two sticks. A little girl runs out with some flowers. He leans forward and tries to kiss her, but the crutches slip and he nearly falls upon her. It was a pitiful but beautiful little scene.

Now the British candidates march up one by one for their medals, hale, hearty men, brown and fit. There is a smart young

officer of Scottish Rifles; and then a selection of Worcesters, Welsh Fusiliers and Scots Fusiliers, with one funny little Highlander, a tiny figure with a soup-bowl helmet, a grinning boy's face beneath it, and a bedraggled uniform. 'Many acts of great bravery' – such was the record for which he was decorated. Even the French wounded smiled at his quaint appearance, as they did at another Briton who had acquired the chewing-gum habit, and came up for his medal as if he had been called suddenly in the middle of his dinner, which he was still endeavouring to bolt. Then came the end, with the National Anthem. The British regiment formed fours and went past. To me that was the most impressive sight of any. They were the Queen's West Surreys, a veteran regiment of the great Ypres battle. What grand fellows! As the order came 'Eyes right,' and all those fierce, dark faces flashed round about us, I felt the might of the British infantry, the intense individuality which is not incompatible with the highest discipline. Much they had endured, but a great spirit shone from their faces. I confess that as I looked at those brave English lads, and thought of what we owe to them and to their like who have passed on, I felt more emotional than befits a Briton in foreign parts.

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Now the ceremony was ended, and once again we set out for the front. It was to an artillery observation post that we

were bound, and once again my description must be bounded by discretion. Suffice it, that in an hour I found myself, together with a razor-keen young artillery observer and an excellent old sportsman of a Russian prince, jammed into a very small space, and staring through a slit at the German lines. In front of us lay a vast plain, scarred and slashed, with bare places at intervals, such as you see where gravel pits break a green common. Not a sign of life or movement, save some wheeling crows. And yet down there, within a mile or so, is the population of a city. Far away a single train is puffing at the back of the German lines. We are here on a definite errand. Away to the right, nearly three miles off, is a small red house, dim to the eye but clear in the glasses, which is suspected as a German post. It is to go up this afternoon. The gun is some distance away, but I hear the telephone directions. "'Mother" will soon do her in,' remarks the gunner boy cheerfully. 'Mother' is the name of the gun. 'Give her five six three four,' he cries through the 'phone. 'Mother' utters a horrible bellow from somewhere on our right. An enormous spout of smoke rises ten seconds later from near the house. 'A little short,' says our gunner. 'Two and a half minutes left,' adds a little small voice, which represents another observer at a different angle. 'Raise her seven five,' says our boy encouragingly. 'Mother' roars more angrily than ever. 'How will that do?' she seems to say. 'One and a half right,' says our invisible gossip. I wonder how the folk in the house are feeling as the shells creep ever nearer. 'Gun laid, sir,' says the telephone. 'Fire!' I am

looking through my glass. A flash of fire on the house, a huge pillar of dust and smoke – then it settles, and an unbroken field is there. The German post has gone up. 'It's a dear little gun,' says the officer boy. 'And her shells are reliable,' remarked a senior behind us. 'They vary with different calibres, but "Mother" never goes wrong.' The German line was very quiet. 'Pourquoi ils ne répondent pas?' asked the Russian prince. 'Yes, they are quiet to-day,' answered the senior. 'But we get it in the neck sometimes.' We are all led off to be introduced to 'Mother,' who sits, squat and black, amid twenty of her grimy children who wait upon and feed her. She is an important person is 'Mother,' and her importance grows. It gets clearer with every month that it is she, and only she, who can lead us to the Rhine. She can and she will if the factories of Britain can beat those of the Hun. See to it, you working men and women of Britain. Work now if you rest for ever after, for the fate of Europe and of all that is dear to us is in your hands. For 'Mother' is a dainty eater, and needs good food and plenty. She is fond of strange lodgings, too, in which she prefers safety to dignity. But that is a dangerous subject.

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One more experience of this wonderful day – the most crowded with impressions of my whole life. At night we take a car and drive north, and ever north, until at a late hour we halt and climb a hill in the darkness. Below is a wonderful sight.

