RUDYARD KIPLING

FRANCE AT WAR: ON THE FRONTIER OF CIVILIZATION

Редьярд Киплинг

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Киплинг Р. Д.

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Содержание

Rudyard Kipling
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FRANCE[1] BY RUDYARD KIPLING

Broke to every known mischance, lifted over all By the light sane joy of life, the buckler of the Gaul, Furious in luxury, merciless in toil, Terrible with strength that draws from her tireless soil, Strictest judge of her own worth, gentlest of men's mind, First to follow truth and last to leave old truths behind – France beloved of every soul that loves its fellow-kind.

Ere our birth (rememberest thou?) side
by side we lay
Fretting in the womb of Rome to begin
the fray.
Ere men knew our tongues apart, our one
taste was known —
Each must mould the other's fate as he
wrought his own.
To this end we stirred mankind till all
earth was ours,
Till our world-end strifes began wayside
thrones and powers,
Puppets that we made or broke to bar
the other's path —
Necessary, outpost folk, hirelings of our
wrath.
To this end we stormed the seas, tack for
tack, and burst
Through the doorways of new worlds,
doubtful which was first.
Hand on hilt (rememberest thou?), ready
for the blow.
Sure whatever else we met we should
meet our foe.
Spurred or baulked at ev'ry stride by the
other's strength,
So we rode the ages down and every ocean's
length;
Where did you refrain from us or we
refrain from you?
Ask the wave that has not watched war
between us two.
Others held us for a while, but with
weaker charms,
These we quitted at the call for each

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other's arms.
Eager toward the known delight, equally we strove,
Each the other's mystery, terror, need, and love.
To each other's open court with our proofs we came,
Where could we find honour else or men to test the claim?
From each other's throat we wrenched valour's last reward,
That extorted word of praise gasped 'twixt lunge and guard.
In each other's cup we poured mingled blood and tears,
Brutal joys, unmeasured hopes, intolerable fears,
All that soiled or salted life for a thousand years.
Proved beyond the need of proof, matched in every clime,
O companion, we have lived greatly through all time:
Yoked in knowledge and remorse now we come to rest,
Laughing at old villainies that time has turned to jest,
Pardoning old necessity no pardon can efface —
That undying sin we shared in Rouen market-place.
Now we watch the new years shape, wondering if they hold
Fiercer lighting in their hearts than we launched of old.
Now we hear new voices rise, question, boast or gird,
As we raged (rememberest thou?) when our crowds were stirred.
Now we count new keels afloat, and new hosts on land,
Massed liked ours (rememberest thou?) when our strokes were planned.
We were schooled for dear life sake, to know each other's blade:
What can blood and iron make more than we have made?
We have learned by keenest use to know each other's mind:

What shall blood and iron loose that we
cannot bind?
We who swept each other's coast, sacked
each other's home,
Since the sword of Brennus clashed on
the scales at Rome,
Listen, court and close again, wheeling
girth to girth,
In the strained and bloodless guard set
for peace on earth.

Broke to every known mischance, lifted over all By the light sane joy of life, the buckler of the Gaul, Furious in luxury, merciless in toil, Terrible with strength renewed from a tireless soil, Strictest judge of her own worth, gentlest of men's mind, First to follow truth and last to leave old truths behind, France beloved of every soul that loves or serves its kind.

I
ON THE FRONTIER OF CIVILIZATION

"It's a pretty park," said the French artillery officer. "We've done a lot for it since the owner left. I hope he'll appreciate it when he comes back."

The car traversed a winding drive through woods, between banks embellished with little chalets of a rustic nature. At first, the chalets stood their full height above ground, suggesting tea-gardens in England. Further on they sank into the earth till, at the top of the ascent, only their solid brown roofs showed. Torn branches drooping across the driveway, with here and there a scorched patch of undergrowth, explained the reason of their modesty.

The chateau that commanded these glories of forest and park sat boldly on a terrace. There was nothing wrong with it except, if one looked closely, a few scratches or dints on its white stone walls, or a neatly drilled hole under a flight of steps. One such hole ended in an unexploded shell. "Yes," said the officer. "They arrive here occasionally."

Something bellowed across the folds of the wooded hills; something grunted in reply. Something passed overhead, querulously but not without dignity. Two clear fresh barks joined the chorus, and a man moved lazily in the direction of the guns.

