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What I Saw in France.

BY PROFESSOR ST. ELME DE CHAMP.*

AT the first meeting of the Canadian Club for the season, held on the 4th October, at the Café Royal, Professor St. Elme de Champ said:

Mr. Chairman, and Gentlemen,—I am a little embarrassed at your warm reception, because if I am here it is very much against my will. (Laughter.) The obstinate person who has taken advantage of twenty years of cloudless friendship to place me in this quandary, will alone be responsible for the disastrous results of this foolish and reckless enterprise. (Laughter.)

You will readily understand that I am speaking a foreign language, and that I have not been using this foreign language for nearly two years. Consequently you must expect me to make some blunders and mistakes in my speech. And also the subject chosen has been so much spoken about, so many writers have expressed their views, that there is practically

*A typical Frenchman in temperament and outlook, M. de Champ's address was all the more interesting by reason of his having just returned from a year's active service in the French Army. He is well known as Associate Professor of French in the University of Toronto.

nothing left for the average man to speak about,—and I am the average man, nothing else.

I mean to speak to you to-day as I would speak to one of you by the fireside. (Hear, hear, and applause.) Don't be surprised if I stumble on my way, if I stop looking for words, or if I collapse altogether before I end my speech.

I should in the first place thank you for your kind invitation. But it has made me feel so miserable during the last few days, that I was little inclined to be very grateful, but I realized that in my unworthy and insignificant self you meant to honor my native country. (Hear, hear, and applause.) Then, I can tell you, with all my heart, how grateful I am for the occasion you have given me of saying that at last the "*entente cordiale*" is no longer a diplomatic formula, but an actual fact, and that to-day my fellow countrymen walk hand in hand with Britishers from all parts of the world on the hard and perilous road leading to the freedom of the world! (Applause.)

On the 2nd of August last year, at 5 o'clock,—I was then in the country in France,—the bells rang wildly; in every one of the thirty-six thousand villages or towns they did the same; mobilization had been ordered; it meant war the very next day.

Now, gentlemen, there are words we all know but which have not the same meaning for every one of us. Take for instance the word "cyclone"; everyone here knows what a cyclone is, and yet only those caught at sea by such a meteor will realize the full strength of the word. The word "mobilization," I am afraid, is perhaps little understood here; what does it picture to my eyes? Mobilization? Well, at first, for the first few minutes, women and children crying, men shouting. "It means we shall have them! we shall get back our Alsace-Lorraine!" (Applause.) Later, crowds of men going to the railways, followed by their families. At the stations tears, kisses, but on every face a proud, beautiful smile! Now, later on again, trains passing every four minutes, full of singing soldiers, guns, munitions. No mail, no telegrams, no telephone, no newspapers, no money, banks closed, no communication, so to speak, from the outside world. At each town hall, a few lines posted, giving but scant news. And all the time that continuous stream of men, who, at the rate of three hundred thousand a day, were joining their regiments. That nightmare lasted for a fortnight. But what magnificent spirit animated everyone! (Hear, hear, and applause.) France had succeeded in bringing together four million men to oppose to the invaders. Well, after a short time, things went on a little better: we got some mail, and occasionally one-sheet news-

papers, but we had no news, no sure news from the capital.

I remember quite well the day we learned suddenly that the government were leaving Paris, and that the Germans were at Compiègne. At that time I was on the Italian border, kept there in case the Germans might make use of Italian territory to come on our own, as they were now on their way there. I remember very well the 6th of September, when our Colonel came. We went to him, asking to be taken to the northern front. He simply smiled: "My boys, wait till the day after to-morrow," he said. He knew! He knew Joffre had chosen the place where the Huns were to be crushed. He knew every move of the eight armies had been planned in order get at that result.

Shall I ever forget the day when the news of the Victory of the Marne reached us! I saw men in their forties dance like children, embrace one another, with tears running down their cheeks,—and I could not swear I was not one of them! (Applause.) For you know we were mere Frenchmen, mere Frenchmen!

There are stories going about the world which are absolutely baseless, and yet they are repeated so often everyone believes they are true. You know the story about all Frenchmen being small of stature, that's one. Friends in this very hall have argued, "But you are an exception." Well, I have brothers who are of my size, and a son who is slightly over my height. (Laughter.) "Well," they say, "it is in your family." If I tell them that my son is not the biggest of his year in our "canton," then they reply, "Well, those are the French of one region." But it happened that out of fifteen Frenchmen who left this town to join the army, four men were over six feet two out of the fifteen. So that story you may dismiss. (Laughter.)

There is also the story about the over-thrifty Frenchmen. It has been put down that we are thrifty, consequently, being thrifty, we were liable to overdo it. Thus a very serious cable was sent from London, saying: "Efforts are being made by Sir George Perley and Arthur Ardagh to secure one of the guns captured by the Canadians to show at the Toronto Exhibition; but it appears that the French hold upon such trophies is most tenacious, and thus far nothing of this form has come to England." (Laughter.) It is useless to say that this story was not true; I asked an officer if he would tell me about it; his reply was that the guns were a mile or two behind the lines, and that since November no trenches had been taken by us. But since that, things have changed, and we have guns in

plenty; I have no doubt we could fill the whole Exhibition Grounds with them now! (Laughter.)

