Rev W.F. Browning
Pte – Sgt. R.A.M.C.
Cross Reference

Religion
Toc H
Armistice
Attitude to Germans

My earliest recollection of the Great War was the visit of Lord Roberts (affectionately known as 'Bobs') to Bedford during the last week of July 1914. I had come from my parish of St John, Keswick on the shore of Derwentwater, in Cumberland (as it was then known), and was spending a few days with my father , who was rural dean of Bedford, previous to accompanying him for a holiday in Switzerland where he was to have a temporary job as chaplain to Saas Grund, a beautiful little village in the Canton Valais within eight miles of the Italian border.

Great preparations were made for Lord Roberts' visit, red coated soldiers lining the streets of Bedford , and in the evening, a large number of Bedfordians gathering to meet him, and hear what he had to say in the town hall.

His speech was in favour of national service, and every young man was to be prepared to sacrifice a proportion of his time to prepare himself for military duty on behalf of his country should the need arise.

He began by drawing attention to the seriousness of the times. We were on the very eve of war; the troops we had seen lining the streets that morning would, before the end of the week be, in all probability engaged in a life and death struggle with a ruthless enemy across the water.

We listened in breathless expectation. Here was the first soldier in the land - who knew what he was talking about - giving us some inside information about things which would shortly shake the country to its very foundations. In a very few days England would be called upon to muster her forces and

and send them hurtling across the sea to fight Catholic and republican elements which were trying to wrench Ulster and, incidentally the rest of that unhappy isle of which Ulster was part from its association with Britain and the British Empire, and to make its headquarters in Dublin and not in London.

Suddenly like Clarence, in the murder scene in King Richard lll, England heard the fatal voice, 'Look behind you, England' and England turned to see, not Ireland, but Germany advancing and about to strike, with poised dagger at her vitals.

My father and I continued our trip to Switzerland, crossing from Newhaven to Dieppe. We sped over the flat, richly cultivated fields of France, reaching Paris about midnight. There was evidently great excitement there, for the war was imminent. Leaving Paris, we made a pretence of sleep, sitting upright in our seats, handkerchiefs spread over our eyes to shade the gaslight.

We woke up (those of us who had had any sleep) in a gently undulating green country much like our own. Where were the mountains? Gradually they appeared through the morning mist as we passed through the outlying ridges of the Jura, over the French border, and, skirting the lovely Lac Leman, passed Lausanne and Martigny, where the mountains began to tower above us, till at length we reached Stalden, where, disembarking from our train, after a drink of iced water, we started our ten mile tramp to Saas Grund refreshing ourselves at the ice cold mountain springs on the way.

Arriving at last at our destination and enquiring for the Zurbriggen family with whom we were going to stay, we found ourselves eventually members of a small party of six,

three English ladies and one Belgian gentleman, who, perhaps naturally, had rather pessimistic views of the outcome of the Great War. In this company we should have to content ourselves for an indefinite period. One year? Two years? How long? The German armies were advancing rapidly towards Calais and the channel ports; would they be there before us? Should we pack up and escape into Italy, which was only seven miles away and get back to England via Rome or Naples - but which side was Italy going to be?

So we decided to wait on events, and meanwhile make the best use of our holiday in that lovely country while we had got it, joining in with our fellow parishioners in their procession from shrine to shrine on the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, setting our record of nine thousand feet in our climb up the slopes of the 'White Cat' our nearest mountain; leaving the last four thousand for 'another day'.

At last the day came. A special train holding a thousand passengers would call at Visp railway station at the end of August, and we must be ready packed and prepared to jump aboard when it came. Getting ourselves and our luggage as best as we could to Stalden, having booked a room at the local hotel, we arose and breakfasted next morning and were out at the station to see the train at eight o'clock, draped in its mantle of August snow, coming in from Zermatt. At Visp we mounted the trans-continental train for Boulogne.

At first things were quiet and subdued, the German Swiss naturally not being quite sure which side they were on, but as we approached Genève and the lake of that name, everything became more definite and it seemed safer to shout 'Vive la

France' and 'A bas Guillaume' to the answer 'Vive l'Angleterre' and 'Vive l'Entente'. English school children greeted us as our train passed by school playing fields at Lausanne displaying Union Jacks to validate their claims.

We trailed slowly across France meeting train loads of wounded Belgians and others shouting enthusiastically "Les Allemands sont battus," quite convinced apparently that the war was over, and the enemy defeated at the end of the first month of fighting, while others, surmising that it might last till Christmas but certainly no longer, were ruefully realising that there would not be much likelihood of any opportunity of the thrill of taking part themselves. So Sleeping as best we could, propped up on carriage seats, or stretched out full length in corridors, with midnight feet perambulating over us, we passed the night, hoping for the best.