"Well. Suppose we come and look at things a little," said the commanding officer.

AN OBSERVATION POST

There was a specimen tree – a tree worthy of such a park – the sort of tree visitors are always taken to admire. A ladder ran up it to a platform. What little wind there was swayed the tall top, and the ladder creaked like a ship's gangway. A telephone bell tinkled 50 foot overhead. Two invisible guns spoke fervently for half a minute, and broke off like terriers choked on a leash. We climbed till the topmost platform swayed sicklily beneath us. Here one found a rustic shelter, always of the tea-garden pattern, a table, a map, and a little window wreathed with living branches that gave one the first view of the Devil and all his works. It was a stretch of open country, with a few sticks like old tooth-brushes which had once been trees round a farm. The rest was yellow grass, barren to all appearance as the veldt.

"The grass is yellow because they have used gas here," said an officer. "Their trenches are – . You can see for yourself."

The guns in the woods began again. They seemed to have no relation to the regularly spaced bursts of smoke along a little smear in the desert earth two thousand yards away – no connection at all with the strong voices overhead coming and going. It was as impersonal as the drive of the sea along a breakwater.

Thus it went: a pause – a gathering of sound like the race of an incoming wave; then the high-flung heads of breakers spouting white up the face of a groyne. Suddenly, a seventh wave broke and spread the shape of its foam like a plume overtopping all the others.

"That's one of our torpilleurs – what you call trench-sweepers," said the observer among the whispering leaves.

Some one crossed the platform to consult the map with its ranges. A blistering outbreak of white smokes rose a little beyond the large plume. It was as though the tide had struck a reef out yonder.

Then a new voice of tremendous volume lifted itself out of a lull that followed. Somebody laughed. Evidently the voice was known.

"That is not for us," a gunner said. "They are being waked up from – " he named a distant French position. "So and so is attending to them there. We go on with our usual work. Look! Another torpilleur."

"THE BARBARIAN"

Again a big plume rose; and again the lighter shells broke at their appointed distance beyond it. The smoke died away on that stretch of trench, as the foam of a swell dies in the angle of a harbour wall, and broke out afresh half a mile lower down. In its apparent laziness, in its awful deliberation, and its quick spasms of wrath, it was more like the work of waves than of men; and our high platform's gentle sway and glide was exactly the motion of a ship drifting with us toward that shore.

"The usual work. Only the usual work," the officer explained. "Sometimes it is here. Sometimes above or below us. I have been here since May."

A little sunshine flooded the stricken landscape and made its chemical yellow look more foul. A detachment of men moved out on a road which ran toward the French trenches, and then vanished at the foot of a little rise. Other men appeared moving toward us with that concentration of purpose and bearing shown in both Armies when – dinner is at hand. They looked like people who had been digging hard.

"The same work. Always the same work!" the officer said.

"And you could walk from here to the sea or to Switzerland in that ditch – and you'll find the same work going on everywhere.

It isn't war."

"It's better than that," said another. "It's the eating-up of a people. They come and they fill the trenches and they die, and they die; and they send more and *those* die. We do the same, of course, but – look!"

He pointed to the large deliberate smoke-heads renewing themselves along that yellowed beach. "That is the frontier of civilization. They have all civilization against them – those brutes yonder. It's not the local victories of the old wars that we're after. It's the barbarian – all the barbarian. Now, you've seen the whole thing in little. Come and look at our children."

SOLDIERS IN CAVES

We left that tall tree whose fruits are death ripened and distributed at the tingle of small bells. The observer returned to his maps and calculations; the telephone-boy stiffened up beside his exchange as the amateurs went out of his life. Some one called down through the branches to ask who was attending to – Belial, let us say, for I could not catch the gun's name. It seemed to belong to that terrific new voice which had lifted itself for the second or third time. It appeared from the reply that if Belial talked too long he would be dealt with from another point miles away.

The troops we came down to see were at rest in a chain of caves which had begun life as quarries and had been fitted up by the army for its own uses. There were underground corridors, ante-chambers, rotundas, and ventilating shafts with a bewildering play of cross lights, so that wherever you looked you saw Goya's pictures of men-at-arms.

Every soldier has some of the old maid in him, and rejoices in all the gadgets and devices of his own invention. Death and wounding come by nature, but to lie dry, sleep soft, and keep yourself clean by forethought and contrivance is art, and in all things the Frenchman is gloriously an artist.

