



Harry Lauder in the War Zone

"A Minstrel in France" Tells His Personal Experiences on the Western Fighting Front

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CHAPTER XI. The Call to France.

I could not, much as I should in many ways have liked to do so, prolong my stay in Scotland. The peace and the restfulness of the Highlands, the charm of the heather and the hills, the long, lazy days with my rod, whipping some favorite stream—ah, they made me happy for a moment, but they could not make me forget! My duty called me back, and the thought of war, and suffering, and there were moments when it seemed to me that nothing could keep me from plunging again into the work I had set out to do.

In those days I was far too restless to be taking my ease at home in my wee hoose at Dunoon. A thousand activities called me. The rest had been necessary. I had had to admit that, and to obey my doctor, for I had been feeling the strain of my long continued activity, piled up, as it was, on top of my grief and care. And yet I was eager to be off and about my work again.

I did not want to go back to the same work I had been doing. Not! I was still a young man. I was younger than men and officers who were taking their turn in the trenches. I was but 46 years old, and there was a lot of life and snap in the old dog yet! My life had been rightly lived. As a young man I had worked in a pit, as a young man I had worked in a mine, and that had given me a strength in my back and my legs that would have served me well in the trenches. War, these days, means hard work as well as fighting—more, indeed. War is a business, a great industry now. There is all manner of work that must be done at the front and right behind it. Aye, and I was eager to be there and to be doing my share of it—and not for the first time.

Many a time, and often, I had broached my idea of being allowed to enlist, even before the Huns killed my boy. But they would not listen to me. They told me, each time, that there was more and better work for me to do at home in Britain, spurring others on, cheering them when they came back maimed and broken, getting the country to put its shoulder to the wheel when it came to subscribing to the war loans and all the rest of it. And it seemed to me that it was not for me to decide; that I must obey those who were better in a position to judge than I could be. I went down south to England, and I talked again of enlisting and trying to get a crack at those who had killed my boy. And again my friends refused to listen to me.

"Why, Harry," they said to me—and not my own friends, only, but men highly placed enough to make me know that I must pay heed to what they said—"you must not think

of it! If you enlist, or if we got you a commission, you'd be but one man out there. Here you're worth many men—a brigade, or a division, maybe. You are more use to us than many men who go out there to fight. You do great things toward winning the war every day. No, Harry, there is work for every man in Britain to do, and you have found yours and are doing it."

I was not content, though, even when I seemed to agree with them. I did try to argue, but it was no use. And still I felt that it was no time for a man to be playing and to be giving so much of his time to making others gay. It was well for folk to laugh, and to get their minds off the horror of war for a little time. Well, I knew! Aye, and I believed that I was doing good, some good at least, and giving cheer to some pair laddies who needed it sorely—But weel, it was no what I wanted to be doing when my country was fighting for her life! I made up my mind, slowly, what it was that I wanted to do that would fit in with the ideas and wishes of those whose word I was bound to heed and that would still come closer than what I was doing to meet my own desires.

Every day, nearly, then, I was getting letters from the front. They came from laddies whom I'd helped to make up their minds that they belonged over yon, where the men were. Some were from boys who came from about Dunoon. I'd known those laddies since they were bits o' bairns, most of them. And then there were letters—and they touched me as much and came as close home as any of them—from boys who were utter strangers to me, but who told me they felt they knew me because they'd seen me on the stage, or because their phonograph, maybe, played some of my records, and because they'd read that my boy had shared their dangers and given his life, as they were ready, one and all, to do.

And those letters, nearly all, had the same refrain. They wanted me. They wanted me to come to them, since they couldn't be coming to me. "Come on out here and see us and sing for us, Harry," they'd write to me. "It'd be a fair treat to see your mug and hear you singing about the wee hoose among the heather or the bonnie, bonnie lassie!"

How could a man get such a plea as that and not want to do what those laddies asked? How could he think of the great deal they were doing and not want to do the little bit they asked of him? But it was no a simple matter, ye'll ken. I could not pack a bag and start for France from Charing Cross or Victoria as I might have done—and often did—before the war. No one might go to France unless he had passports and leave

from the war office, and many another sort of arrangement there was to make. But I set wheels in motion. Just to go to France to sing for the boys would have been easy enough. They told me that at once.