We arrived at length at Boulogne, and transferred ourselves to the deck of a channel steamer. 'Did you hear the guns last night? was the question on everyones lips as we woke up after a restless night on a hard bed the next morning. 'They must be getting nearer' 'Garn! That was old Bill here drumming on the gun'n'le. He's expecting to be called up, when he gets ashore, and he's trying to get himself used to the noise when he gets out there'.

Crossing the channel escorted by three torpedo boats we arrived at Folkestone about two pm, and were greeted by a number of our countrymen and women with 'God save the King', 'Rule Brittania' and other items suitable to the occasion, to which we added our contribution.

After a weekend on the south coast and a sermon in St. Leonards, Hythe, on the despicability of such young men

who didn't want immediately to come forward and make a living wall against the advancing hosts that were threatening their country's existence. From thence we sped back to our respective posts, myself awaiting the return of my vicar from his summer holiday.

After three weeks absence he reappeared on the scene of his parochial duties, and after mildly criticising my farewell sermon as being a cacophonic indictment of the sins of the other side, which, I assured him, I had never intended it to be; we had the beam to cast out of our own eye first. This was, I think, the first and last time I had ever been accused of censorious feelings towards our enemies, my delinquencies usually lay in the opposite direction. My last three weeks at Keswick however were the acme of congeniality and happiness. I found a very kindred spirit in Canon Harford and his young family, the temporary occupants of the vicarage, and parted with them and with Keswick with a feeling of great gratitude for the kindness received, which seemed to me during my twenty one months of ministration there to have been utterly and totally undeserved. Misrepresentation and ingratitude are certainly met with in parishes, though the fault may not be all on one side, but in Keswick I met with nothing but kindness. How else could it be where God's goodness seemed to be so reflected in the lovely works of His creation?

'Morn amid the mountains;
Lovely solitude!
Rushing streams and fountains
Echo God is good' .

From Keswick I went up to Glasgow to bid farewell to an aunt and uncle and two little girl cousins who were staying

there. Actually they were in residence at Helensburgh some ten miles out of the city, my uncle having some naval commitment there. After a day and a couple of nights at Helensburgh on a mat in my aunt's drawing room I took the night train from Glasgow, ~~and~~ in company with half a dozen young Scottish recruits who shared my compartment, and an old Glaswegian lady who fainted during the operation.

We arrived at Bedford station at 8 am and I walked out and met my father coming out to meet me. We continued the walk home arriving at Bromham, my father's parish, at about nine, where after a well earned breakfast, I rolled myself up on the garden couch for an hour or two and then walked back into Bedford and called at the recruiting office in High Street. I had not been there many minutes discussing the rival merits of this regiment and that regiment, or should I try the public school battalion, when in walked W.H. Allen Esq. the head of Allen's Engineering Works, and a regular worshipper at my father's Church; and Sheriff of Bedfordshire.

'Frank, what are you doing here? You're not thinking of joining a fighting regiment are you? How will you be able afterwards to stand up in the pulpit, and proclaim the Christmas message of peace and goodwill if you have German blood on your hands?'

It was strange that what had appeared to be perfectly right and normal to my bishop, my vicar and my father, three accredited officials of the Holy Catholic Church, should have been so immediately and strongly discountenanced by one whose affinities had been in the realm of commerce and worldly advancement.

Well, what was I to do then? Having come so far, I surely was not to go back and relinquish all my ideals and aspirations and relapse into dull 'civvy' life again! 'Do you want excitement, danger, the chance of getting killed, wounded, anything of that sort?' 'Yes, thats what I want' 'You can get it all in the Royal Army Medical Corps.' 'But I cannot bear .....' 'Never mind, you'll be all right'

So into the Medical Corps I went, and after a night's sleep in a bed, the last for many nights to come, I finally caught the 10.30 train next day to Aldershot, and was deposited with all my paraphernalia, in a large drill hall, which seemed to contain all ranks and files of society, some of whom seemed to be quite at home with bare boards for a nights resting place, others like myself, with a slightly more elegant past, were wondering what to do with suitcases, pyjamas and the elegancies of civilisation which had little or no place in the life we had adopted to lead.

The next day we were removed to another part where the order of the day (and night) was 'bell' tents which were erected on the lawn in front of the offices, and after a night in this situation, the bare earth beneath and the thin canvas above, and the consequent rheumatic pains and feverish symptoms which followed, with a few words from the Chaplain General in his Sunday sermon as to how we were to treat little Hans and Gretchen when we got to Berlin, (an occasion which would eventuate on some happy day some time before Christmas), we finally moved off after our week at Aldershot, to Tidworth Park camp in Wiltshire and after a couple of months mudlarking there, with nothing much to remember except mud, it was westward

ho again down to Paignton on the South Devon coast. Here I found a haven of refuge with three young soldiers and one slightly elderly and rather less outwardly respectable one with a Teutonic background and name.

