

# IN PRAISE OF FRANCE!

BY PHILIP GIBBS

TO-DAY, when across the Channel joy-bells are ringing and bugles blowing, and many battalions of blue and khaki are marching through triumphant arches, the soul of England, and of all our British race, must give a salute to France.

When the history of this war is written and read, so that the world may understand the heights and depths of it, France will stand out forever as the nation which suffered most, fought with most exalted heroism, and as a people, with her armies, revealed most wonderfully to the world a spiritual defiance of all agony and wounds.

I can write that in sincerity and truth, though I know as well as any man what British soldiers did in the war, and remember our million dead and their immense, patient valor on many battlefields where their graves were dug.

But it was France who in the beginning withstood the first terrible blows of the German armies in their full strength and ferocity, and staggered under them, but did not fall, and fell back, fighting desperately, bleeding frightfully, before that advancing tide which overwhelmed great tracts of country and made bonfires and ruin of many fair cities and thousands of little towns and villages, whose people fled, homeless, if they had time to flee, until Paris itself was threatened, and the very heart of France.

But the heart of France did not break and the spirit of her soldiers rallied to the first victory of the Marne,

and after that was patient, long-suffering, and resolute in defense, reckless of life in many attacks that failed — poor boyhood of France! — but with a never-failing faith that one day the Germans would be hurled back from French soil and her people liberated.

In the first days of the war I was with the French and saw then not only what modern war means to the world, but what it meant to France. I was caught up in the tides of her fugitives from Lille and Arras and a thousand villages beyond Amiens and Paris, and after a few weeks it seemed to me that all my life had been spent in truck trains crowded with old men and women and young mothers and children, escaping from a fear that was following them; or in roads where these same people trudged away from their homes, leaving everything except life itself behind.

They were in a common misery. Fine ladies of France had dirty hands and soiled clothes like the peasant girls who were with them. Old men and women were as helpless and bewildered as the children who clung to them. But those people did not weep much. Hardly at all. They did not bemoan their losses. They said a thousand times, a million times, '*C'est la guerre!*' 'It is war; and we do not suffer as much as our sons who are fighting. We are glad to share a little of their suffering — those boys of ours who are dying so that France may live.'

That was the spirit of the French people from first to last, in spite of years when the war seemed intermin-

able, in spite of attacks that failed, and continual slaughter, in spite of black months when despair settled heavily upon their souls, and they cried out to God because all their sacrifice seemed fruitless, and the loss of so many sons did not seem to bring victory nearer. And the enemy was still stretched across France, strong and terrible to strike.

But the people of France were marvelous in courage. On the British front we found them living in towns and villages on the very edge of the battlefields, and there they stayed under shell fire which smashed their houses and killed many of them, and ploughed deep holes in their fields. Old women hung out their washing on the slopes behind Albert over which shells came howling. Girls served in the tea-shops of Bethune until the roofs were blown off; and in Armentieres until hundreds of them were gassed in their cellars and many killed.

In Arras all through the war women and children lived below ground, coming up to sunlight between bombardments which wrecked their city from end to end. In Amiens they stayed until they were ordered to leave for their lives' sake, after a terrifying night, and even then, when the British front had broken under overwhelming odds, and the Germans were close at their gates, and many of their houses were in dust and ashes, they waved their hands to our soldiers, cheered them on, and said, '*Ils ne passeront pas!*' ('They will not pass!')

The Germans could not understand these French women.

'You are so proud!' they said in towns which were under their rule for four years or more, until at last we entered them. Those French people, under hostile rule, suffered much, spiritually. Worse than the taxes put on them, the taking of their wines and

linen and metal and milk and machinery, was the sight of those field-gray men about them, and their assurance of victory over France, and their orders and discipline and arrogance.

But the French civilians were never subservient to the 'kommandantur' of the German occupation. They kept their dignity and their pride, and hid any despair they had in their own houses.

'Why not tell your people that resistance is useless?' said a German officer to a woman in Nesle. 'Why go on with all this slaughter?'

