

Leaves from a Ruhleben Notebook by Francis Gribble in FORTHNIGHTLY
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The actual notebook, alas! does not exist. It hardly seemed worth while to take notes at Ruhleben; for one could never be sure that the precious document would not suffer the fate of the manuscripts in the Louvian Library. There was, indeed, a young friend of mine who took notes most voluminously, compiling what, if completed, might have been a veritable Ruhleben Encyclopaedia. Night after night he sat up in his loft scribbling, scribbling, scribbling, by the light of a pocket electric lamp. The notebooks accumulated as fast as the letter-books in a busy office, and his fellow-prisoners were speculating as to the date when the heap would be enough to reach the ceiling. But then, one day, a soldier, acting on information received, walked in and seized them, and carried them off to the Commandantur.

It was not an encouraging example; and one had other warnings. On the eve of my departure a confidential messenger took me aside and whispered something in my ear. He had heard, he said, on the very, very best authority, that the returning prisoners were going to be searched very strictly at the frontier, and that any one who was found carrying a manuscript would be detained until it had been perused. Even the recollection of Camoens shipwrecked, risking a watery grave in order to swim ashore with the *Lusiad*, did not stimulate me to take that risk. I tore up all the papers in my possession which seemed likely to provoke curiosity. I committed to memory the violent verses in which I had lampooned the Kaiser, and I carried my notes inscribed upon the mindful tablets of my brain, whence I will now transcribe a few of them.

One impression which will never be effaced is that of my arrival in the camp. I had come from Coblenz, travelling all night, and getting very little sleep. Dawn was just breaking when I arrived, and a fierce east wind swept the unprotected platform on which I descended in a light summer overcoat. The railway station was nearly a quarter of a mile from the camp, and I had either to carry my own luggage or leave it behind. I carried it- a Gladstone bag in one hand and a suit-case in the other. The bell rang; the gate swung open; we passed through, and found ourselves in the midst of stables built on a morass. Our military escort, guided by a soldier of the Ruhleben garrison, marched us across the swamp to the door of the Commandantur, and left us outside while he went in and obtained a receipt for us. Having got it, he left us and repaired to the refreshment room, while we remained standing in the cold, waiting for the authorities to decide to which stable we should be assigned. The delay seemed interminable, for we were hungry and thirsty and cold; but at last the matter was settled and we were taken to the loft of Barrack V.

But barrack was a euphemism; the barrack was, in fact, a stable, and the loft was no more designed for human habitation than intended for stable boys; but the rest of the loft was merely a store-house for fodder. One climbed to it by an outside staircase, almost as steep as a ladder. Huge beams traversed it in all directions- beams fixed low enough for a tall man's head to knock against them. The windows were few and small, and the place was so dark that one could not have seen to read there unless one stood quite close to either the window or the door. The only artificial light, which was only turned on at night, was supplied by an electric lamp of about four candle-power, of little use except to those who sat immediately underneath it, on account of the shadows thrown by the beams. There were no beds, no mattresses even- only

straw; and the floor on which the straw was strewn was of concrete, and there was no heating apparatus whatsoever.

Such was the place which was to be our home for an indefinite period; and the uncertainty of the duration of our sojourn was, to some of us, the most depressing influence of all. As one of my *Ruhleben* friends once put it to me: 'Sleeping on straw is not necessarily an intolerable hardship; but it *is* a hardship to have to sleep on straw for a year, and to sleep on straw, night after night, without knowing when the end will come- that is, indeed, a cruel experience.' It assuredly is; and I shall have something to say in a moment about the effect of the experience upon the minds, as well as the bodies, of the men most sensitive to such influences. Before coming to that, however, I will tell the story of my first practical problem, and the solution which I found for it.

A portion of straw had been allotted to me. I had dumped my luggage down beside it, and been marched in a procession- four abreast- to fetch my morning coffee in a tin bowl and a loaf of the dry bread which was the only thing they gave us to eat with it. I had discovered that the coffee was not really coffee, but a decoction of acorns faintly flavoured with coffee essence, and served without milk and with very little sugar. I had explored the camp, and visited the canteen, where I had bought a few of the articles which the German Government thought it unnecessary to give to prisoners- a knife and fork, a drinking-cup, a tea-spoon, a cake of soap, etc. And then, returning, I decided to unpack, and made the disconcerting discovery that I had lost the key of the bag containing the things I needed for the night.

In vain I searched for it; in vain I tried other people's keys; in vain I endeavoured to wrench the bag open. Then it occurred to me that, as representatives of all trades and professions had been swept into the German net, there might be some one in the loft who could pick or prize the lock for me. I inquired, and an obliging gentleman was fetched for me from a dark and distant corner.

