

A glimpse of Armistice Day in London

Edgar Bramwell Piper, *Somewhere Near the War*(1919)

The news was given out by Premier Lloyd George to the papers a little before 11 o'clock on Monday, November 11. Up to that time London had preserved its usual phlegmatic calm. The successive announcements, in the closing days of the war, that Turkey had succumbed, that Austria had sent up the white flag, that the Kaiser had abdicated, and finally that Germany had sent its representatives to General Foch to arrange for a suspension of hostilities — all failed to disturb the Londoner in the pursuit of his established and historic routine. Apparently everything was coming out as England expected, and there was nothing to do but await events. The crash of empires and the fall of dynasties were the mere incidents of an arranged schedule.

The armistice was signed at 5 o'clock in the morning. London and England should have been notified of the result early in the day, immediately after the signing of the document. But the London papers are poor contraptions, and they have a way here of awaiting official announcements. It isn't news until the King, or the Premier, or some other great man has said it or done it. In any event, the method of communicating to the public the great fact that Germany had officially acknowledged that it had lost was through Lloyd George.

The day was threatening and misty; a very poor time for a public celebration of any kind. Then a lorry came lumbering up the Strand firing anti-aircraft guns. The significance of the exploit was not at first clearly understood. Some thought it was a final German air raid. But at last it dawned on the London mind that the war was over; and the impossible happened. London cast all reserve to the winds and let itself loose in a spontaneous and mighty demonstration. It was mainly a thing of moving and joyous crowds, going somewhere, anywhere, and making a noise—not a din after the American fashion, but yet a fairly noisy noise, all quite seemly, disciplined and respectable.



The crowds were enormous, and they were everywhere. It is said that London has 7,000,000 people. It must be an underestimate. Far more than that number apparently assembled at Trafalgar Square and before Buckingham Palace, and marched in platoons or companies or irregular regimental formations up and down the Strand. The crowd before the palace wanted to see and hear the King and Queen. "We want King George!" cried the people. Here, where they have King George, and evidently intend to keep him, there was no emotional outburst, no passionate outcry, no mob frenzy, merely the more or less formal call of a disciplined people to see their King, doubtless because they reasoned among themselves, in good English style, that it was the correct procedure in the circumstances. There is no denying the popularity of the King, however. If they were to hold an election for King in England tomorrow, the incumbent would distance all others at the polls.

At a quarter to 11 there were no signs of special commotion before the palace. A few idlers had gathered to watch the ceremony of changing the guard. The only flag in sight was the royal standard. At 11 o'clock, precisely, a typewritten copy of the Premier's announcement that hostilities had ceased was hung outside the railings and then the maroons exploded. The crowds began to gather, coming from all directions like bees in a swarm. Many had

flags. Men on horseback came from somewhere and reined up before the palace. Taxicabs and motor cars came along and people who wanted to see better began to climb on the roofs. Within a few minutes many thousands had assembled and they began to call for the King.

At 11:15 King George, in the uniform of an Admiral, appeared on the balcony. The Queen, bareheaded and wearing a fur coat, was with him. The Duke of Connaught came too, and the Princess Mary. The soldiers presented arms and the Irish Guards' band played the national anthem and the crowd solemnly took up the slow refrain. Then the band played "Rule Britannia." The people sang again and flags began to wave. The King removed his cap and his loyal subjects cheered, and someone proposed a groan for the Kaiser, which was given sonorously, and the ruler of Great Britain and all the Indies donned his cap and the royal group went back into the palace.

Later, the King decided to drive through the city. He was accompanied by the Queen and the Princess Mary. Rain was falling, but nobody in England minds rain. It was a triumphal procession. Everywhere at central points had gathered many thousands to welcome their majesties. Here and there was a police officer, but the police had no difficulty with the crowds. There was no special or unusual guard for the King and Queen, only a few outriders. They have no fear, evidently, in England that anything untoward will happen to the Crown, through the act of a madman, or the deliberate deed of a regicide. A policeman's baton is enough. The English respect authority and obey it.

On the succeeding day it was announced that the King and Queen would attend a thanksgiving service at St. Paul's Cathedral. The street scenes of the previous day were repeated during the progress of the royal couple to the magnificent centre of worship. It is a noble and wonderful shrine, with a fit setting for occasions of vast importance. Great bells rang and a mighty

concourse gathered, and a solemn and beautiful ceremony was conducted in commemoration of the triumph of the allied cause.

The Strand, ending in Trafalgar Square, the heart of London, is the most popular thoroughfare in the city. When the joy-making began, the crowds took possession not only of the Strand, but of all available vehicles. A favourite adventure of men and women was to commandeer a taxicab and to pile in and on anywhere, preferably on top. One car, with a prescribed capacity for four, had exactly twenty-seven persons sardined in its not-too-ample proportions. Then there were lorries—automobile trucks—crowded with soldiers, civilians and girls, all waving flags and singing or shouting. Soldiers formed in procession and marched along. After a while they turned about and went the other way. Girls in uniform—munitions workers—appeared in large numbers, and walked along, arm-in-arm with the men in khaki. Flags were plentiful.

The day went on with no diminution of the crowds or moderation of the excitement. Apparently it increased rather than diminished. Business was wholly suspended, except in the restaurants and hotels, and the metropolis gave itself up to merry-making. Yet it was mainly an unorganized, though orderly, spectacle of movement, without any great variety of stunts or picturesque incidents. There was little drinking or drunkenness, apparently, in the streets, though there was plenty, and to spare, later in the great hotels. Possibly the crowd was sober because intoxication costs money nowadays in England; or perhaps it was not in the humor to drink. But the gay assemblies within the walls of the restaurants had no such scruples. There was much drinking, much noise, much laxity, a complete departure from the innocent gaiety of the streets.

The celebration did not end on Monday night. But it started up again on Tuesday and continued through the week. When London celebrates it celebrates. There is no question about it.