I spent the late autumn and Christmas with this company in the care of Mrs Fairweather of 'The Haven' Midvale Road and her four young daughters, and what with the mistletoe in the hall and elsewhere, it promised to be a lively time, and so it was, and what with the friendliness and hospitable spirit of the West Country population we most of us looked back in the later days to that little bright spot that cheered us before we were finally engulfed in the gloom and horror of world war no.1.

What with St Patrick's day regimental sports, an occasional concert party joined by the young people of the town, Sunday worship at the parish church and for some of us hardier ones, a daily dip in the sea off the pier head, the days passed pleasantly enough until April when once again we found ourselves eastward bound to Winchester, where, stationed at Pitt Corner Camp we passed the summer months, finding, some of us, old friends in the city and countryside and, for my part, renewing some very interesting old acquaintances, among them my old headmaster J.M. Sing.

After the better part of the spring and summer here, we moved eastward again to "the 'Shot" where we started, and after a short period of parades and drills, the long expected day arrived, and with my father standing at the corner of the parade ground to see us off, (being nearly all Lancastrians the others relations, friends and sweethearts had not had time to reach the

parade ground and get back), we heard the command 'by the right quick march' and we started that march, which, (with the exception of one or two short railway and army bus trips) was not to stop for another four and a half years over France and Belgium, through towns, villages and countryside till we laid down our equipment, and weary and ill at ease, but humbly thankful, made our way back again to our dear native land, which we still hoped was waiting thankfully to receive us.

We spent a night and a day in the docks at Southampton and at midnight of the second night we were glad to wind up our amateur concerts with which we had been keeping ourselves awake, and, life-belted and ready for any emergency, to start the last stage of our journey to France.

We boarded the channel steamer ready there to take us about midnight and, crossing the channel without incident, in the company of three torpedo boat destroyers, we disembarked next morning, and after spending a day on the quay at Le Havre, making ourselves as comfortable as we might, and personally not feeling as 'good' as we might have hoped, after a couple of days under such rough conditions, we finally boarded the long evening train (a cattle train) and crawled all night and all next day over the French countryside, finally disentraining at Lillers, where we arrived at about 4 am on the next morning, and finished our night in a field about a quarter of a mile from the railway. After a chilly hour or so in this location we proceeded to Merville, a village with a handsome red brick Church which we reached about noon, and thence, after a short rest, to Armentières, our final destination. Here, we were accommodated in an 'école de filles et salle d'asile' - (a

young ladies' academy and kindergarten) and, having been separated from my companions by a sore foot necessitating a ride on an ambulance wagon which put me down at a different place; I was shown to this by Augustine, who afterwards, with her husband Duhamel, entertained me to a pleasant evening and 'une tasse de café' whenever I felt inclined to go, accompanied by 'Georges' or any other friend I cared to take with me, till 'Georges'was finally removed to take charge of a V.D. home in the vicinity. Duhamel, now in his seventies, had taken part in the Franco-Prussian war in the 1870's when he 'allait à la bayonette' at the battle of Sedan, and now resided with his wife and little grandson, Charlot, in the Rue Marceau, at Armentières.

While we were at Armentières we had our first experience of shell fire, a detachment of us being sent to Bizet Belge, just across the Belgian border three miles away, to be stationed at an old brewery, the vats of which were to be used as baths for troops, and we were to be employed filling and refilling them from a hot water system nearby. We were warned that when ever an extra large number of troops should be there and their presence be notified to the enemy by an unusually large column of smoke rising from the furnace used to heat the bath water for the occasion, the Germans would take the opportunity of opening up a devastating bombardment from their batteries concentrated in three enemy positions facing the British line. The bombardment duly arrived after a few range finding shells, but, thank God, the troops were not there, except for one single infantryman who appeared with a rather nasty arm wound to be dressed, but whence and on what authority he was present

among the French washer-ladies was not quite evident.

Having dressed the arm wound and gathered together such equipment as seemed worth saving from the holocaust, the one or two of us who remained in the building decided that it was time to get away to some 'healthier' spot, rather than risk annihilation at the 'brasserie' so, finding a young francaise, who had been engaged in the laundry department and was of the same mind as ourselves, we asked her to escort us to her home which lay about three hundred yards from the now half destroyed brewery. Here we found some of the neighbourhood clustered together in the nooks and crannies of the house, looking a bit shattered and apprehensive, when suddenly out of nowhere, appeared on the scene a messenger from other spheres, and added her childish voice to the deafening clatter around us. "Vous avez peur?" she mildly enquired. "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" Amd the noise abated a little and we looked up and saw great mounds of earth being flung into the air from the water meadows across the river, and churning up harmlessly the fields beyond.