'I hope you're a locksmith,' I said.

'No, I'm not a locksmith,' he replied; 'but I'm a dentist, so I daresay I can manage.'

And he could and did. My lock was prized with a forceps or some other dental instrument, which I hope was not afterwards used for dental purposes. I took off my coat and boots, put on my dressing gown, lay down on the straw, and, having had no rest the previous night, slept like a tot until I heard the rough voice of a soldier shouting '*Aufstehen! Aufstehen!*' It pleased me to think that I had probably got through the night more comfortably than the Kaiser, whose guard was just then melting like snow in the attempt to force a way to Calais.

But the Kaiser had, at any rate, one advantage over me. He doubtless rose to warmth and comfort and a good breakfast; whereas I got up in the dark and the cold, and washed at a tap, and breakfasted of dray bread, and had nothing to do all day long except crouch in the dark loft or roam about among the stables in the wind-swept swamp. There were eleven stables in all, and men were also sleeping in the restaurant underneath the grand stand and in another restaurant known as the Tea House. In stables and restaurants alike they were packed like herrings in a barrel, and when they quitted their sleeping quarters they could find no other place of shelter. The wind blew them out of the grand stand and the soldiers drove them out of the betting boxes. They would have been glad to warm themselves by walking round the racecourse; but the gate was locked, and there was no admission. The younger and more active of us played games- all kinds of games, from rounders to tip-cat; the rest took refuge in workman's sheds, where they lent against the walls, and smoked and discussed the situation in all its bearings.

Apropos of the smoking, I have a story to tell which I sincerely hope is true. It certainly was current in the camp and was believed there.

Berlin, it seems, was at that date desirous of making things as unpleasant as possible for civil prisoners. The order had been given, we were credibly informed, that they were to be treated as nearly as possible like criminals. The order, if given, had certainly been executed by a good many of the soldiers, though there were others who apologised for it and disobeyed. And then one day, we heard, our Commandant, Graf Schwerin, received the order from headquarters that the privilege of smoking was to be withdrawn. He took counsel with his Assistant Commandant, Baron von Taube, and then he went to the telephone and rang up the war office. 'Smoking' he is reported to have said 'is the one little bit of *gemuthlichkeit* which the prisoners here enjoy. It is intolerable that they should be deprived of it. If you persist in the prohibition I must ask you to find another Commandant. Baron von Taube, who is now present, associates himself with these statements, and will also resign his position if the order is maintained.'

As I have said, I do not know whether this story is true or not; but the general impression certainly was that the officers at Ruhleben- or some of them, at all events- had more tender bowels of compassion than their superiors, and inclined to the view that smoking was one of the inalienable rights of man. The privilege, we were told, was threatened a second time. Tobacco, it was given out, would no longer be sold at the canteen because all the tobacco in the country was required for the comfort of the army; and once again an officer lifted up his voice in indignant protest. 'The army be d---d,' he is said to have said in idiomatic English; but it would be a poor return for his kindly thought and sympathetic words to mention his name at the present juncture.

In any case, however, smoking did not cease to be permitted, and we puffed vast clouds of smoke while discussing the military situation in our sheds. It was not all Englishmen, by any means, who took a hopeful view of it in those days. Those, in particular, who had lived long in Germany had been impressed by the German boasts and were inclined to pessimism. Two propositions which I ventured to advance on the first day of my internment seemed incredible to a good many of my friends: the first that Italy obviously intended to join the war on the side of the Allies; the second that, whatever might happen in the immediate future, Germany in the end would surely be beaten to a pulp. When the first prediction came true the prophet received many congratulations- and also, incidentally, won a bet- and the second prediction began to be regarded as credible.

There was one class of the community, however, which had never doubted; our sailors were always confident, even in the darkest days. The place in which they foregathered was the shed adjoining the canteen, and I remember a very comforting speech which I heard there on a very depressing day. The mud outside the shed was ankle deep, the rain descending in an unceasing drizzle, and through the drizzle we saw a flaunting flag, hoisted to celebrate a German victory. I stood there, feeling very cold and miserable, and then I heard a sailor speaking words of comfort to some one who complained of the way in which he had been treated. 'Yes, I know,' he said. 'These bloody Germans want knocking a hundred miles the other side of hell. And that's where they'll find themselves before we've done with them.'