There is a well-meaning and kind editor who wrote once—I wonder who he is—"A new France has arisen!" Well, that man expressed his thought very likely; but was he telling the truth? Let me say No! No, there is no such thing as a new France: the France that is fighting now is the old France, with her love for liberty for herself and for others, the same France that stopped the first Huns fourteen hundred years ago, the same who under Charles the Hammer drove out of Europe; the Saracens twelve hundred years ago, the same France which in 1792 at Valmy sent her sons to crush the forefathers of the present Huns. Nothing has changed! (Applause.)

But it happens that that poor Old France is not known by everybody. What does the average man know about my country? Very little! The foreigner who goes to Paris does not see our life at all. What does he see? He goes to the centre of Paris, he sees some of the sights of that city, and perhaps also the Chateaux de la Loire; and he comes back to America, having seen nothing of what we are and have been! The world in general and Germany in particular had decided that France through her political and religious disputes, and the Socialists' claims had lost altogether all national spirit. Now it happened that at the very word of war we swept aside all the rubbish that divided us, and worked as one man towards our common foe; and the world cries: What a miracle! I beg your pardon, there is no miracle—we, the French people, knew it all the time!

I have three brothers. One of them is by profession a soldier, consequently he has practically and in fact no opinion about politics, and very little about religion. The second is a Royalist, and a staunch Roman Catholic. The third is an artist—I am sorry to say (Laughter)—an atheist with Socialistic views. I myself am a moderate Republican—I am very moderate in everything (Laughter), and a fair Catholic. But what does it mean? We do love one another tenderly, and have but one motto: "France first!" (Applause.)

The world always thought us to be—wonderful sprinters; but believed we had no chance to do anything in any other class: now we have shown that we are stayers as well, and the world is astounded! (Applause.) What does it prove? Does it prove that we have changed? No, it proves that the world did not know us. You have heard again and again this old story, that France is a decaying nation. It has been taught in some universities—let us say, on this continent—officially taught, that in twenty years France would be a second rate

power. Well, I do not know what France will be twenty years from now, but surely, at this present moment, if there are any second rate powers, they must be a little far back from us! (Applause.)

Few foreigners who go to France go anywhere else than Paris, while you know, most of you, that within half a mile from the Church of the Madeleine you meet so many foreigners, as a matter of fact hundreds of thousands of foreigners, the "métèques" as they call them, that you hear in the street every language spoken except French. (Laughter.) Well, no matter how stupid the French business man may be, he can't fail to cater to the needs of the people who go there to make merry. I myself—I suppose I am not saying something wrong; I am always afraid of that, I am a newcomer to Canada, you know (Laughter)—I went on three occasions to the Moulin Rouge, and the Folies Parisiennes, but each time at the special request of Canadian visitors. (Laughter.) So that really Paris has become to be regarded by a good many as a sort of Coney Island (Laughter) artistically designed, where all those looking for a "good time" will gather. But of the family life in France the foreigner sees nothing in the fashionable tea rooms of the Rue de la Paix and the night restaurants of the Boulevards. He does not see there the busy manufacturer or the hard working scientist with their wives and children—they are somewhere else!

To see true family life, and thus to see exactly what we are, is a very hard task for the foreigner. I should like to explain this fact, because it really shows that we are not what you think us to be. How do you picture the average Frenchman? A sort of light-hearted man, who likes a good drink, and you don't like that sort of thing. That is the man pictured in novels. I am sorry that other French people are not here to-day to corroborate what I say, but we are really quite bashful, quite timid. If I were quite sure this would not be reported up town, I would tell you that the "cosy corner" is a frightful thing to us; we are always seeking more light, and we bless the innocent intruder that walks our way. Well, that foreigner does not see the sanctuary, that is the French home. He does not see how carefully, how tenderly, our children are brought up; the whole family gathered at each meal around the table; the springs among us of an ardent patriotism, that has its roots in the deep love of the home and of those of whom the home is made. He does not see that France is nothing but one large family. We never separate the idea of motherland from that of family: to us they are one and the same thing; to us one of the first of our duties is to learn to love our country

above all things. That is why we remain French wherever we go, even in Canada; it is also why we cherish the hope of dying, if not for our country, at least in our country. Let me tell you, I like Canada; I have in this very room many friends, perhaps more than in France, and perhaps surer friends—because when an Anglo-Saxon is a friend he *is* a friend—but if I thought that when I should be laid to rest it would be elsewhere than in a graveyard overlooking a valley beside the Alps, then I would shudder, and this would spoil the rest of my life. That is how we love our country—madly, passionately! It is foolish under ordinary circumstances; but in war time it is a mighty precious inspiration. (Applause.)

I meant to say a few words to you about conscription, and a few words about what the situation is in France at the present time, but I am afraid I can not now, as it would take five or six minutes. (Cries of "Go on!")

