

CIVILIANS AT FRENCH HEADQUARTERS

BY JEAN DE PIERREFEU

[The following entertaining sketch is by the author of G.Q.G. which was reviewed in The Living Age of January 29 and February 25. It pictures a state of affairs with which the hostile headquarters were also acquainted. Marshal von Hindenburg, writes in his Out of My Life, 'There was quite a large number of people who considered themselves compelled to open their hearts to me in writing about every conceivable occurrence, or to acquaint me with their views. It was perfectly impossible for me to read them all myself. I had to employ the services of a special officer for the purpose.' . . . 'Artists presented themselves with a view to immortalizing General Ludendorff and myself with their brushes and chisels; but this was a distinction with which we should have preferred to dispense, in view of our scanty hours of leisure, although we much appreciated the kindness and skill of the gentlemen in question. Neutral countries also sent us guests.']

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AFTER the victory of the Marne, there was in reality but one power left in France, that of Joffre and the Staff. The government, deprived of all prestige by its flight to Bordeaux, cowed in the chieftain's shadow. It had scented the wind of catastrophe in the days when the Germans were marching upon Paris. The idea of rendering accounts filled with terror the greater part of those ministers who had upon their consciences their ancient obstruction of the law providing for three years of military service, and they prudently took shelter behind the responsibility of the military officials, whom they allowed to extend their operations to the maximum, thinking to substitute the soldiers for themselves in case of bad fortune.

It must be admitted that the latter, far from seeking to avoid this, displayed a certain ostentation in claiming full responsibility. So many details, so many essential things had not been foreseen prior to the war, and in turn, the dogma of the absolute autonomy of the military officials had been minutely determined. It will be remembered that everywhere, from the very first

day, officers were automatically substituted for civil functionaries, who seemed intruders in the general confusion. It was through an incredible oversight, of which the military command had frequent occasions to deplore the regrettable results, that the Ministers and the President of the Republic were not militarized!—When the latter dignitary, for example, had once signed the decree of August 2 and finished his patriotic addresses, he found himself, one may say, out of a job. No legal link bound him to the military organization. Had he been of age to bear arms, he would, without doubt, have reported to his station.

It was a bizarre situation, which at first no one realized. From his retreat in his palace, M. Poincaré, too proud to take the initiative, did not know how to get into touch with his chief general. What was going on? He did not know. Reading the newspapers, the stories of visitors, indiscretions on the part of the Minister of War, who was himself badly enough informed, did not suffice to give him an exact idea of events. This condition of things might have endured without the sturdy initiative of

Colonel Pénelon, then the President's attaché. This officer perceived at a glance the isolation of the chief of the state and his ignorance of the military situation. With that rapid decision which characterizes his profession, he set out by motor for general headquarters, having determined upon an audacious plan. Having reached Vitry which at that time sheltered the brain of the army, he penetrated to the third office, where he had some acquaintances. The reception which he received was rather cool.

'What are you doing here?' inquired a comrade of the same rank.

'What am I doing here? Getting some news for the boss,' replied the colonel.

Was it this phrase from political slang that exasperated the interlocutor?

'The boss,' he cried. 'There's only one boss here, and that's Joffre.'

Surprised by the voices, other officers approached and joined in chorus with the first. It would be a fine thing to see a civilian meddling with operations. In vain the unfortunate messenger tried to make them understand that the head of the state still retained some prerogatives, even though they were not inscribed in the field-service regulations of the army; the indignant officers tenaciously denied it. Losing ground, seeing that his mission was a failure, overwhelmed at the idea of returning empty-handed, the colonel cried:—

'But then, what *are* you going to do with the government?'

The reply to this (which I guarantee to be authentic) raises its author, ordinarily a man without irony, to a level with Molière's genius:

'The government? It can go run the colonies!'

By the grace of Providence, the general-in-chief was not of the same stuff. He retained memories of the days of political power, and he did not think

that a short and victorious war would lead to the end of the Republic. He very kindly set himself at the disposition of President Poincaré.

'You must come back, Pénelon,' he said to the colonel. 'There will be from time to time, some little things to tell you.'

Properly proud of his success, the attaché made a triumphal return. Two days afterward, he set out again for general headquarters, where he received the warmest welcome. He went there very often after that; and until he was made a general in April, 1917, Colonel Pénelon filled with devotion the function of liaison officer of the President of the Republic.

