

## THE FIELD OF BLENHEIM

There is a charm in footing slow across a silent plain,  
Where patriot battle had been fought, where glory had the  
gain.—*John Keats.*

ON a sunny morning in August I walked out of Donauwörth and took the straight tree-lined road which leads up the Danube valley towards Ulm. The time was still one for harvesting; peasants dotted the wide and open plain, piling bullock waggons with their sheaves, or eating the midday ration in the shade.

A warm silence hung over contented fields. Geese gossiping down the village street, a white church rising among its cottages—these were the things of yesterday and tomorrow, the gentle ornaments of peace.

In my mind's eye, as I drew nearer the battlefield of Blenheim, I saw other and less soothing symbols: English red-coats, lively with the rumour of action, tramping along the same road, with their heavy cannon lumbering behind.

From the church tower at Tapfheim, on the evening of August the twelfth, 1704, Marlborough and Prince Eugene were watching the infantry of France, as they moved without suspicion of alarm to their encampment on the vast plain before them. And even I, walking through Tapfheim in the year 1933, could sense a little of their exaltation.

An hour later I ate sausages and drank beer in the village of Schweiningen. Here stood the rear-guard of the Allies on that historic day; and I could see the empty fields ahead of me, crowded with an imaginary host.

Modern Blenheim has a railway station. A mile from the village, it sits prim and solitary beside a lazy line. The German spelling—Blindheim—stands out in white paint on the dull red of the walls. I left my rucksack with the station-master, and walked on down a narrow lane.

I peered about for that stream called the Nebel, with its treacherous marshes, which is marked in all the history text-books of the world. Here Tallard, if his military genius had matched his sense of duty, might well have won

## BLACKFRIARS

the day. But now, this trickle underneath the wooden bridge—is this the Nebel? And the dreaded marshes, where are they? Drained and forgotten, I suppose.

The village, rebuilt after its burning, has forgotten, too. The rough cart-track and its broad green verge, stolid farmhouse, ubiquitous goose, muddy child—they do not know, nor do they wonder about such distant days. No brass statuettes of Marlborough! Yet here also, as on more famous ground at Waterloo, the civilization of Europe was at stake, over stubble fields and in-and-out of cottages.

There still stands the strong wall of the churchyard, which the French held so long and gallantly against Orkney's men. On it I found curtly inscribed this sole reminder of that day: *Here, on August 13th, 1704, Marlborough and Eugene defeated the French and the Bavarians.*

I lingered a few minutes round the untidy village. I searched for that steep slope down which a mass of fugitives rushed to their death in the Danube marshes, a tragedy saluted by an English poet with those memorable lines (Professor Trevelyan has unearthed them):

Think of two thousand gentlemen at least,  
And each man mounted on his capering beast;  
Into the Danube they were pushed by shoals.

And is this the slope? Perhaps, but time has tamed its terrors; and the Danube itself has wandered carelessly away.

I walked back through the village to the station. Blenheim was deserted; Blenheim was working in the fields. Now I felt the village had a wise air about it, as if its sorrow and its suffering, years old, combined to lend it dignity.

I talked to the station-master. He said that nobody ever came to his station. I asked him: 'Are there never any tourists?' 'Ach,' he said, 'why should tourists come?' Yes, he knew of the battle; but it was so long ago. Besides, there was nothing to see.

Nothing to see? Oh, I don't know.

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