'We shall go on for three years, or four years, or five,' said the woman, 'and in the end we shall beat you.'

The officer was silent, and then said: 'You people are wonderful!'

All that I saw of French soldiers; officers and 'poilus' made me admire them, this side idolatry, from the time when I went with the first trainload of mobilized men from Paris to Belfort and Toul, in the first days of the war, to the days when they fought side by side with us in the last great battles. It was they who had that first fine faith — now lost, in spite of victory — that 'This is a war to end war.'

The French syndicalist who had believed in the 'Internationale' rushed to the Colors with rage in his heart, to save France, and civilization. But he said after a few weeks: 'This must never happen again in the world. If I thought my child should have to suffer this thing I would strangle it in its cradle. By defeating Germany we shall smash militarism forever. By saving France we save the world, and that is why I fight.'

The French aristocrat, the poet, the artist, the man of letters, the priest, and the little bourgeois gentleman, served in the ranks with the mechanic, the peasant, and the apache, in the brotherhood of the trenches, in the

dirty ditches of death, in the squalor of barns and billets; and it was a democratic army, in its spirit and in its discipline, far beyond any democracy which we attained in ordeal by battle. To a French general his soldiers were '*mes enfants*,' his sons and children. He kissed his man on the cheek when he pinned a ribbon on his breast.

I saw the French army in the early days, the worst days, when the Germans were driving hard down to Paris. On the platform at Creil among a crowd of them a French sergeant of engineers showed me his diary, a record of bridges blown up by his company, the line of dreadful retreat.

'All goes well!' he said. 'Papa Joffre is preparing a fine trap. You wait — In a few days we shall give the Boche a terrible kick.'

So said all the men about him, though they had seen scores of French villages burning behind them, and were still in retreat. I marveled at their faith, until, in a few days, the battle of the Marne was fought and won.

People here in England do not know how the French fought in the first years of the war. They do not know, for example, the frightful fighting that happened on Notre Dame de Lorette, and in Souchez, and Ablain-St. Nazaire and Neuville St. Vaast, below the Vimy Ridge, before we came into those places, and made them part of our own history.

There was a place called the Labyrinth there, a maze of trenches and earthworks, where the French fought underground as well as above ground, sapping and mining, fighting Germans in dark tunnels, with bayonets and knives, and hands and teeth, in death-struggles. Seven thousand French boys of the youngest class fell in the dash down from La Targette to the village of Neuville St. Vaast, and 3,000 fell with mortal wounds.

Round Souchez and Ablain-St. Nazaire they fell in thousands, and to-day when the rain washes a little earth away, one sees the white bones of those boys with bits of red rag — the old red pantaloons of the first French armies. I went to those places when the French were there with the Vimy Ridge above them, and rain slashing down upon them, and shrapnel, and high explosives.

'It is not good here,' said a little French lieutenant.

No, it was not good there for the men of whom Henri Barbusse wrote — his comrades — in his novel, *Le Feu* (*Under Fire*), the greatest picture of this war from the poilu's point of view.

The poilu's point of view stretched from those fields about Vimy (and higher up by Dixmude, for a time) to the slaughterfields of Lorraine, until we took over more and more line, relieving his exhausted divisions, and I saw him in many of these places from time to time.

In the long, dreary years of trench warfare the French soldier became bitter with Fate sometimes, like our men, and thought himself forgotten by those behind the lines. It seemed to him that he was out there in the trenches, cut off forever from civilized life, awaiting that death which would come one day by trench mortar, or rifle-grenade, or high-explosive shell, or sniper's bullet, in the mud.

He was not relieved so often as our men. In his first year or two he stayed for months in the trenches without relief, and he said, 'We are forgotten — Paris is gay again! — The people at the back do not care a curse for us.'

But the people of France did not forget their sons, and the mothers of France agonized for them. Only corrupt people forgot, and made money, and gorged like vultures on the bodies

of dead youth, like our own profiteers in England.