To return to the state of mind of the government, exiled at Bordeaux, the loyalty of Joffre, guaranteed by the *Dépêche de Toulouse*, somewhat reassured them. The general was put to the test on the day when he consented to insert in the order of felicitation to the troops of the Marne, the famous phrase about the army which the Republic had prepared and of which she should be proud. It is hard to believe that such a commendatory phrase could have burst spontaneously from an officer's pen. I have no difficulty in imagining that the editor of the generalissimo's orders had no taste at all for this rhetoric of the laity, obligatory upon him, but not passed without protest. One may ask himself what would have happened if the army had had at its head, at that moment, a general less orthodox. It is beyond a doubt that the government could not have associated itself without great fear in the immense popularity of a Pau or a Castelnau, if either of them had been the conqueror of the Marne. Would not Bordeaux have been fatally led to plot its own destruction. In any case, if it had been impossible to touch him, for fear of popular discontent, what sus-

picious would not have been shown. It was, I think, a great piece of good fortune for France that this situation was spared her. Would the Staff have been wise enough to endure hazing without reacting? The ambitious self-seekers, the men who make *coups d'état*, whom military men often find among them, would not these have been assembling about the victorious general?

It is so much the more probable that Joffre himself, in the first days of his triumph, saw that gate which he kept closed forced by enthusiastic visitors, full of mental reservations, who pretended to hold in their hands the fate of France. As is well known, the general voluntarily affirmed that he was a good republican; he has so often made that profession of faith that it has become notorious. It is perhaps well that he had the habit at that time, when this phrase served him as a defense to cut short the ambiguous insinuations which he detected behind the excessive admiration of certain visitors. One would be surprised to find out that men of position, men covered with honors by the Republic, and whom the Republic has often used in its service in high positions, have been in the number of these dangerous flatterers. If Joffre wished to let us share in his suspicions, we should have some curious confidences on this subject; but it is probable that he will say nothing.

When I arrived at general headquarters, that ferment of troubled hopes had definitely dwindled, but Chantilly remained the centre of worldly covetousness. Public men or society men, even though Joffre had by that time acquired the reputation of a taciturn, peevish fellow, impatient of cajolery, were highly desirous of approaching the grand chief and having a share in his glory. Even the writers held no more earnestly to the notion that they could utilize the historic and romantic mate-

rial which, they thought, must fill every corner of general headquarters. What letters, at once humble and pompous, have I not seen in the hands of the general, begging the honor of fixing for posterity the effigy of the hero of the Marne! Every day attempts were made to force a way in, and women were no less ardent in seeking to approach the holy of holies.

The fact that one had come back from Chantilly attracted as much attention as, in the eighteenth century, the fact that one was a Persian would have done. Mischievous people knew how to profit by this infatuation. I knew a certain officer, of the military government of Paris, whose service brought him, once a month, into the vicinity of general headquarters. He confined himself to making reports in some bureau, and returned after a few banal words exchanged with the officers who were present. One day in Paris, to my great surprise, he was presented to me as a friend of the generalissimo and in constant touch with him. People used to go out to have the honor of hearing, each time he returned from Chantilly, the ultra-fantastic tales that he imagined.

In reality, the general-in-chief defended himself with all his might against this intrusion, and his staff did its best to aid him in this task, in which, in certain cases, they exceeded propriety. A man like Maurice Barrès, for example, had to wait a long time before being received at general headquarters.

Along with Gabriel Hanotaux, Joseph Reinach was one of the most persevering in the effort to break into the isolation of general headquarters. He assumed, at once, a tone of pathetic familiarity in talking with the chief leaders. At the end of every attack, there were embraces, warm hand-clasps, exuberances as of a great man greatly moved. After every victory he would turn up,

to fall on Joffre's neck, weeping into his beard with emotion and giving the impression that he came in the name of France to thank the generalissimo for having saved the fatherland. Sometimes installed in an arm-chair, sometimes flat on his stomach among the office maps, sometimes even rummaging in the papers, he made himself quite at home — horribly indiscreet, but with such good-nature that one could not object.

General Pétain, with whom he tried to begin this treatment, had no particular appreciation of these manifestations — so little, indeed, that 'Polybe,' carried away by his impetuous temperament, fell victim on many occasions to the prevailing idea that France should take the offensive, and in covert hints blamed Pétain for his inaction. But this course did not prevent his writing the general letters which overflowed with effusiveness, and which ended with such stupefying formulas as 'I open my arms to you,' 'I crush you to my heart,' 'I embrace you.'

One used often to see, as an assiduous visitor, the painter Flameng, a member of the Institute, garbed in khaki and looking like a cross between an English officer and an art student. Flameng was received with pleasure because of his constant good-humor, his air of a good fellow, and the Gallic stories which he used to retail with bursts of laughter. But this cordiality, it is said, was only apparent, for he bestowed a junior officer's cavalier treatment upon the chauffeurs who had to drive him. For Flameng enjoyed the most extensive privileges. Life would have been very agreeable to him, if he had not ceaselessly encountered on the road Georges Scott, who was in inviolable competition with him.