It was the right spirit, and there were plenty who echoed it on every suitable occasion. One sailor echoed it to a German non-commissioned officer who had gone too far in the way of remonstrance for his neglect of some piece of work. He made a long rhetorical reply in English, and wound up with a warning in broken German: '*Warten sie bis English Soldaten kommt Berlin* - they'll show you.' It was also

echoed to Baron von Taube himself by one of the Gentleman of colour. He had waited upon the Baron for the purpose of saying that he was tired of Ruhleben and wanted to go home. The Baron had replied that he would have to remain at Ruhleben until the end of the war. 'No, no, I don't,' replied the gentleman of colour. 'English soldier come and fetch me out.'

Such was the spirit of confidence which gradually permeated the camp and now prevails in it. It has happily grown *pari passu* with a gradual improvement in the conditions of the camp- an improvement of which I have told the story elsewhere, trying to give credit where it is due. Before the confidence dawned, however, and at the time when the discomfort was still intense, there were men among us who suffered mentally as well as physically. I have seen men's hair turn white under the influence of the mental and moral strain; only in one man's case could the impossibility of renewing his stock of hair-dye be invoked as a contributory cause. There were cases of men whose minds gave way under the worry, and I was actually the eye-witness of a suicide.

It happened within a few yards of my own barrack, and I was standing in the doorway at the time. A man of miserable aspect, poorly dressed, was waling rapidly up and down a short beat, muttering to himself in German. He was, I think, only technically a British subject; by birth he may have been either a German or a Polish Jew, but he was not the less wretched on that account. Suddenly he pulled out a pocket-knife, opened it, and jabbed with it, first at his throat and then at his stomach. Then he staggered wildly until he fell, and men gathered round and picket him up, and carried him off to the doctor. I was paying no particular attention, and suspected nothing more than some foolish piece of buffoonery; but when I strolled up I saw a pool of blood on the ground and understood what had happened. We were very close, in those days, to some very cruel realities, and needed all our natural high spirits in order to resist them.

But we did resist them. At all events, most of us did so; and it was an interesting philosophical exercise to classify the members of our little community and see which class produced the greater proportion of Mark Tapleys. It was, at any rate, gratifying to observe that the weakest vessels were those who had least English blood in their veins, and were most indebted for their education to German culture. Even among the pure-blooded Germans, English only through naturalisation, the most cheery were those who had been at English public schools. The others wandered about like lost dogs, though some of them had the grace to express admiration for the greater energy of their companions in misfortune. 'You English,' one of them said to me, 'seem to set to work as if you were founding a new colony.'

That, in effect, is what we did. From the moment of our arrival, while we were sleeping on straw in unfurnished lofts and boxes, we began to organise, and to plan projects for the alleviation of our lot. Chess clubs, musical and dramatic societies, debating societies sprang up like mushrooms in a night. We discovered a Major Pond, who undertook to arrange a series of lectures; we discovered various evangelists, who were only too delighted to arrange bright religious services on the grand stand- services mostly consisting of hymns, which were sung in the dark, or with only such illumination as was furnished by a small electric lamp held by the conductor. At the lectures and debates the chair was generally taken by Mr. Butterworth, J.P., of Manchester; while the men of light and leading in religious matters were Professor Delmer, of Berlin, Mr. Cecil Duncan Jones, the novelist, and my own fellow townsman, Mr. Bossum, of Barnstaple, who had been living in Germany as a teacher of languages. Mr. Duncan Jones, it may be added, took no less interest in dramatic

than in devotional affairs, and was a perfect embodiment of a church and stage guild; while our most brilliant chess-player, if a player of my own poor capacity may presume to judge, was the Earl of Perth, who had long been settled at Munich.

To whom- I speak of classes, not of individuals- should one award the palm for energy, serenity, and 'Stoic-Epicurean acceptance of life,' with all its unavoidable limitations? It might be disputed, I think, between the sportsmen and the scholars. I once began to make a list of the games which the former played, but desisted because there seemed to be no end to it. It included, I remember, not only such obvious games as cricket, football, rounders and golf, but also such comparatively unlikely games as prisoner's base, tip-cat, and high-cockalorum. At the time of my departure lawn-tennis was in full swing and La Crosse was being arranged for. And our standard in all the games was high. Our football team, including one or two old internationals, could have competed for the cup-tie without looking ridiculous. We could have put a creditable boat on the river at either of the universities- stroked, perhaps, by Mr. Kindersley, son of the President of the O.U.B.C., who had himself rowed for Cambridge, or else by Mr. Tom Sullivan, once a champion sculler. Some of our cricketers had also played for their universities or counties; while in golf we were represented by Mr. Jackson and other professionals. It was not among these athletes, or among the actors who took part in revues and extravaganzas, that one discovered undue depression.

