

A VOICE FROM A HIGHLAND SCRAP HEAP.

Introduction.

In one county, at least, of the Highlands, as probably in the majority, there lie in farmsteads and by the roadside, uncollected dumps of metal. And where they are, it may safely be prophesied, they will be left for the rust to corrode, despite every order of any Minister of Supply for their collection. Every conceivable article that in its day did good work, and that, after its day, might, transmuted, do the best of all, lies there. Old spades and other like tools, broken up motor cars and motor parts, every kind of outworn agricultural machinery, useless cauldrons, girdles, pots and pans, stoves and grates, and battered and leaking baths in abundance, are of the common stock. Even, in one case, three heavy British cannon of pre-Victorian date can be seen, as if mutely entreating refashioning, that once again they may be used in defence of their country. In vain - their dumb desire is mocked.

So, too, with thousands upon thousands of loyal and eager subjects of the King - educated men and women, many of them even experienced in the departmental direction of parts of munition output in the last War. From the outset of this War, these people have sought to serve their Country similarly again. But their search has been futile. Thousands, years younger than Mr. Churchill, are dismissed as "too old" to take up any War work whatsoever, for which their previous war experience has qualified them.

"Why", asks a man censor working in the Highlands, "could not older and better qualified women be employed, instead of these silly young girls who seem to think only of lipstick and face powder, who are engaged here by the hundred as censors?" The answer of course is "red tape". Reined in by this, which reigns as triumphantly now as ever, the willing and competent elder brain workers have found themselves finally strangled and cast out as scrap - for which there is no use in any other form.

Never was a more ironic situation. On those, still youthful alike in spirit and in activities; fit, able, and

alert, to whom work is a necessity of healthy living, the doom has fallen. For the first time in their lives they are wilfully kept idle. During this life and death struggle, to them alone, outside the physically unfit, the decree has gone forth, excluding not even the merely incapable. To some of these with influence, neither the age rule nor inefficiency has been a bar to a desirable post. Not in broadcast words, indeed, but in arbitrary action to individuals, whose sole fault is their age - in terms of years only - the universal edict of Government red tape proclaims: "You are too old. Pray cease from troubling us any further. Your proper place is on the scrap heap of useless things. Go to it, then!"

Into this shamefully enforced peace, possibly secure even from sharing with fellow-subjects the risk of bombs, the request has come to write for those heroic and uncomplaining endurers something that may carry their minds into quite another world, untroubled by hell-let-loose. There being nothing more active to be done - until a Hun parachutist obligingly comes down where he may be fallen upon - the response follows in these pages from a Highland scrap heap. For since the unsupportable cravings for wartime activities had to be stifled, and this was impossible of accomplishment anywhere where others were busied with war work, resort had to be made to some region where, from its situation, of necessity no post for brain workers was - or could be - in existence.

Thus this book is written on an unspoilt island, not unknown in Highland history, though little of that history is ascertainable. Its first chapters alone, however, are concerned with it, and they attempt to describe its strange natural features and others of a different kind, but nothing whatever of its present intimate life. Of this, none but those who have lived for years amongst the islanders are qualified to write.

By far the greatest part of the book is a picture of life in a beloved home in the remote Highlands-far, far away from any town. This life, in its unconventionality, has nothing whatever in common with the more or less stereotyped life of the ordinary countryside, served by a not very distant railroad and daily buses to the adjacent shopping centre. About this everyday country life in England many books have been written (though the author has read none of them) and many townspeople are now experiencing it all the year round for the first time in their lives. But the life with which these pages deal differs from that of the ordinary English

countryside, or even from that of the more populous parts of the Highlands, as much as the rugged mountain-side differs from the smooth valley of the south.

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