

An Englishman Looks at the World

By

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AN ENGLISHMAN LOOKS AT THE WORLD

THE COMING OF BLÉRIOT

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The telephone bell rings with the petulant persistence that marks a trunk call, and I go in from some ineffectual gymnastics on the lawn to deal with the irruption. There is the usual trouble in connecting up, minute voices in Folkestone and Dover and London call to one another and are submerged by buzzings and throbbings. Then in elfin tones the real message comes through: "Blériot has crossed the Channel.... An article ... about what it means."

I make a hasty promise and go out and tell my friends.

From my garden I look straight upon the Channel, and there are white caps upon the water, and the iris and tamarisk are all asway with the south-west wind that was also blowing yesterday. M. Blériot has done very well, and Mr. Latham, his rival, had jolly bad luck. That is what it means to us first of all. It also, I reflect privately, means that I have under-estimated the possible stability of aeroplanes. I did not

expect anything of the sort so soon. This is a good five years before my reckoning of the year before last.

We all, I think, regret that being so near we were not among the fortunate ones who saw that little flat shape skim landward out of the blue; surely they have an enviable memory; and then we fell talking and disputing about what that swift arrival may signify. It starts a swarm of questions.

First one remarks that here is a thing done, and done with an astonishing effect of ease, that was incredible not simply to ignorant people but to men well informed in these matters. It cannot be fifteen years ago since Sir Hiram Maxim made the first machine that could lift its weight from the ground, and I well remember how the clumsy quality of that success confirmed the universal doubt that men could ever in any effectual manner fly.

Since then a conspiracy of accidents has changed the whole problem; the bicycle and its vibrations developed the pneumatic tyre, the pneumatic tyre rendered a comfortable mechanically driven road vehicle possible, the motor-car set an enormous premium on the development of very light, very efficient engines, and at last the engineer was able to offer the experimentalists in gliding one strong enough and light enough for the new purpose. And here we are! Or, rather, M. Blériot is!

What does it mean for us?

One meaning, I think, stands out plainly enough, unpalatable enough to our national pride. This thing from first to last was made abroad. Of all that made it possible we can only claim so much as is due to the improvement of the bicycle. Gliding began abroad while our young men of muscle and courage were braving the dangers of the cricket field. The motor-car and its engine was being worked out "over there," while in this country the mechanically propelled road vehicle, lest it should frighten the carriage horses of the gentry, was going meticulously at four miles an hour behind a man with a red flag. Over there, where the prosperous classes have some regard for education and some freedom of imaginative play, where people discuss all sorts of things fearlessly, and have a respect for science, this has been achieved.

And now our insularity is breached by the foreigner who has got ahead with flying.

It means, I take it, first and foremost for us, that the world cannot wait for the English.

It is not the first warning we have had. It has been raining warnings upon us; never was a slacking, dull people so liberally served with warnings of what was in store for them. But this event--this foreigner-invented, foreigner-built, foreigner-steered thing, taking our silver streak as a bird soars across a rivulet--puts the case dramatically. We have fallen behind in the quality of our manhood. In

the men of means and leisure in this island there was neither enterprise enough, imagination enough, knowledge nor skill enough to lead in this matter. I do not see how one can go into the history of this development and arrive at any other conclusion. The French and Americans can laugh at our aeroplanes, the Germans are ten years ahead of our poor navigables. We are displayed a soft, rather backward people. Either we are a people essentially and incurably inferior, or there is something wrong in our training, something benumbing in our atmosphere and circumstances. That is the first and gravest intimation in M. Blériot's feat.

The second is that, in spite of our fleet, this is no longer, from the military point of view, an inaccessible island.

So long as one had to consider the navigable balloon the aerial side of warfare remained unimportant. A Zeppelin is little good for any purpose but scouting and espionage. It can carry very little weight in proportion to its vast size, and, what is more important, it cannot drop things without sending itself up like a bubble in soda water. An armada of navigables sent against this island would end in a dispersed, deflated state, chiefly in the seas between Orkney and Norway--though I say it who should not. But these aeroplanes can fly all round the fastest navigable that ever drove before the wind; they can drop weights, take up weights, and do all sorts of able, inconvenient things. They are birds. As for the birds, so for aeroplanes; there is an upward limit of size. They are not going to be very big, but they are going to

be very able and active. Within a year we shall have--or rather they will have--aeroplanes capable of starting from Calais, let us say, circling over London, dropping a hundredweight or so of explosive upon the printing machines of The Times, and returning securely to Calais for another similar parcel. They are things neither difficult nor costly to make. For the price of a Dreadnought one might have hundreds. They will be extremely hard to hit with any sort of missile. I do not think a large army of under-educated, under-trained, extremely unwilling conscripts is going to be any good against this sort of thing.