After this experience I was put in charge of a "wet canteen" just across the Belgian border. It seemed a rather strange job for me who had been brought up in the atmosphere of Bands of Hope, teetotallers and temperance societies. I was, however, given an assistant from some other regiment, and made the best of it. But in spite of our record of eleven dinner glasses at one sitting by one of our customers, the average of fifty six glasses a day was considered very uneconomical by the Lieutenant quartermaster responsible for the experiment. The general opinion seemed to be that the success of a 'wet canteen' or any other drinking establishment depended on the presence

or absence of barmaids,- the soldiers delight! Be that as it may, after a short spell at ~~Heuvris~~ Merris, a small village in the Flanders section of the Department du Nord, I was delivered from my predicament and restored to my self respect by a new commanding officer who wanted his men back from such frivolous posts as beer selling canteens to their proper job of ~~reassuring~~ rescuing the wounded under shell fire, and generally speaking getting on with such jobs as seemed then to us to be worthy of our attention; so we turned south.

Passing through St Pol, I was detailed with some others to sweep the courtyard of a chateau used as an officers' mess. Here in the reception room, I was fortunate enough to meet two of my old school and college friends, W.R.. Strahan and E.G. Prynne.. Prynne who had follwed me from St Edwards School Oxford to Selwyn College , Cambridge, gave his life a few months later in the Battle of the Somme, and was one of my most delightful acquaintances. How often that sort seem to be taken. Their message of life given, their jobs done. How different from these riotous young 'students' we find in such abundance nowadays. W.R.Strahan was a cousin and came through intact.

From St Pol we came by easy stages to the sector north of Arras, where the severe April snowstorms were a promise of the great winters to come. Our hardy daily bath exponent came out here with his bucket of half frozen water and exposed himself to the delight (or admiration) of the female population of the vicinity, attracted by this unusual sight, where cold baths at the best of times were not much the order of the day, let alone those taken in a windy snow field. We were stationed on and around Vimy Ridge for a while, probably with the purpose of dislodging the enemy from his hold of the lands

to the north of the Somme district from which we wanted to get rid of him, if we could next summer, while we left the French to get on with the job to the south, which job they seemed to be doing remarkably well. Meanwhile we took over the sector north of Albert, with the Virgin and Child looking down upon us from the top of Albert Cathedral, bending over and ready to come to our assistance whenever the forces of the enemy should prove too strong for us.

Arriving at a labyrinth of underground dwellings a couple of miles north of Albert, we stood casually gossiping with some French soldiers from whom we were expecting to take over shortly. "Ah! Oui, it is a very quiet place, nice summer holiday" Bang! Crash! Bang! We saw no more of our French friends, but presumed they had gone to earth in one of the many pot holes in the vicinity, to reassess their favourable summary of the situation.

Via the neighbouring hamlet of Bouzincourt we next proceeded to Black Horse Bridge, a place of ill omen on the banks of the river Ancre, a tributary of the Somme. The place owed its name to a pontoon across the said river and its adjoining water meadows, and seemed to be our main headquarters in the gloomy days that followed, the big and semi-successful attack of July the first.

While here I renewed my attempts to become a member of the stretcher bearing force, but S. M. seemed to want me to continue in "Tent Subdivision" so I arose one morning at 4am and followed the stretcher bearers into action.

Not being officially a stretcher bearer, but a hospital tent orderly, I lost touch with my companions (who naturally did not notice my absence) and after wandering about

aimlessly in a labyrinth of trenches, I found myself at length in a company of the third Welsh division, who were apparently on their way back to make an attack on the German line a few yards away. Being unarmed and under the Geneva Convention, I was beginning, to say the least, to be distinctly apprehensive of my position in such a situation, and ..... was not a little relieved when, turning a corner in the subterranean labyrinth, I caught sight of familiar faces of some of my companions of the Royal Army Medical Corps, who received me back with surprise, and perhaps a little satisfaction, and in half an hour I was back to report for duty at my regimental aid post at Black Horse Bridge.

I worked here for the rest of the morning in company with a Roman Catholic padre who came in to help and comfort us, whom we liked for the kind and gentle help he gave us in our heartbreaking task of patching up wounded and shell-shocked patients, and sending them off as best we could, on their way rejoicing (if that were possible in their sufferings) to the joys of "Blighty" (England).

At midday, after having a finger dressed which I had injured in packing up some tent material while on a short period of hospital duty at a casualty clearing station, I was sent off from duty by a very kind Irish corporal to have half an hours rest in my billet, a five minutes walk from the dressing station. No sooner had I reached my billet and sat down for a few minutes rest (and a cup of tea) than whizz - bang - bang - bang - bang, and I returned to my duties to find the rest of the staff knocked out by a salvo of "whizz-bangs", one on a stretcher, three others, including a young Devonshire lad who had been called in to take my place, in various positions

of discomfort lying about the small dressing station nursing injuries from four light artillery shells, which had exploded among them. There were no fatal casualties fortunately, and replenishing our small staff, we again took to our duties of receiving the wounded at the hand of stretcher bearers, seeing they were properly equipped and their wounds correctly dressed at the hands of qualified army doctors, so that they might arrive in some degree of comfort, if possible, to start their convalescence in a base hospital in France, or, if fortunate, in England. The Roman Catholic padre again coming to join us, and give us his kindly help.