Down on the flats, in a huge semi-circle, lights are rising and falling. They are very brilliant, going up for a few seconds and then dying down. Sometimes a dozen are in the air at one time. There are the dull thuds of explosions and an occasional rat-tat-tat. I have seen nothing like it, but the nearest comparison would be an enormous ten-mile railway station in full swing at night, with signals winking, lamps waving, engines hissing and carriages bumping. It is a terrible place down yonder, a place which will live as long as military history is written, for it is the Ypres Salient. What a salient it is, too! A huge curve, as outlined by the lights, needing only a little more to be an encirclement. Something caught the rope as it closed, and that something was the British soldier. But it is a perilous place still by day and by night. Never shall I forget the impression of ceaseless, malignant activity which was borne in upon me by the white, winking lights, the red sudden glares, and the horrible thudding noises in that place of death beneath me.

II

In old days we had a great name as organisers. Then came a long period when we deliberately adopted a policy of individuality and 'go as you please.' Now once again in our sore need we have called on all our power of administration and direction. But it has not deserted us. We still have it in a supreme degree. Even in peace time we have shown it in that vast, well-oiled, swift-running, noiseless machine called the British Navy. But now our powers have risen with the need of them. The expansion of the Navy has been a miracle, the management of the transport a greater one, the formation of the new Army the greatest of all time. To get the men was the least of the difficulties. To put them here, with everything down to the lid of the last field saucepan in its place, that is the marvel. The tools of the gunners, and of the sappers, to say nothing of the knowledge of how to use them, are in themselves a huge problem. But it has all been met and mastered, and will be to the end. But don't let us talk any more about the muddling of the War Office. It has become just a little ridiculous.

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I have told of my first day, when I visited the front trenches, saw the work of 'Mother,' and finally that marvellous spectacle,

the Ypres Salient at night. I have passed the night at the headquarters of a divisional-general, Capper, who might truly be called one of the two fathers of the British flying force, for it was he, with Templar, who laid the first foundations from which so great an organisation has arisen. My morning was spent in visiting two fighting brigadiers, cheery weather-beaten soldiers, respectful, as all our soldiers are, of the prowess of the Hun, but serenely confident that we can beat him. In company with one of them I ascended a hill, the reverse slope of which was swarming with cheerful infantry in every stage of dishabille, for they were cleaning up after the trenches. Once over the slope we advanced with some care, and finally reached a certain spot from which we looked down upon the German line. It was the advanced observation post, about a thousand yards from the German trenches, with our own trenches between us. We could see the two lines, sometimes only a few yards, as it seemed, apart, extending for miles on either side. The sinister silence and solitude were strangely dramatic. Such vast crowds of men, such intensity of feeling, and yet only that open rolling countryside, with never a movement in its whole expanse.

The afternoon saw us in the Square at Ypres. It is the city of a dream, this modern Pompeii, destroyed, deserted and desecrated, but with a sad, proud dignity which made you involuntarily lower your voice as you passed through the ruined streets. It is a more considerable place than I had imagined, with many traces of ancient grandeur. No words can describe the

absolute splintered wreck that the Huns have made of it. The effect of some of the shells has been grotesque. One boiler-plated water-tower, a thing forty or fifty feet high, was actually standing on its head like a great metal top. There is not a living soul in the place save a few pickets of soldiers, and a number of cats which become fierce and dangerous. Now and then a shell still falls, but the Huns probably know that the devastation is already complete.

We stood in the lonely grass-grown Square, once the busy centre of the town, and we marvelled at the beauty of the smashed cathedral and the tottering Cloth Hall beside it. Surely at their best they could not have looked more wonderful than now. If they were preserved even so, and if a heaven-inspired artist were to model a statue of Belgium in front, Belgium with one hand pointing to the treaty by which Prussia guaranteed her safety and the other to the sacrilege behind her, it would make the most impressive group in the world. It was an evil day for Belgium when her frontier was violated, but it was a worse one for Germany. I venture to prophesy that it will be regarded by history as the greatest military as well as political error that has ever been made. Had the great guns that destroyed Liége made their first breach at Verdun, what chance was there for Paris? Those few weeks of warning and preparation saved France, and left Germany as she now is, like a weary and furious bull, tethered fast in the place of trespass and waiting for the inevitable pole-axe.

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