I do not think that the arrival of M. Blériot means a panic resort to conscription. It is extremely desirable that people should realise that these foreign machines are not a temporary and incidental advantage that we can make good by fussing and demanding eight, and saying we won't wait, and so on, and then subsiding into indolence again. They are just the first-fruits of a steady, enduring lead that the foreigner has won. The foreigner is ahead of us in education, and this is especially true of the middle and upper classes, from which invention and enterprise come--or, in our own case, do not come. He makes a better class of man than we do. His science is better than ours. His training is better than ours. His imagination is livelier. His mind is more active. His requirements in a novel, for example, are not kindly, sedative pap; his uncensored plays deal with reality. His schools are places for vigorous education instead of genteel athleticism, and his home has books in it, and thought and conversation. Our homes and schools are relatively dull and uninspiring; there is no intellectual guide or stir in them; and to

that we owe this new generation of nicely behaved, unenterprising sons, who play golf and dominate the tailoring of the world, while Brazilians, Frenchmen, Americans and Germans fly.

That we are hopelessly behindhand in aeronautics is not a fact by itself. It is merely an indication that we are behindhand in our mechanical knowledge and invention. M. Blériot's aeroplane points also to the fleet.

The struggle for naval supremacy is not merely a struggle in shipbuilding and expenditure. Much more is it a struggle in knowledge and invention. It is not the Power that has the most ships or the biggest ships that is going to win in a naval conflict. It is the Power that thinks quickest of what to do, is most resourceful and inventive. Eighty Dreadnoughts manned by dull men are only eighty targets for a quicker adversary. Well, is there any reason to suppose that our Navy is going to keep above the general national level in these things? Is the Navy bright?

The arrival of M. Blériot suggests most horribly to me how far behind we must be in all matters of ingenuity, device, and mechanical contrivance. I am reminded again of the days during the Boer war, when one realised that it had never occurred to our happy-go-lucky Army that it was possible to make a military use of barbed wire or construct a trench to defy shrapnel. Suppose in the North Sea we got a surprise like that, and fished out a parboiled, half-drowned admiral explaining what a

confoundedly slim, unexpected, almost ungentlemanly thing the enemy had done to him.

Very probably the Navy is the exception to the British system; its officers are rescued from the dull homes and dull schools of their class while still of tender years, and shaped after a fashion of their own. But M. Blériot reminds us that we may no longer shelter and degenerate behind these blue backs. And the keenest men at sea are none the worse for having keen men on land behind them.

Are we an awakening people?

It is the vital riddle of our time. I look out upon the windy Channel and think of all those millions just over there, who seem to get busier and keener every hour. I could imagine the day of reckoning coming like a swarm of birds.

Here the air is full of the clamour of rich and prosperous people invited to pay taxes, and beyond measure bitter. They are going to live abroad, cut their charities, dismiss old servants, and do all sorts of silly, vindictive things. We seem to be doing feeble next-to-nothings in the endowment of research. Not one in twenty of the boys of the middle and upper classes learns German or gets more than a misleading smattering of physical science. Most of them never learn to speak French. Heaven alone knows what they do with their brains! The British reading and thinking public probably does not number fifty thousand

people all told. It is difficult to see whence the necessary impetus for a national renaissance is to come.... The universities are poor and spiritless, with no ambition to lead the country. I met a Boy Scout recently. He was hopeful in his way, but a little inadequate, I thought, as a basis for confidence in the future of the Empire.

We have still our Derby Day, of course....

Apart from these patriotic solitudes, M. Blériot has set quite another train of thought going in my mind. The age of natural democracy is surely at an end through these machines. There comes a time when men will be sorted out into those who will have the knowledge, nerve, and courage to do these splendid, dangerous things, and those who will prefer the humbler level. I do not think numbers are going to matter so much in the warfare of the future, and that when organised intelligence differs from the majority, the majority will have no adequate power of retort. The common man with a pike, being only sufficiently indignant and abundant, could chase the eighteenth century gentleman as he chose, but I fail to see what he can do in the way of mischief to an elusive chevalier with wings. But that opens too wide a discussion for me to enter upon now.

MY FIRST FLIGHT