Moreover, the French officers seem as mother-keen on their men as their men are brother-fond of them. Maybe the possessive form of address: "Mon general," "mon capitaine," helps the idea, which our men cloke in other and curter phrases. And those soldiers, like ours, had been welded for months in one furnace. As an officer said: "Half our orders now need not be given. Experience makes us think together." I believe, too, that if a French private has an idea – and they are full of ideas – it reaches his C. 0. quicker than it does with us.

THE SENTINEL HOUNDS

The overwhelming impression was the brilliant health and vitality of these men and the quality of their breeding. They bore themselves with swing and rampant delight in life, while their voices as they talked in the side-caverns among the stands of arms were the controlled voices of civilization. Yet, as the lights pierced the gloom they looked like bandits dividing the spoil. One picture, though far from war, stays with me. A perfectly built, dark-skinned young giant had peeled himself out of his blue coat and had brought it down with a swish upon the shoulder of a half-stripped comrade who was kneeling at his feet with some footgear. They stood against a background of semi-luminous blue haze, through which glimmered a pile of coppery straw half covered by a red blanket. By divine accident of light and pose it St. Martin giving his cloak to the beggar. There were scores of pictures in these galleries – notably a rock-hewn chapel where the red of the cross on the rough canvas altar-cloth glowed like a ruby. Further inside the caves we found a row of little rock-cut kennels, each inhabited by one wise, silent dog. Their duties begin in at night with the sentinels and listening-posts. "And believe me," a proud instructor, "my fellow here knows the difference between the noise of our shells and the Boche shells."

When we came out into the open again there were good opportunities for this study. Voices and wings met and passed in the air, and, perhaps, one strong young tree had not been bending quite so far across the picturesque park-drive when we first went that way.

"Oh, yes," said an officer, "shells have to fall somewhere, and," he added with fine toleration, "it is, after all, against us that the Boche directs them. But come you and look at my dug-out. It's the most superior of all possible dug-outs."

"No. Come and look at our mess. It's the Ritz of these parts." And they joyously told how they had got, or procured, the various fittings and elegancies, while hands stretched out of the gloom to shake, and men nodded welcome and greeting all through that cheery brotherhood in the woods.

WORK IN THE FIELDS

The voices and the wings were still busy after lunch, when the car slipped past the tea-houses in the drive, and came into a country where women and children worked among the crops. There were large raw shell holes by the wayside or in the midst of fields, and often a cottage or a villa had been smashed as a bonnet-box is smashed by an umbrella. That must be part of Belial's work when he bellows so truculently among the hills to the north.

We were looking for a town that lives under shell-fire. The regular road to it was reported unhealthy – not that the women and children seemed to care. We took byways of which certain exposed heights and corners were lightly blinded by wind-brakes of dried tree-tops. Here the shell holes were rather thick on the ground. But the women and the children and the old men went on with their work with the cattle and the crops; and where a house had been broken by shells the rubbish was collected in a neat pile, and where a room or two still remained usable, it was inhabited, and the tattered window-curtains fluttered as proudly as any flag. And time was when I used to denounce young France because it tried to kill itself beneath my car wheels; and the fat old women who crossed roads without warning; and the specially deaf old men who slept in carts on the wrong side of the road! Now, I could take off my hat to every single soul of them, but that one cannot traverse a whole land bareheaded. The nearer we came to our town the fewer were the people, till at last we halted in a well-built suburb of paved streets where there was no life at all..

A WRECKED TOWN

The stillness was as terrible as the spread of the quick busy weeds between the paving-stones; the air smelt of pounded mortar and crushed stone; the sound of a footfall echoed like the drop of a pebble in a well. At first the horror of wrecked apartment-houses and big shops laid open makes one waste energy in anger. It is not seemly that rooms should be torn out of the sides of buildings as one tears the soft heart out of English bread; that villa roofs should lie across iron gates of private garages, or that drawing-room doors should flap alone and disconnected between two emptinesses of twisted girders. The eye wearies of the repeated pattern that burst shells make on stone walls, as the mouth sickens of the taste of mortar and charred timber. One quarter of the place had been shelled nearly level; the facades of the houses stood doorless, roofless, and windowless like stage scenery. This was near the cathedral, which is always a favourite mark for the heathen. They had gashed and ripped the sides of the cathedral itself, so that the birds flew in and out at will; they had smashed holes in the roof; knocked huge cantles out of the buttresses, and pitted and starred the paved square outside. They were at work, too, that very afternoon, though I do not think the cathedral was their objective for the moment. We walked to and fro in the silence of the streets and beneath the whirring wings overhead. Presently, a young woman, keeping to the wall, crossed a corner. An old woman opened a shutter (how it jarred!), and spoke to her. The silence closed again, but it seemed to me that I heard a sound of singing – the sort of chant one hears in nightmare-cities of voices crying from underground.