At eight o'clock my day's work was ended, and I, with what was left of our day staff, were dismissed and settled down for the night in our dormitory quarters, when, once again, a terrific concussion shook the neighbourhood, lights went out everywhere, and we turned to sleep eventually and waited for the morning.

Returning to our duties we caught a glimpse of our aid post through the shattered trees. It was completely transformed. Its facade of greyish white sandbags looked as if someone had been employed all night with a pot of red paint and practically the whole frontage of about twenty five square yards had been transformed to blood red, a fearsome sight! As we approached nearer we saw two horses lying stretched out on the ground near the entrance, one with the head and neck several yards from the rest of him, the other intact but inanimate, dead perhaps of shock, - poor creatures, martyrs in a quarrel for which they bore no responsibility. Besides these poor creatures we noticed that a human body, that of the driver presumably, was being lifted from the wagon. We looked again and it was only half

a body; a bursting fragment had cut it clean in two, and the explosion had carried the lower half and deposited it elsewhere.

We later learned that our Roman Catholic padre friend had perished in this melee.

We spent some time in and around Albert under the protection of the swooping Virgin, and about this time, after seventeen months of mud and blood in France and Belgium, I was allowed a change, lasting ten days, in England. I returned to find myself transported from the twentyfifth to the eighteenth division, from Lancashire to London, and actually I felt more at home under the changed conditions. Geographically I exchanged the Somme for the Ypres surroundings, the latter perhaps a little "moodier and bloodier" and life largely spent in concrete erections above ground rather than in earthy depressions below.

Here I met the two Hudson brothers with whom I had been at St. Edward's, Oxford, - Arthur and Noel, both officers in the Berkshire Regiment. We met in a concrete shelter, on the eve of the third battle of Ypres, and they, especially Arthur, were very confident of the result of the next day's battle. Looking at the map we were shewn the "country beyond" and promised that next day we would be there! Arthur H. certainly was there, but in another sense. A German bullet found him a few days later as he was sitting chatting on the remains of an old garden wall within sight of the enemy. The rest of us were not far in advance of our then present position.

We moved up that night into a position close up to the German line. It was dark when we arrived, and the night was spent sitting in a puddle of water under a corrugated iron shelter slightly reinforced with sand bags overhead; underneath was a

"staircase" cut into the rock and ending in a pool of more water. Someone seemed to be seated playing with the water to while away the time, and imagining himself presumably safer than among the frequently bursting shells on top.

In the morning we were summoned from our unhealthy state, and lined up ready to advance to our still more unhealthy duties in front of us. Before us as we advanced, we saw a long barrier of black butterfly shaped clouds being shot up from the hillside opposite us. Lord, shall we have to go through that! we dismally thought. We soon found ourselves in a nightmare of screaming and exploding missiles of war; a clay shrapnel bullet hit me in the eye, but it was spent, robbed of its force before it arrived by some contact with some object on the way - a "ricochet".

Shells and bullets seemed to be evrywhere. One of my stretcher party was wounded, a young Jewish soldier, and we were left a man short, to carry on. As we worked on the hillside I caught sight of one of my friends prostrated, he looked across with an agonised expression, as if he badly needed help but didn't know where to find it. It was one of my friends of the night before in the concrete shelter. Someone had started up the well known hymn (tune at least) "Sun of my soul", and he cast a look at me "Don't let them start that sort of thing here - this is not the place for religion!" And I had cast a look back, "You may need some sunshine for your soul by this time tomorrow night" - and he did.

Passing on a little further we came across the mortal remains of our beloved little Freddie Walker, the leader of our Soldier's Christian Association, an organisation which, owing to the multitude and diversity of religious systems within our

consortium strove to coagulate the weakness of the many into the stability of one central entity and authority. The army jargon is not exactly that of an archbishop's drawing room, but to one's own knowledge, Freddie had never been noticed using a word which would not pass muster in any society. A Walker indeed in the steps of his Master.

We spent the following night in wetness and misery on the edge of the battlefield, for the thunder of the guns of the preceding day had, possibly, brought the culmination of a dry spell to a dissolution in a period of rain. Army wagons conveyed us to a destination ten miles in arrear of the fighting line, and there we had a week to meditate on the uses of adversity and count the raindrops, not only refreshing the land but giving us a week's rest from the dust and smoke of conflict and the thunder of battle that was against us.