By what miracle of ingenuity was that obscure designer of chromos — I am speaking of Georges Scott — able

to obtain authorization to move freely over the whole front? There is a mystery here, for the explanation of which we must seek the fantastic imaginings of the Minister of War, Messimy, unless, indeed, Scott accorded the right to himself — which is quite possible. In any event, his adventures during the war were like a moving picture. Mobilized at Versailles as a common soldier in the baggage trains, he hit upon the extraordinary notion of uniforming himself like a *chasseur alpin*. It was on his own responsibility, naturally, that he effected this travesty, in which he persisted until the end of the war.

He had the free disposal of an automobile and a military chauffeur, and depended on nobody but himself. Gasoline and tires were presumably furnished by the army. His uniform bedizened with facings, his *béret* coquettishly cocked over one ear, his civil cross of the Legion of Honor on his breast, he used to roll up to headquarters and present himself to the general as he had seen liaison officers do, achieving an impeccable military salute and clicking his heels — for he affected the martial gait of an old trooper. At first nothing was more of a burlesque than this 'blue devil' from the realm of fantasy, with the appearance of a dandy and the figure of a well-fed bourgeois. He had the air of playing the part of the tenor in a comic opera, and gave the impression that he would force his way through most of reconquered Alsace. Officers who were in need of amusement got used to his presence. He was discreet, however, very patriotic in his talk, and respectful to excess. He was invited everywhere, to messes and to generals' dining-rooms, the story having got about that he was the official painter of the Minister. His sentimental and patriotic daubings pleased simple souls, and he offered his designs

freely, knowing what they were worth. But for all that, authorization was pitilessly refused to really great artists, to go and see the war on the spot.

Georges Scott made his way from staff to staff, even up to general headquarters. He was presented to Joffre, and perhaps even invited to his table, but there he found himself confronted by a man of intellect and an enlightened amateur of art, General Pellé, who refused to take him seriously.

He took it into his head that he ought to rise in rank. Desiring to interest me in his cause, he told me that he experienced painful humiliations.

'Sometimes I happen to meet on the road one of our brave little soldiers,' he said. 'Whether the elegance of my uniform misleads him, or whether it is my Legion of Honor that deceives him, the moment he sees me, taking me for an officer, his hand rises for a salute; but a glance at my sleeve, bare of ornament, shows him that I am a private like himself, and at once his hand falls. Well, I feel as if I had received a blow, and blushes cover my face.'

According to Scott, the way to end this deplorable state of affairs was for General Pellé to authorize him to wear the bar of a sub-lieutenant. He did not ask either for the rank or the pay; the appearance was enough for him. I took his request to the general, who burst into a roar of homeric laughter and suggested to me that I had better not talk any more to him about Scott, in view of the fact that we were engaged in a war and not in a carnival.

Marcel Hutin had no need to solicit the confidences of the chiefs, in order to appear *au courant* of military plans. He confined himself to gathering up the gossip of the corridors of the Ministry and the Chamber. Indeed, we never had an offensive under consideration of which he did not know something or other, a month in advance, by means

of the confused rumors that got out. Combatants were the first to show themselves indiscreet when they came back on leave. Hutin, with a diverting air of assurance, a great supply of big type, italics, and mysterious formulas, simply spread among the great public the indiscretions which circulated in political circles. But he knew how to give to these mixtures such a stamp of genuine news, that even his fellow journalists were deceived and accused general headquarters of favoring Hutin. I can bear witness that there was nothing of the sort.

Upon one occasion he ended his article in the following fashion: ' . . . and as one of our principal leaders said to me yesterday in giving me his plans, "Courage, we'll have them yet." ' There was a formidable outcry among the journalists accredited to the military bureau of information at Paris. 'You see,' they said, 'Hutin receives hints. He says so himself. We want such favoritism to stop.'

Thereupon the Minister telephoned to general headquarters to ask that no exceptions should be made. General Pellé was interested enough to make an inquiry to see which particular 'principal leader' could have taken it upon himself to give information to a journalist who had not yet set foot in general headquarters, and who had taken no part in trips to the front. He learned from the lips of General Castelnau in what fashion the thing had occurred. One evening, being in Paris, the general had been stopped, just as he was entering his motor, by Marcel Hutin, who, hat in hand and with a smile on his lips, asked the favor of an interview with him. But Castelnau, excusing himself, merely said with his habitual openness, 'Courage, we'll have them yet.' It needed the magnificent audacity of Marcel Hutin to transform into 'plans' so brief a conversation.

