



WAR SHADOWS IN SOUTH FRANCE

By ALICE JONES

AT the hospital on the hill that French sisters have made a real, if temporary, home for their "dear wounded," some convalescents loitering by the door in the sun eagerly greeted a visitor. "Oh, madame must come and see our Servian; it is his fete day!" Cripples and all forming an escort, they led her to a bed where sat smiling a young Servian, the first of the scattered army to reach our shores, bandaged, haggard from past privations, but never losing that proud tilt of the head, characteristic of his race. On the quilt amid an arabesque of sprays of green, interspersed with a few flowers, were set out some small gifts of cigarettes, picture post-cards, a ring fashioned from a bit of shrapnel.

Proudly contemplating their work, the Frenchmen stood round, nodding and exchanging friendly grins with the man cut off from any other greeting.

It was Twelfth Night, the Christmas of the Greek Church, and the exile was keeping his feast.

The visitor left some money for cigarettes and came away with a choky feeling she did not wish to betray.

During a sunny morning stroll on the promenade, I was drawn by curiosity to a bench where, on the reverse side, sat a strange pair.

One was a shabby, unshaved old man, still showing through the listlessness of his dejection signs of former local importance. Ruddy-faced, short and sturdy, one recognized the northern Flemish type now mentally associated with refugees. Beside him sat a smart young officer, sandy-haired and freckled. Anywhere he might have been taken for a Scotchman. His closely fitting uniform of fawn-coloured cloth with facings of crimson velvet was visibly fresh from the tailor. His white collar and cuffs, not so common now as once, were spotless, and his buttons shining. His peakless, fawn-coloured cap had a jaunty tilt. At first I thought him a Belgian, but their uniforms are in cut and material much more like our own, and if he were not a Belgian, he must be one of the Servian officers newly arrived at the English hospital. If so, the splendour of his appearance was dimmed by my happening to know that the French Red Cross ladies were busy getting a change of underclothing made for these same officers, and in passing I will note the fact that Serbs, in spite of their cold winters, prefer to the heavy woollen underclothing of French and English soldiers, cotton garments. But the old man was asking the officer questions to which he responded in the most halting of French.

He was a Serb. He had come? By Nisch, Ushub, Durazzo, Brindisi, Genoa. Each word dropped like a bead on a rosary of pain and exile.

The old man, comprehending, sighed, and staring with heavy eyes at the shores and sea, said, with dull bitterness:

"Ah, me, I come from the Belgian border. Never did I think to find myself here."

"Me, I go back!" the youth announced.

The old man shook his head.

"It marches slowly la bas, eh!" he said.

Meanwhile the officer had been keeping sharp watch on paths, and when a nice-looking girl appeared behind the band stand, he jumped up and joined her.

As they walked past me, she was laughing gaily at his broken French and he was trying to explain his meaning by waving his hand round his cap and then pointing his stick like a gun at the distant mountains.

The old man sighed again and toddled off. For him there was no pretty girl, no hope in youth, the first breath of spring, only the dreary listlessness of days of exile.

Mardi Gras on the Riviera. Two years ago the words meant much more, meant crowded hotel and trains, all Parisian upper Bohemianism disgorging its unsavoury self on Nice in trains de luxe and Pullmans. It meant bright flags everywhere and music and flowers, from the country woman's basket

of humble little bunches of wall flowers and marguerites, with perhaps one wilted rose or carnation to a bunch, to the ethereal sprays of forced lilac and great glowing orbs of La France or Glorie de Dijon roses behind the panes of fashionable flower shops, both doomed to be trampled underfoot in the street dust. From the country woman with her basket to the German owner of the most gorgeous hotel, all were reaping their harvest from the world's pleasure-seekers. Prices, what did prices matter when it seemed a race between reckless Russians, ponderous grey-clad German couples, smart English men and girls, French, somewhat scornful and aloof, and excited American family groups of shrill children and grey-haired elders as to who could fling away their money the fastest.

"It can't last much longer," said my wise English doctor, who knows his Riviera so well, but neither he nor I guessed that the writing for this pleasure-seeking world was already on the wall and its days numbered.

I think it must be three years since a friend of mine, a self-reliant, much-travelled Englishwoman, was called south by sudden summons on the eve of Shrove Tuesday. Her account of the journey was startling.

Cook managed to secure her a berth in the night express, crammed with Parisian daughters of joy and with men intent on making the most of every hour allowed them by their return tickets. Everywhere were notices to beware of pickpockets, and it was easy to see that the warning was needed.