Nor did we discover it, as I have said, among the scholars, of whom we had enough to staff, let me say, Trinity College, Dublin, or the University of Manchester. Their manifold interests in life made them largely independent of their surroundings. It was as if they- or a good many of them- could leave the camp in spirit when they wished, only returning to it when summoned by the call of hunger, or by the ringing of the fire-bell which made them form up in fours, to be harangued by the military authorities. Moreover, even within the camp, they found a good deal to interest them, in spite of their discomfort. They analysed the German character, they expounded the teaching of Treitschke to those who were unacquainted with the works of that philosopher, and showed how the whole trend of German thought had led up to the sacking of the Louvain and the sinking of the *Lusitania*. They also discussed the German genius for discovering 'substitutes' for this, that, and the other necessary of life; and of them- a Professor of Deutsche Kultur whom I used to chaff for having taken the trouble to specialise in such a subject- promised me that the first lecture which he delivered when he got back to his seat of learning should bear the title of '*Kulturersatz*.' And, if I am any judge of men, that particular professor may be relied upon to rub it in.

Our scholars, however, did a good deal more than talk- they also worked. Ruhleben, thanks to their organising activities, became almost a university town, with elementary and secondary schools to feed the university. At the head of it was the Science and Arts Union, organised by Mr. Hattfield, a distinguished chemist, with whom were associated, among others, Professor Demler, whom I have already mentioned, Mr. Klingender, the curator of the Goslar Museum, and my friend, Mr. Prichard- a society to which our own Education Office has been sending a large supply of educational books. At the base of it were philanthropists, like Mr. Mahony⁰ who is, I believe, when at home a coadjutor of Sir Jesse Boot- teaching the alphabet and the multiplication table to the gentlemen of colour.

It was not, indeed, all the gentlemen of colour who required such rudimentary instruction- one of them had himself set up in business as a professor of Arabic, and was to be seen all day long sitting in front of the barrack with a pupil beside him and a

copy of the Koran in his hands. But others of them did need to begin at the beginning, and that recollection brings me to a story of a gentleman of colour who was doing his best, but whose best was not very good. It happened on the day on which our military authorities, for reasons best known to themselves, decided to have a solemn roll-call, and require every prisoner to answer his name.

They marched us down on to the racecourse for the purpose, and they sorted us alphabetically- all the A's together, all the B's together, etc. It was a tedious business, lasting for several hours, and only enlivened by the merriment which the sound of some of the names provoked0 such names as those of Mr. Kitchener, who was a tailor, and Mr. Edward Grey, of whom I know nothing except that he was not a Secretary of State. But when the names of all the G's had been called there was an incident. Each man, as his name was called, was transferred to a fresh formation; but at last there remained a solitary gentleman of colour, gaping and grinning genially. Mr. Beaumont, acting on behalf of the military authority, turned and questioned him.

'What are you doing here?' he asked.

'Waitin' to be counted, sah,' replied the gentleman of colour.

'What's your name?'

'My name is Martin, sah.'

'Well, Martin doesn't begin with a G, does it?'

'I don't know, sah. I've only learnt as far as F, sah.'

But I must return to our scholars. One of the places set apart for them was the third grand stand, and another was the synagogue in the Jews' barrack. In the former place I heard Mr. Masterman deliver a course of lectures on English history which I should, in the old days have described as eminently 'good for the schools.' In the latter, Professor Patchett, whom the Germans had picked up while he was on his way from a chair at Kingston, Ontario, to a chair at Southampton, was instructing the elect in the language of the Goths, in the poetry of Goethe, and in the philosophy of Kant and Hegel. Other lecturers were Mr. Stern, who dealt with Russia; Mr. Foster Kell, who told us all that a brief visit to California had enabled him to discover about that Western State, and Mr. Bainton, Professor of Music at Newcastle, who demonstrated that contemporary music derived less inspiration from Germany than from France, Belgium, Russia, and even England, and whose discourse on glees was demonstrated by a choir which he himself had trained. There were even classes in one of the lofts and in a good many of the betting-boxes, and even in the open air. Mr. Prichard and Mr. Oscar Magnus were taking classes in Italian. Mr. Adams, a correspondent of the *Daily Mail*, had Spanish classes. Mr. Seale, who had spent most of his life manufacturing locomotives at Tubize, near Brussels, was one of many teachers who took classes in French. There were also a good many teachers of Russian; and the zeal alike for acquiring and for imparting knowledge spread even to classes of the community which one does not usually associate with the disinterested desire for erudition. Or so, at all events, I judged from an advertisement which I once saw posted on the boiler-house, and from a fragment of a lesson which I once overheard. The advertiser was apparently a Pole, and his announcement ran as follows:-

'I give English lesson very chepe. Also haircut or shave.'