We spent a good part of that summer in the region of St Omer, and Therouranne with its legend of divine visitation. A quiet place of farm houses, canals and ducks. Whence we wended our way northward and eastward again, and in September were in the Poperinghe area, this time in tents. Here I became acquainted with "Toc H" (Talbot House) and the Rev. P B. Clayton (familiarly known as "Tubby Clayton" for some unknown reason.)

Toc H was a three storied Victorian residence in the middle of Poperinghe, which had been acquired and named in memory of Lieutenant Talbot who had been killed in the early stages of the war in that part. A dining and reception room had been adapted for the use of the troops and the upper story served as a chapel for use on suitable occasions.

On Michaelmas Sunday large shells from a long range gun were dropping all around us, but the chaplain continued with the service, and took no notice whatever. When I returned to the camp about two miles out of the town, I found that a single bomb had dropped on our camp about three hundred yards from our tent causing a hundred and twenty casualties.

Half a dozen of us visited this chapel on the couple of Sundays that we were in camp here, and Fr. Clayton presented a Crucifix to wear on or under our uniform before the next time we went into battle. One of our members protested vigorously against this "Symbol of idolatry" and was buried alive shortly afterwards by a shell on his underground shelter. However, by the prompt action of his mates, he was rescued from his predicament. His brother, who served with him, was gassed shortly after in a shelter on this front and lost his life. We moved on to "Essex Farm" where we stayed for a while, the Prince of Wales, afterwards King Edward VIII being seen about here also.

We moved on by stages to the vicinity of Poellcapelle and found ourselves spending a night at "Rose Farm" or near it. Our night shelter was a mass of railway sleepers. A line was apparently going to be laid down in that area, and the work was stopped by the outbreak of war. We propped ourselves against these sleepers, and fortunately it did not rain, except shells, but we had no sleep for the constant rain of shells, one of which carried away the corner of our bedroom, and the night long arrival of wounded from the second Duke of Wellington's regiment which happened to be in action on that same sector of the line, and which happened also to be my brother's regiment, kept us pretty busy.

Next day we left Rose Farm and moved to an "elephant" shelter facing Poellecapelle, "elephant" because its rounded shape suggested the body of that animal.

Here we found Sergeant Smalley D.C.M. with another small body of troops under his charge. Together we were too many for the shelter, so we split up into two small parties of ten, one destined to spend the night in the elephant hut, and the other in a ruined farm building close by. I myself was in the farm building . We tossed up for our position with a small coin. We had a peaceful night but in the morning to us in the old farm building came the news that our companions had had two gas shells in the cours of the night in their compartment. Going up half an hour later we found the shelter drilled by two small holes where the gas shells had entered. The sergeant, one of the bravest men I have met, had been killed outright, and also our favourite officer who used to share meals and jokes with us, besides our young protestant's brother. Later we heard that of the other seven, only one, an old soldier, had survived, giving substance to the legend that "old soldiers never die". The other seven of us all died within a week or so, their lives having depended apparently on the toss of a coin.

After this incident we had a short stay on the Essex Farm area seven miles behind the front line. Our champion three miler was killed here by a stray shell, and I spent a night or two with my dear friend, Frank Carless, and two companions. Carless was an outstanding Christian, and the only man I knew to kneel up and say his prayers in a tentful of men on the first night of his arrival in camp.

From Essex Farm we moved up to Poellecapelle. It was

the morning of October 25th, the anniversary of Agincourt and Balaklava and the feast of Crispin. The medical officer had tried to persuade me not to take part in the expedition because of a sore heel, a common complaint with me, but I was determined to go. We reached our destination, Rose Farm, about 9am. It didn't look very "rosy" just then, and we sat down to rest for a few minutes in the safest place we could find. Most of the "better 'oles" seemed to be pre- occupied by German prisoners of war, but being "perfect gentlemen" we made no attempt to dislodge them.

Most of us were glad to remain where we were, watching our field kitchen go up in the air, and the poor cook with it, waiting the command of the officer before we did anything more adventurous.

This didn't suit Carless; he must be up and doing. Carless by name and careless by nature. Whether in the field of Christian endeavour, or in the realm of earthly opportunity. "Come on, my lads" his voice rang out in the clear morning air. "Let's get a start" and he bundled his nearest wounded patient onto the stretcher and started him off on his first stage of his journey to "Blighty". Twenty yards down the duck-boards, as the temporary wooden pathway laid down by the engineers to guide and support our steps as we floundered through the mud of Flanders, was called, a flash and a crash, and back pelted three members of the stretcher party, one wounded, one shell-shocked, and one, a stoic and phlegmatic person looking as if the end of the world would not worry him; while the mortal remains of poor Carless lay beside the stretcher track, headless and motionless. The wounded patient, as was sometimes the case, had apparently made his way to some healthier, or, at least safer locality,

not so seriously wounded as was supposed.