Again and again France attacked in the Champagne, in the hope of victory at last, and failed, and hid her losses, her tragic losses. Verdun, the key position of French defense, was assaulted by all the strength that Germany could spare, while on the British front we held our breath and waited.

In that heroic defense 550,000 Frenchmen fell dead or wounded, and after that, though France was saved again, her reserves of men were weakened. It seemed as though France would bleed to death.

Yet when our turn came, for the great battles of the Somme and Flanders and for losses greater than those at Verdun, the French still had a fighting strength, and in March of last year, after the last German offensive which was hurled against our lines, I saw a tide of blue streaming up behind us, when our lines were thin after frightful fighting.

It was the French army on the move again, an army of tall, solid, war-hardened men, the last reserves of France. In July a year ago, with English, Scottish, and American troops,

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Foch struck again on the Marne, gathering those reserves of his at the eleventh hour, striking at the psychological moment; and the Germans reeled back, and were lost, when the British armies struck the final blows.

Soldiers of France, the world to-day salutes your heroic spirit, your stern, simple courage, the chivalry with which you bore all suffering, many wounds, the agony of your country, the full abominations of this war which have scarred the beauty of France with one long belt of desolation and ruin.

In England to-day there will be little flags sold for the French Red Cross, and many people here will give what they can in remembrance of your ruined villages and churches, and of your suffering children. As an eyewitness of your valor, and lover of your people, I pay this tribute remembering the 'poilus' I met along the roads of war, and in trenches where they shared their pot-au-feu with me in 'Champagne pouilleuse,' so gallant in places of death, so gay even in the old bad years, so patient in their impatience for the Peace that has come.

*Salut, poilus!*

## GOING SOUTH IN ITALY

BY NORMAN DOUGLAS

No butter for breakfast.

The landlord, on being summoned, avowed that to serve crude butter on his premises involved a flagrant breach of war-time regulations. The condiment could not be used save for kitchen purposes, and then only on certain days of the week; he was liable to heavy penalties if it became known that one of his guests — however, since he assumed me to be a prudent person, he would undertake to supply a due allowance to-morrow and thenceforward, though never in the public dining room; never, never in the dining room!

That is the charm of Italy, I said to myself. These folks are reasonable and gifted with imagination. They make laws to shadow forth an ideal state of things and to display their good intentions toward the community at large; laws which have no sting for the exceptional type of man who can avoid them — the sage, the millionaire, and the 'friend of the family.' Never in the dining room. Why, of course not. Catch me breakfasting in any dining room.

Was it possible? There, at luncheon in the dining room, while devouring those miserable macaroni made with war-time flour, I beheld an over-tall young Florentine lieutenant shamelessly engulfing huge slices of what looked uncommonly like genuine butter, a miniature mountain of which stood on a platter before him, and overtopped all the other viands. I could hardly believe my eyes. How about those regulations? Pointing

to this golden hillock, I inquired softly:

'From the cow?'

'From the cow.'

'Whom does one bribe?'

He enjoyed a special dispensation, he declared — he need not bribe. Returned from Albania with shattered health, he had been sent hither to recuperate. He required not only butter, but meat on meatless days, as well as a great deal of rest; he was badly run down. And eggs, raw eggs, drinking eggs; ten a day, he vows, is his minimum. Enviably convalescent!

The afternoon being clear and balmy, he took me for a walk, smoking cigarettes innumerable. (He needed also cigarettes: 'I would sooner go without trousers than without tobacco,' he said.)

'They had a German here,' he told me, 'who loved this town. He began writing a book to prove that there was a different walk to be taken in the neighborhood for every single day of the year.'

'How German? And then?'

'The war came. He cleared out. The natives were sorry. This whole coast seems to have been saturated with Teutons — of a respectable class, apparently. They made themselves popular, they bought houses, drank wine, and joked with the countrymen.'

'What do you make of them?'

'I am a Tuscan,' he began, meaning, I am above race-prejudices; I can view these things with olympic detachment. 'I think the German says to himself: We want a world-empire, like those