"What? Harry Lauder wants to go to France to sing for the soldiers? He shall—whenever he pleases! Tell him we'll be glad to send him!"

So said the war office. But I knew what they meant. They meant for me to go to one or more of the British bases and give concerts. There were troops moving in and out of the bases all the time; men who'd been in the trenches or in action in an offensive and were back in rest billets, or even further back, were there in their thousands. But it was the real front I was eager to reach. I wanted to be where my boy had been, and to see his grave. I wanted to sing for the laddies who were bearing the brunt of the big job over there—while they were bearing it.

And that no one had done. Many of our leading actors and singers and other entertainers were going back and forth to France all the time. Never a week went by but they were helping to cheer up the boys at the bases. It was a grand work they were doing, and the boys were grateful to them, and all Britain should share that gratitude. But it was a wee bit more that I wanted to be doing, and there was the rub.

I wanted to go up to the battle lines themselves and to sing for the boys who were in the thick of the struggle with the Hun. I wanted to give a concert in a front-line trench where the Huns could hear me, if they cared to listen. I wanted them to learn once more the lesson we could never teach them often enough—the lesson of the spirit of the British army, that could go into battle with a laugh on its lips.

But at first I got no encouragement at all when I told what it was in my mind to do. My friends who had influence shook their heads.

"I'm afraid it can't be managed, Harry," they told me. "It's never been done."

I told them what I believed myself, and what I have often thought of when things looked hard and prospects were dark. I told them everything had to be done for the first time sometime, and I begged them not to give up the effort to win my way for me. And so I knew that when they told me no one had done it before it wasn't reason enough why I shouldn't do it. And I made up my mind that I would be the pioneer in giving concerts under fire if that should turn out to be a part of the contract.

But I could not argue. I could only say what it was that I wanted to do and wait the pleasure of those whose

duty it was to decide. I couldn't tell the military authorities where they must send me. It was for me to obey when they gave their orders, and to go wherever they thought I would do the most good. I would not have you thinking that I was naming conditions, and saying I would go where I pleased or bide at home! That was not my way. All I could do was to hope that in the end they would see matters as I did and so decide to let me have my way. But I was ready for my orders, whatever they might be.

There was one thing I wanted, above all others, to do when I got to France, and so much I said. I wanted to meet the Highland brigade, and see the bonnie laddies in their kilts as the Huns saw them—the Huns, who hated them worse than they hated any troops in the whole British army.

Ha! ye heard the tale of the Scotsman and the Jew? Sandy and Ikey they were, and they were having a disputatious argument together. Each said he could name more great men of his race who were famous in history than the other could. And they argued, and nearly came to blows, and were no further along until they thought of making a bet. An odd bet it was. For each great name that Sandy named of a Scot whom history had honored, he was to pull out one of Ikey's hairs, and Ikey was to have the same privilege.

"Do ye begin!" said Sandy. "Moses!" said Ikey, and pulled.

"Bobbie Burns!" cried Sandy, and returned the compliment. "Abraham!" said Ikey, and pulled again.

"Ouch—Duggie Haig!" said Sandy. And then Ikey grabbed a handful of hairs at once.

"Joseph and his brethren!" he said, gloating a bit as he watched the tears starting from Sandy's eyes at the pain of losing so many good hairs at once.

"So it's pulling them out in bunches ye are!" said Sandy. "Ah, well, man—"

And he reached with both his hands for Ikey's thatch.

"The Highland brigade!" he roared, and pulled all the hairs his two hands would hold!

Ah, weel, there are sad thoughts that come to me, as well as proud and happy ones, when I think of the bonnie kilted laddies who fought and died so nobly out there against the Hun! They were my own laddies, those, and it was with them and among them that my boy went to his death. It was among them I

would find, I thought, those who could tell me more than I knew of how he had died, and of how he had lived before he died. And I thought the boys of the brigade would be glad to see me and to hear my songs—songs of their hames and their ain land—auld Scotland. And so I used what influence I had, and did not think it wrong to employ at such a time, and in such a cause. For I knew that if they sent me to the Highland brigade they would be sending me to the front of the front line—for that was there I would have to go seeking the Highland laddies!