IN THE CATHEDRAL

"Nonsense," said an officer. "Who should be singing here?" We circled the cathedral again, and saw what pavement-stones can do against their own city, when the shell jerks them upward. But there *was* singing after all – on the other side of a little door in the flank of the cathedral. We looked in, doubting, and saw at least a hundred folk, mostly women, who knelt before the altar of an unwrecked chapel. We withdrew quietly from that holy ground, and it was not only the eyes of the French officers that filled with tears. Then there came an old, old thing with a prayer-book in her hand, pattering across the square, evidently late for service.

"And who are those women?" I asked.

"Some are caretakers; people who have still little shops here. (There is one quarter where you can buy things.) There are many old people, too, who will not go away. They are of the place, you see."

"And this bombardment happens often?" I said.

"It happens always. Would you like to look at the railway station? Of course, it has not been so bombarded as the cathedral."

We went through the gross nakedness of streets without people, till we reached the railway station, which was very fairly knocked about, but, as my friends said, nothing like as much as the cathedral. Then we had to cross the end of a long street down which the Boche could see clearly. As one glanced up it, one perceived how the weeds, to whom men's war is the truce of God, had come back and were well established the whole length of it, watched by the long perspective of open, empty windows.

II
THE NATION'S SPIRIT AND A NEW INHERITANCE

We left that stricken but undefeated town, dodged a few miles down the roads beside which the women tended their cows, and dropped into a place on a hill where a Moroccan regiment of many experiences was in billets.

They were Mohammedans bafflingly like half a dozen of our Indian frontier types, though they spoke no accessible tongue. They had, of course, turned the farm buildings where they lay into a little bit of Africa in colour and smell. They had been gassed in the north; shot over and shot down, and set up to be shelled again; and their officers talked of North African wars that we had never heard of – sultry days against long odds in the desert years ago. "Afterward – is it not so with you also? – we get our best recruits from the tribes we have fought. These men are children. They make no trouble. They only want to go where cartridges are burnt. They are of the few races to whom fighting is a pleasure."

"And how long have you dealt with them?"

"A long time – a long time. I helped to organize the corps. I am one of those whose heart is in Africa." He spoke slowly, almost feeling for his French words, and gave some order. I shall not forget his eyes as he turned to a huge, brown, Afreedee-like Mussulman hunkering down beside his accoutrements. He had two sides to his head, that bearded, burned, slow-spoken officer, met and parted with in an hour.

The day closed – (after an amazing interlude in the chateau of a dream, which was all glassy ponds, stately trees, and vistas of white and gold saloons. The proprietor was somebody's chauffeur at the front, and we drank to his excellent health) – at a little village in a twilight full of the petrol of many cars and the wholesome flavour of healthy troops. There is no better guide to camp than one's own thoughtful nose; and though I poked mine everywhere, in no place then or later did it strike that vile betraying taint of underfed, unclean men. And the same with the horses.

THE LINE THAT NEVER SLEEPS

It is difficult to keep an edge after hours of fresh air and experiences; so one does not get the most from the most interesting part of the day – the dinner with the local headquarters. Here the professionals meet – the Line, the Gunners, the Intelligence with stupefying photo-plans of the enemy's trenches; the Supply; the Staff, who collect and note all things, and are very properly chaffed; and, be sure, the Interpreter, who, by force of questioning prisoners, naturally develops into a Sadducee. It is their little asides to each other, the slang, and the half-words which, if one understood, instead of blinking drowsily at one's plate, would give the day's history in little. But tire and the difficulties of a sister (not a foreign) tongue cloud everything, and one goes to billets amid a murmur of voices, the rush of single cars through the night, the passage of battalions, and behind it all, the echo of the deep voices calling one to the other, along the line that never sleeps.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.