

UNDER THE FRENCH FLAG.

Before the war only a few civilians had any idea of the life of an English soldier—what was his routine, what his pleasures, his cares, his slang, and his particular vein of humour or profanity. What ideas we had we owed to Rudyard Kipling or Robert Blatchford. If we wanted to know the life of an Italian soldier we turned to de Amicis, whose sketches of military life were “commanded” by the Government of the day in order to popularize the new conscription laws. They do not profess to be up to date, but no one can read them without feeling that the then Government showed amazing foresight, for even now every line makes one regret never to have been an Italian soldier. The mind of a French soldier in peace time was no doubt best exhibited in books which few Englishmen ever saw; they were emphatically not of the kind that can be left about. George Courteline’s stories of barrack-room life, “Les Gaïetés de l’Escadron” and “Le Train de 8h. 47,” made every reader realize why it is that the French “bourgeois” of the upper classes when discussing conscription invariably begins by denouncing it as utterly intolerable, so many years of indescribable torture, and equally invariably ends by recounting an endless series of stories and amusing anecdotes of his fellow-soldiers and his superiors, so that one comes to think that at any rate conscription has provided him with an inexhaustible store of “smoking-room stories.”

UNDER THE FRENCH FLAG. A BRITISHER IN THE FRENCH ARMY, by M. Macdonald (Robert Scott, 3s. 6d. net), is not such a revealing book as any of those. It is a very simple account of a few months’ life as a recruit in the French Army, and as an N.C.O. in the auxiliary services at the “Back of the Front.” The author gives as his reason for enlisting in Paris rather than in London that “I chose the French Army because the age limit, fifty, gave me a little more chance of ‘seeing the end of it,’ as it seems we are in for a long war!” After a certain amount of delay he was duly recruited and posted to his regiment. He is very discreet on page 20 about the number of his regiment, but by page 125 the cat is out of the bag—perhaps it never was worth bagging. One cannot help wondering, all the time he is talking about the inadequacy of the food and how he would have got old kit instead of new unless he gave a cigar to the storemen, what were the officers doing, and why is so much left in the hands of a corporal who is paid 2½d. per diem? No doubt recruits are considered “fair game” in any army under any conditions. After two months on the barrack square with its concomitants, which do not vary very much in any army, Mr. Macdonald became an “aspirant corporal,” and shortly afterwards went on special duty at an important railway junction. Here he saw all sorts and conditions of troops, from the “Anzacs” to the “Bats d’Af.” We could wish that he had told us a little more about what Paris was like during the first few months of the war. We get a tantalizing glimpse here and there—the *queue* at the Gare de Lyon, receiving numbered tickets for their right of admission to the booking office (as if it were a Paris omnibus), and the crowds who came back when the danger was past.