About this time it began to appear as if our old plan of a little bit in the front line and a hand shake or two of a rather violent nature with our friend the enemy, and then a nice bus ride, or if we were less fortunate, a foot slog, further, further, further every day through lovely unwarspoilt country, to some beautiful quiet old country mansion or farmhouse where our ears rested from the din of battle, and our eyes from the sights of war and carnage for a while.

But Russia had slunk out of the war, and released seven hundred thousand German troops for us to attend to, and they would be over very soon for us to meet them, so we hung on to our dirty old "pill boxes" as we called our concrete shelters, daily and nightly expecting a visit from greatly increased German forces capable of making one.

In the early Spring of 1918 we moved southwards in the direction of Noyon and St. Quentin where our friends the enemy were awaiting us. They, however, were making no efforts to get to know us. "La Guerre" had quietened down altogether. But not so the spiritual "guerre". "Onward Christian Soldiers" was the motto of the Soldiers' Christian Association, and all its members came to the conclusion that the temporary cessation of earthly hostilities lent a good opportunity for those ~~of~~ of a more spiritual nature, so the chaplain was invited in, and we worked out a plan of campaign to convert the forces around us. Our friend the enemy, however, had other designs for us and on the night of the 20th to the 21st of March, he came out of his hiding, and gave us such a greeting as we had never had in our lives before. His thunderous welcome on the morning of

the 21st resounded in front of us from north to south, as all the guns in the German army seemed to be emptying their contents on our troops prepared to receive them.

A small party of us had just returned from depositing a young infantryman at the nearest aid post. We could not think what was the matter with him, "funk-itis" perhaps - "wind-up" but he seemed to have a notion that something was going to happen and he had better be well out of it.

After four or five hours the noise quietened down, the sun shone out brightly, but the whistle and click of bullets told us that our friend the enemy was near and we prepared to meet him at any moment.

"They've started" said my laconic no.4 stretcher bearer, and so they had,"But we'll just sit tight at the bottom of our damp hole in the ground and let him get on with the job." Two of us crept out of our seclusion and sat out on the top. "He won't shoot us I suppose" remarked my companion, "Not if we sit still here and speak nicely to him; he might drop a bomb on those below, just to see if they're there". The officer's orders however, were different. "Come on" he said, "We've got to get out of this". The great retreat had begun.

We made for a gap in the camouflage which had been erected to hide our movements, and the bullets, which had been sporadic to that moment seemed suddenly to concentrate on the gap at about knee height. This insured that , if wounded in the leg, one would, as one fell to the ground receive the coup de grace with one in the neighbourhood of the heart at that moment.

We spent the night where we could. The French civilians had evacuated the country, and left plenty of room for us. We picked up a Paris newspaper with the account of a big British

advance on the western front. It made encouraging reading, but....

Gradually edging further back in the direction of Amiens, Germans in planes, sometimes with French army markings, (rings with red outside etc.) suddenly appearing and shooting down on us, I was ~~glad~~ glad at length to arrive at Amiens. The long bright spring of 1918 had changed to winter again, and we found shelter in the basement of the Amiens polytechnic which we shared as day and sleeping quarters with the displaced inhabitamts of the adjacent countryside, regardless of age or sex. Where were we going next we wondered. But if the Russians had opted out, the Americans were beginning to make their presence felt, and we were beginning to realise that the shape of things to come was rapidly changing and the end was in sight.

It was somewhere about this time that I had a remarkable experience. Becoming rather bored of my company one day, I decided in the absense of anything very special to do for half and hour or so, to take a short walk and get a breath of fresh air spiritually and physically, after damp dug outs and foetid conversation, so I set out from my malodorous abode and emerged out into a pleasant avenue of trees, and was suddenly confronted with a young and handsome figure of humanity with a vastly bemedalled uniform. I was so taken by surprise by this imposing personage that I completely forgot the first military duty on such occasions - to salute! I had twice neglected this important duty before, once, when the setting sun so shone in my eyes that it made it impossible to distinguish the impressive rank of the exalted gentleman passing by me, and once when I made some minor miscalculation in the salutation art. On both these occasions I was ordered to report myself to the proper regimental authority for a reprimand, on one occasion receiving the adwice, "Salute

everybody; salute Jesus Christ, if you meet Him".

On the third occasion, being so taken by surprise as to forget my duty, the delinquency was quite unnoticed and I was left to pursue my walk unrebuked and unmolested, and on second thoughts I discovered the individual to be no less a personage than the Prince of Wales the future King Edward VIII of rather unhappy memory. I had great regard for him especially at that time when he stooped to associate with us, in billet and in trench.

Gradually once again we seemed to be finding ourselves in the position of attacker and not attacked, and by August 1918 it became quite evident that we were turning round and pushing in the opposite direction again.