His renown was already universal when he undertook to pay a visit to general headquarters. General Pellé consented, desirous, as he said, to see this 'phenomenon.' Hutin arrived at Chantilly in an automobile, very proud of the honor which was done him, at once humble, and yet bold as usual. At once he began, in a high-pitched voice, to give the general advice as to what must be done to obey the wishes of the country, adding that he took it upon himself to keep the public spirit firm. The general was much amused at the presumption of this journalist who, having come with the intention of learning something, had done all the talking himself without listening for a moment. But the next day the general got more light on this method of interviewing, when he read that he had stated as the intentions of the high command, the very things that Hutin had himself proposed.

If general headquarters held itself aloof, from some obscure hostility to writers, the generals of the fighting units, on the other hand, had the most cordial welcome for them. Many were invited to the headquarters of armies or army corps. They went directly, without the knowledge of Chantilly, although this was contrary to formal orders. In fact, the generals did not disdain to secure popularity by this means. They knew that in this way they would get the attention of the writers, who would take it upon themselves to spread among the public the legend of their exploits. Yet it is not always the chiefs who are to be held responsible for prop-

aganda which was sometimes carried on without their knowledge. Their staffs, eager for the reputation of their chiefs, were often the principal authors.

This explains the unequal renown of the generals of the war, the best known of whom are not always the best. That is the way fame goes in a democracy. I admit that it seems natural enough for staff officers to feel faithful attachment toward men for whom they have nothing but praise; but in so delicate a matter, in the interest of the country, the strictest justice ought to reign. These habits of comradeship, the relation as between client and patron, hitherto reserved for politics, are so implanted in our habits of thought, that at present whoever tries to establish a classification according to merit in war finds himself suspected of trying to help his friends.

The more I examine what is written, and what is taught, the more I doubt all history — a tissue of legends, of illusions, and of counterfeits. A man is so deceived in his opinions by clever people that one may think that the greater part of the time it is error that has succeeded in imposing itself. Why should our epoch be different from others? It has been given me, a living man, devoted to the truth, to witness events which I am, moreover, compelled to set in their true light. Every day the greater part are wrested from their true significance to the profit of some idea or of some man. If it has always been so, as there is ground enough for thinking, then history is nothing but a romance.

THE BURNING OF MOSCOW

BY ÉTIENNE SAINT-DENIS

[This account of the burning of Moscow is taken from the memoirs of a humble follower of Napoleon, who was an eye-witness of the conflagration. It is now published for the first time.]

From *Le Figaro*, June 4
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PERFECT quiet reigned in the Palace of the Tsars. The silence was broken only by the heavy breathing of my companions, when I suddenly awoke, about midnight or one o'clock. Opening my eyes, I rubbed them with astonishment at seeing the room perfectly light. That certainly was extraordinary. I rose and went to the window, to discover the source of this illumination. Imagine my startled surprise at discovering that the whole city was on fire — at least the southern and western portions; for our windows looked out toward the west, across the Moskova.

It was a beautiful but terrible sight. Imagine a city, I should say as large as Paris, all in flames, viewed at midnight from one of the towers of Notre Dame. I aroused my companions, telling them to come and see. They were up in a moment and joined me at the window, watching the immense conflagration that was devouring the city. Since it was important for the Emperor to be informed at once, Constant decided to go to his apartments without delay. His first *valet de chambre* returned a moment later; and since he brought us no orders, we again retired; for there was nothing that we could do until daylight.

By morning the fire was raging, if possible, more furiously than ever; but it did not afford such an impressive sight in the daytime, and besides, you

get used to everything. Knowing that the Emperor was close at hand, we did not concern ourselves.

I was one of the first to get up. I always like to take an early morning walk, and went out at once for my usual promenade around the Kremlin. Everything was in confusion. Several detachments of guards had bivouacked in the great empty space in front of this part of the palace. Some of the soldiers were lying down, others sat smoking their pipes by the embers of their campfires. Parties were constantly coming and going. Empty bottles scattered around the fires indicated how the soldiers had spent the night. Every soldier I met had lost something or other. Dragoons were looking for bridles, saddles, or blankets, and in some cases even for their mounts.

All were watching the spread of the conflagration, which was rapidly consuming street by street those parts of the city which had not already fallen victims to its voracity. Orders were issued to save certain establishments; but we were helpless. We had no pumps, no pails, no water. We did not know where to find anything in this great city, deserted by its inhabitants. So we let things burn, merely taking from the houses things likely to be of immediate service to us.

What did the Emperor think of this sublime but tragic spectacle, this ocean