The Impressions of a French War Correspondent in the N.Z. Stationery Hospital

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Translated by H.J.H.

Dear friends unknown, whose interest and kindliness I can appreciate, although ignorant of your names and rank. Since you have asked me for some matter for your magazine, you do me great honour, believe me, for it is extremely flattering for a French journalist to dream that his prose will be read in even New Zealand; a great pleasure, for it recalls to mind my journalistic duties, which I had in truth begun to forget, in the charming serenity of this war hospital, where I have enjoyed the benefits of real peace more than ever.

In our adventurous and constantly changing existence as story-hunters, and still more as war correspondents, opportunities for rest are rare. Sickness alone can give us this respite. So, not wishing in the least to fall ill, we support such misfortune, when it does befall us with philosophy and resignation in belief that, thanks to the mischances, we can enjoy without regret a well-earned rest. This is precisely my case. For four months now, in company with three colleagues of the Parisian Press, I have devoted my days, and often my nights, to following and noting carefully the continuous progress of the gallant British Armies; and I can truthfully say that if they have not given the Huns much rest they have not given us witnesses of their success much either, charged as we are to record their doings from day to day. I had, then, a great yearning for a little quiet repose.

A nice broncho-pneumonia procured for me my wished-for holiday, the result of daily wanderings in evil smelling, filthy trench mud, between Beaumont-Hamel and Grand-court; and it is thus that I have passed three weeks, three weeks of holiday, in a peaceful retreat, that I can without hesitancy define without parallel; this, the New Zealand Stationary Hospital in —— Ward A3, which has been assigned to me as my residence. To be frank, I must confess that the first hours of my sojourn were very sad; the fever, the oppression, the coughing, and sleeplessness made life very unattractive. Separated from my "compagnons d' existence" I seemed to be an exile, an isolated Frenchman, unable to speak a word of English, surrounded by bed-fellows so distant, as I thought, regarding points of view, language, and thought. My sadness was quickly dispersed, however, courteous and sympathetic smiles, kindhearted interest became the link, as a dumb yet so eloquent language by which my companions in misfortune and myself began to understand each other. Some of them could speak a few words of French, and this was the medium with which our mutual cordiality was further cemented. I, being French, jovial by birth, of a race with a gallant reputation, did not wish to remain in the background with these young, amiable British officers, so rebellious against their hard luck, so averse to being ill, rebelling against it, as against the enemy with all their heart and soul, as would be expected from their resolute and tenacious spirit. So on the wings of our common good humour, trouble and depression flew away.

Further, the excellent doctors who looked after us, gave us a perfect example to follow; particularly one Captain Gray, to whom I shall never be able to express the gratitude which I feel for the happy knack he had of joining good humour with attentive care in nursing us, completing by this, as it were, a sure and decisive cure. I can almost recommend this idea to our French doctors, who are not cheerful enough with their patients, and who always, in my opinion, take themselves and their cases too seriously. A happy smile often is worth as much as a dose of medicine, and I cannot ever remember having seen Captain Gray without his smile. I owe to his good cheer half my cure, and the other half to his attention. I also owe him the prescription of stout, stout, which is now one of my weaknesses, and which I certainly would not have come across elsewhere.