And these were the words which I heard the teacher of languages addressing to his pupil:-

'You blank idiot! How many more blank times do you want me to tell you the meaning of that blankety word?'

Which was not exactly professorial diction, but may nevertheless have produced the desired psychological effect.

With that story I will leave our scholars, merely repeating that scholarship was very useful to them in making them comparatively independent of what was, beyond question, a most uncomfortable environment. One or two of them, indeed, noted that fact, remarking with satisfaction that the men into whose souls the iron entered most deeply were the tradesmen and the merchants. Some of these certainly did appear to be lost and utterly miserable when suddenly shut off from the opportunity of buying in the cheapest and selling in the dearest market; and it was one of them who said to me, in the days when our discomfort was at its height, that he did not care how the war ended, provided that it ended soon. He pulled himself together, however, and learnt French, having come to the conclusion that the town in which he carried on business would presently be annexed either to France or to Belgium. So culture saved him after all, and there were other men who found their escape from boredom in hard work and useful organisation.

Mr. Powell, the Captain of Captains, must have worked quite as hard in the camp as he ever needed to work outside it. We owed him, among other things, the introduction of the cinematograph, and no doubt it was largely through his energy that the prisoners came to take over the management of practically everything in the camp, from the kitchen to the canteen. Mr. Beaumont was one of the most conspicuous of those whose competent direction of the internal economy of barracks made the establishment of Home Rule possible. Mr. Cocker, who had previously dealt in toffee, had, if I am not mistaken, a good deal to do with the management of our dry goods store. It was largely, too, to the merchants among us that we owed those social clubs which did something to diversify camp life for those who could afford to join them.

The principal of these was the so-called Summer House. I believe its establishment provoked, at one time, some expressions of jealousy on the part of those who were not asked to join it; but as I was not myself a member, but occasionally visited the Club House as a guest, I shall avoid that branch of the subject. The premises originally consisted of a shed with a small piece of ground adjacent to it. The ground was turned into a garden, and the shed was reconstructed and divided up into rooms. Small tables, cheap and comfortable chairs, and a few books of reference were provided; a few newspapers were subscribed for. It was a convenient place in which to chat, to write letters, or to play cards or chess. A steward- a really excellent steward, as it seemed to me- was in attendance, and simple refreshments, such as coffee and lemonade, were served. Everything was done, as far as might be, on the lines of a London club, and it was possible for the members to forget, for a little while, that they were prisoners of war. I do not think they minded being chaffed as 'Bessere Leute' in the *Ruhleben Camp News*.

Another club, less exclusive, if that is the applicable word, was known as the Corner House. It was not so quiet as the Summer House, but organised symposia and smoking concerts. I heard also something of an aristocratic club, to be called- or perhaps be nicknamed- the House of Lords, and of a billiard club; but I fancy neither of these had been opened at the date of my deliverance. In connection with some of the clubs men were able to give tea-parties on their birthdays, and I have even heard of one or two picnic parties on the racecourse.

In all these connections it was the mercantile section of our community which was most active, and I tremble, in recording their enterprises, lest the inference should be drawn that our *Ruhleben* civil prisoners are, after all, leading a jolly-life. That, of course, is not by any means the case. They are making the best of a bad job with an energy of which England may be proud, and they have recently been allowed a latitude in doing so which it would be ungracious not to acknowledge; but the job

remains a bad one- especially bad for those who have little money in their pockets and receive few parcels from home. There are men at Ruhleben who have been there nearly sixteen months- deprived, all that time, of the means of earning their livelihood, and cut off from the society of their wives, their families, and their friends. It is a cruel experience, and the cruelty of it accumulates as the months go by. It is terrible to think that many of the sufferers- especially among the sailors- are elderly and ill and poor.

Some of our number happily found their sphere of usefulness in helping these men who needed help so badly. In particular, my friend Mr. Stanley Lambert, now the Captain of the Schonungs Barracke, or Barrack for Invalids and Convalescents, did so. Some day, I hope, it will be my privilege to devote a special article to a full record of the work which Mr. Lambert has been doing at Ruhleben; but it will be better to wait for that until the work is finished. Here and now it will be enough to set down that, for many months, Mr. Lambert has been devoting practically the whole of his time and thoughts to the care and protection of those who are interned who, through illness or weakness of constitution, are least fit to withstand the inevitable hardships of camp life, acting, of course, in collaboration with the camp doctor, but also showing himself capable of energetic initiative, and serving his country in a way which has made his name one to conjure with among those whom he has been looking after. If any reader wants further testimony, let him ask any one of the sailors who have recently been returned to England as invalids unfit for further detention.

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