Tucked away in her corner, sad at heart for the bereaved mother she was hastening to, the wild horde mattered little to her. But food must be had, and when she ventured into the dining-car she was almost swept off her feet. Fantastically dressed women and half-drunk men made a babel. Champagne flowed like water and she saw a plate thrown at a pallid waiter. Dinner was impossible, so she beat a retreat with a roll and an orange. I forget exactly when it was that she discovered a frightened English girl, but they shared a berth together, preferring crowding to a solitude not without risk. No doubt many of those men have died for France. Many of those women have served her in hospital or ambulance.

I remember that carnival of the old order. Beneath heavy skies, stretched a wild grey sea, and the rows of seats on the promenade offered small temptation.

So we strolled up and down, with occasional pauses to watch a floral battle between two carriages turned into bowers of mimosa or of red carnations. There was always an outburst of laughter and flower-throwing when the military car came, especially if it met the white and yellow tennis club car, laden with white-clad men and girls. The officers were mingled, Chasseurs des Alps and artillery. How many of them are sleeping their last sleep on northern battlefields. How many are to-day facing the German hordes on the Meuse?

To-day the March sun shines brilliantly over the snow-tipped mountains, but the town shows no flags or flowers or music, and the crowd only gathers round the evening bulletin on the Mairie wall that tells how sways the battle. And the women grow more and more nervous.

"Ah, madame, I had no sleep last night. I was cold to the heart," says the heavy-eyed washerwoman, whose husband is at Verdun.

My French friend appears with a resolute smile on her lips, though eyes and hands betray her nervousness. There is no news of her nephew somewhere on the Meuse, who is as her own son.

The France of to-day is as far removed from that two-year-old France as is the Merovingian kingdom, and as far exalted above it, perhaps.

No one who has not known it can realize what it means to watch day by day the slightest variation of the battle line in one's own country. In Canada,

I know that to-day there must be thousands of homes where the coming of the daily paper is awaited with sick dread, but here it is not only for the dear soldier that the watch is kept, but for France, the invaded country.

It is not so far away as the crow or the aeroplane flies from where the Huns are flinging their wretched soldiery against that line of steel.

"On ne passe pas," says the French poilu, and ever the heaps of German dead rise higher, a mute appeal to heaven against man's madness, and the whole of France holds its breath and watches and prays.

Wake! calls the bugle as St. Michael's bells on the old town heights ring out five while the line of the Mediterranean changes from grey black to royal purple, and over beyond the Italian shore behind Bordighera on its point the first auroral light creeps up the sky. The bare Alpine peaks show a pale, ashy pink against the dark north, and in the big, white hotel, now their barracks, the Chasseurs des Alps rouse from dreams of mountain village homes, where wife or mother may already be feeding the mules or setting out for the first mass to pray for their men.

Wake, to a routine of dull tasks and dull leisure, or to that day that comes sooner or later to each one, when the heavy pack, the bundle of firewood, the kettle are shouldered, the rifle grasped and the rakish cap discarded for the blue steel helmet, and a grim company trudges to the station and the train that will bear it north away from the blue sea and the sunshine to the sodden trenches or the Jura heights. Worse, far worse for those who, having faced the ordeal before, know to what they are returning.

"It is the going back that matters," say the women, speaking of their men. Never did this matter more than in the past autumn months, when a second winter in the trenches had to be faced, when the gloom of its coming hung like a pall over the land.

Letters! calls the bugle, and the men lounging on the steps, who still carry a stick as insignia of the stiffness of wounds, are galvanized into activity and active men in canvas fatigue blouses pause for their tasks to join the group. A strange medley those letter bags must hold. Here may be one, slowly scrawled on flimsy, lined paper by the old father or mother on some Provencal bastille among the olive groves, and next it the dainty effusion of some smart young avocat's bride or sweetheart in Toulon or Nice. If the old mother wears the short, full skirt, she has all her days worn to till the vines and gather the olives, and the pretty town bride wears hers still shorter and fuller, only in accordance with the latest fashion, yet, old and young, their hearts beat equally true for the man who has gone to fight for them and his home and their words have the same echo of love and prayer.

Dinner! calls the bugle, as the Angelus rings and the noon sun shines down on the southward, facing hotel court and the palms planted there for the decoration of German tourists. In and out the big door stream the little blue men, laden with tin pannikins and hunks of bread. Every step and bench and rocky border becomes a dining place. Far worse have many of these men known in gloomy defiles of the Vosges, or on the bare Gallipoli shores.

Sleep! calls the bugle, with that lingering note that shall sound over many a lonely grave in near at hand days of wrath. With the sound a great stillness falls upon the town and the country. In these times, when there are no late trains, none of the old Monte Carlo trains bringing back the cosmopolitan crowd to the hotels, nine o'clock has the silence of midnight. The waves sigh in a slow rhythm on the shore and the full moon looks down on France, on women weeping for the dead or praying for the living, on many a new made grave, or dead face turned to the sky, but above all, on that line of men keeping ever a determined, watchful face bent on the relentless foe, still within her borders.