Last week—I must tell you again I am so thankful to Canada for the way I have been received, the reception is much too warm, I have done nothing extraordinary (Laughter)—several times during last week people came to me and shook hands with me, and especially gave me new remedies for rheumatism (Laughter)—well, it is absolutely true, and you would be surprised if I showed you the letters I have on my desk at the university, coming from various parts of Ontario and giving me new remedies for rheumatism (Renewed laughter)—among the things that have been said to me I remember this sentence: "Well, you did well, but of course in this free country of ours we have no conscription." Well, to my mind conscription—our conscription—is the very essence of liberty! If we have conscription in France, it is because we are not under the rule of a dictator, it is because everyone has this feeling towards the nation, that the nation must be defended against the foe; and every child is born not only to his family but also to France. (Applause.) Conscription—well, if you could see the way our people join the army—I am not speaking only of war time but of peace time—how eager they are to join—it is an actual shame for a young man in France not to be accepted by the medical board when he is twenty years old! We are perfectly at liberty to suppress these laws, for as a matter of fact we have no dictator, and if we have that law it is because we have made it, and are only too glad to have it. (Hear, hear.) So we were able to bring together four million men. Now, when I am told that France is not a free country because she has conscription—well, this is a little too much for me to receive! (Laughter.)

Also, in what condition did I leave France? Well, of course, the first day I arrived here—that is a week from last Friday—I said, "The big drive is coming!" "Oh, nonsense!" I was told. I repeated, "The big drive is coming." Nobody believed me. That was Friday, and it was on Sunday that the good news came! (Applause.)

At the present time we have all the men we want, all the munitions we want, more money than we want, and we are absolutely sure of crushing Germany in a few months! (Cheers.) Joffre—(Applause)—he knows his business! (Applause.) Now, we are thankful to Great Britain and Canada for having sent a large number of men to the north of our front; we have thus been able to mass a larger number of men in the south,—and just wait for the results! (Applause.)

Also I have been asked, "What about the country there? I wish I could go and spend the winter on the Riviera!" Do go, please! The Riviera is still there. The hotels, the theatres, are there, concerts are given every day. A few hundred thousand acres of our territory are occupied by the Germans, but the rest is all free soil. You will not meet men under forty-six; you don't find in the streets the young people. Where are the young people? Those under forty are in the camps. With that exception things are much as usual in the streets. You will find a good many people with one arm, or one leg, sometimes with no arms, blind people; but with that exception, French life is much the same as before. The foreigner going to Nice or Cannes will see one or two hotels transformed into hospitals. But if you have any idea of going to France, Go! I have crossed the whole of France in good trains, have found good hotels, nothing lacking that money could buy. The cost of living is not so very high, it is perhaps fifteen per cent. higher, but in this good town of Toronto we are so accustomed to rises in prices of things that fifteen per cent. is not much! (Laughter.)

It is useless for me to say how much we have appreciated the Canadian contingents sent from Toronto and elsewhere. We all admire them. The only one I saw was passing at top speed on a motorcycle; I could not stop him to speak to him, but I understood he was a Canadian, at something he said to someone ahead of him, it was only two words he said, but they showed he was a Canadian. (Laughter.) I would not dare to repeat one of them.

Well, we all hope the war will end soon. I told one mother this morning who was anxious about her son who is in training, that those in training here will not fight—the war will be over before they are ready. But those who are there, we all

hope, will go as far as the Rhine with us and watch developments! (Applause.) It is quite sure by the time we reach the Rhine the Germans will be on their uppers. Cheers.) Of course you know the Germans have tried again and again to destroy our mutual friendship, but if in the eyes of Germans the most sacred treaty is a rag of paper, among gentlemen the word of honor, the handshake, are sufficient bonds. (Applause.) And when in last September we were offered Alsace-Lorraine and two hundred million dollars if we allowed Germany to fight England alone, the answer was a scornful "No!" and the victory of the Marne. (Cheers and applause.) For every Frenchman was ready to die to keep his promise, and it is useless to say we expected it just as much from Britain. (Applause.)

Now, gentlemen, I did not know really, what I was going to say when I came here. But I want you to be impressed with one thing, that if I have come here—under other circumstances I would say, to make a fool of myself—it was not because I wanted to speak in public, not because I thought it would please my friends, but because I thought by coming here I might give a few explanations to you which might bring you nearer and nearer to our heart. (Hear, hear.)

In the war, we British, Belgians, Russians, Serbians, French, of to-day, no matter how small, no matter how remote the part we shall have taken in stopping the course of this torrent of devastation, we shall go down to history as the unnamed heroes, who freed the world from the greatest peril that perhaps ever threatened it. I am sure the grandsons of the neutrals, the note writers, the degree snatchers (Laughter and cheers)—well, those grandsons will be a little ashamed of the prudence, the "love for peace at any cost" of their forefathers. (Hear, hear, and applause.) They will be very much ashamed that their love for peace should have deprived them of the privilege to belonging to our great and glorious crowd! (Long applause.)

At the conclusion of Professor De Champ's address, the President of the Club, Mr. F. H. Deacon, called for cheers for France, and the audience rose and gave them with great heartiness.