I waited patiently as I could. And then one day I got my orders! I was delighted, for the thing they had told me could not be done had actually been arranged for me. I was asked to get ready to go to France to entertain the soldiers, and it was the happiest day I had known since I had heard of my boy's death.

There was not much for me to do in the way of making ready. The whole trip, of course, would be a military one. I might be setting out as a minstrel for France, but every detail in accordance with military rules, and once I reached France I would be under the orders of the army in every movement I might make. All that was carefully explained to me.

But still there were things for me to think about and to arrange. I wanted some sort of accompaniment for my songs, and how to get it puzzled me for a time. But there was a firm in London that made pianos that heard of my coming trip, and solved that problem for me. They built, and they presented to me, the weest piano ever you saw—a piano so wee that it could be carried in an ordinary motor car. Only five octaves it had, but it was big enough, and sma' enough at once. I was delighted with it, and so were all who saw it. It weighed only about 150 pounds—less than even a middling stout man! And it was cunningly built, so that no space at all was wasted. Mrs. Lauder, when she saw it, called it cute, and so did every other woman who laid eyes upon it. It was designed to be carried on the grid of a motor car—and so it was, for many miles of shell-torn roads!

When I was sure of my piano I thought another thing it would be well for me to take with me. And so I spent 100 pounds—500 American dollars—for cigars. I knew they would be welcome everywhere I went. It makes no matter how many cigars we send to France, there will never be enough. My friends thought

I was making a mistake in taking so many, they were afraid they would make matters hard when it came to transportation, and reminded me that I faced difficulties in that respect in France it was nearly impossible for us at home in Britain to visualize at all. But I had my mind and my heart set on getting those fags—a cigaret is a fag to every British soldier—to my destination with me.

I was not to travel alone. My tour was to include two traveling companions of distinction and fame. One was James Hogge, M. P., member from East Edinburgh, who was eager, as so many members of Parliament were, to see for himself how things were at the front. James Hogge was one of the members most liked by the soldiers. He had worked hard for them, and gained—and well earned—much fame by the way he struggled with the matter of getting the right sort of pensions for the laddies who were offering their lives.

The other distinguished companion

I was to have was an old and good friend of mine, the Rev. George Adam, then a secretary to the minister of munitions. He lived in Ilford, a suburb of London, then, but is now in Montreal, Canada. I was glad of the opportunity to travel with both these men, for I knew that one's traveling companions, on such a tour, were of the utmost importance in determining its success or failure, and I could not have chosen a better pair, had the choice been left to me—which, of course, it was not.

There we were, you see—the Rev. George Adam, Harry Lauder and James Hogge, M. P. And no sooner did the soldiers hear of the combination than our tour was named. "The Rev. Harry Lauder, M. P. Tour" was what we were called! And that absurd name stuck to us through our whole journey in France, up and down the battle line, and until we came home to England and broke up!

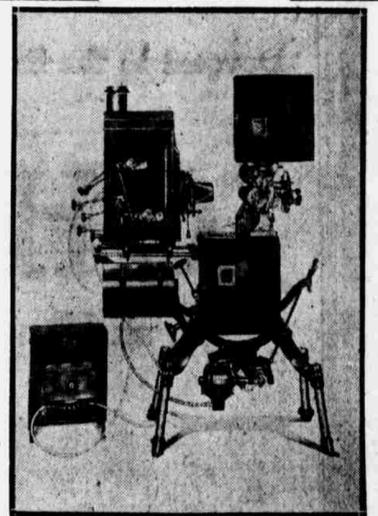
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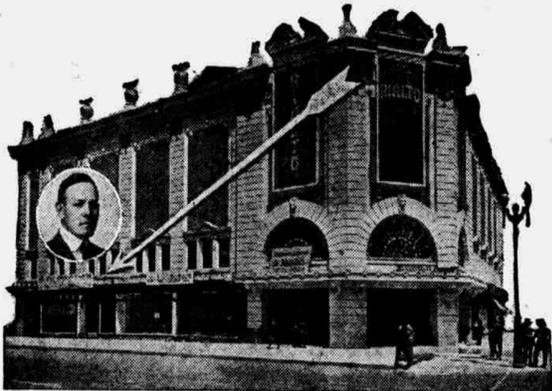
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