By this time a feeling of monotony was beginning to creep over us and had been for a good long time, and a party of us, engaged in digging a hole by the roadside, exclaimed to a passing officer, "Sir, we came here to win the war, not to dig holes by the roadside!" To which he answered, "Every job that we are given to do is either helping to win or to lose the war, according to whether we do it well or badly, and a little job well done is better than a big job done badly."

We were attacking again now, and the enemy were still replying pretty fiercely. They seemed to be concentrating on a railway bridge north of Albert as I and my companion were passing it, myself in front and he behind. I noticed four men sitting in an embrasure at the side of the bridge as we passed close by them at about ten yards distance. Suddenly there was a noise like the popping of a cork and a cloud of dust between us, followed by groans. A shell had fallen, too close to be heard, as is the fashion with a very loud noise that deafens you.

Meanwhile my companion had disappeared, and I was left with four wounded men and a stretsher to carry them on, but no one at the other end. What was I to do? "Stay where you are"came the answer from Heaven! "Better be killed than have to remember all your life that you ran away".

There were many coming and going, but no one seemed the least interested in my plight, when suddenly I was aware of four friendly looking people resting on a broken- down fence about twenty yards in front of me, one of whom detached himself from the other three and coming up said, in very good English, spoken with a very slight Teutonic accent, "Can we help you, sir?" Their field grey uniforms denoted the land of their origin, but a friend in need is a friend indeed, and remembering the good Samaritan, I accepted the help of these "enemy aliens" with fervour, and soon found the willing help of four stalwart Prussians a very good substitute for one frightened member of the "allied" forces.

"Love your enemies" is a Christian command, a command certainly put into action on that day many years ago on a battle-field in France. I dread to think what the consequences might have been if that friendly help had not arrived from such an unexpected source at such an unexpected moment.

"You do love those Germans, don't you ?" A young officer said to me, as he saw me speaking to one of our Teutonic friends who had been captured in a recent attack. "Yes, I'm a Christian, if thats what you mean. The Leader of our party says 'Love your enemies'. I am a deacon in his Church." As a matter of fact, I was trying to persuade our German friend not to show any more of his indecent postcards to a group of Anglo-Saxon admirers clustered round him. They knew quite enough of that particular

subject without any more instruction from the Germanic point of view..

About this time I was asked to conduct a service and preach a short sermon for the benefit of some of my young well wishers. We were in tents and temporarily removed from hostilities and I took for my text psalm 23 verse 1. "The Lord is my Shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing". My congregation listened to my discourse in reverential silence and I gave my blessing, but as I stepped out of the tent I met another of my companions of a rather different school of thought, a fringer in fact, who greeted me, "Hullo, Browning, the Lord is my Shepherd; I don't care a ....." (add according to taste), and I thought "Yes, my friend that isn't exactly what I said, but the fact that you can put it into your own language, shews that you must have understood what I meant."

I often, as I listen to modern readings of scripture wonder what enlightenment, if any, this modern "jargon" (I hope I am not irreverent) brings to the man "out of the street" (if it ever does bring him out of it). His own dialect is unprintable.

At this stage of the proceedings one was suffering considerably from war weariness; in fact one had been so for some time.

This war- weariness feeling seemed to have come to a head in the village of Premont, a hamlet which we reached in the autumn of 1918, a few miles from the suburb of Le Cateau (pronounced"Lee Catoo" in Anglican and military circles); and there certainly seemed to have sprung a "leak or two" in our reservoir of endurance by now. "When is this war going to end?" I remember saying to myself (as I'd often said it) as we wearily lay down our equipment in Premont, and had an hour's rest, and

then the same thing over again, - a weary march up to the front line, and what there? Mud? Blood? Wounds? Death? What else is there for me? And then a voice "Up to the front line in an hour's time" and another voice "A service in the schoolroom over the road in five minutes". "Yes, its Sunday, so I'll go, perhaps theres' something for me there!"

I went. The usual "shortened evensong" drew to its close,"straws upon the tide of life etc", and a few other special army prayers, "Grant us grace to fight the good fight of faith and ever to prove victorious" and then the inevitable without which no army service ever seemed complete,

"Fight the good fight with all thy might
Christ is thy strength and Christ thy Right".

The service ended, we went up into action. I only remember three incidents of the following week..... (one) being sent with provisions (and a stretcher in case of necessity) to some comrades in another part of the town, the arrival of a "block buster" about twenty yards ahead of us, my companion at the front end of the strstcher looking round, exclaimed "If you're scared we'll go back" and dragging me and the stretcher behind him, made at full speed for home. " 'E was scared" was a good enough excuse for his conduct, and we had to go again at night when it was ten times worse. It is always easy to blame one's delinquencies on to someone else but it doesn't always pay.

My next incident was rescuing an old lady whom we found in a derelict home between the British and the German lines and conveying her in an old bath chair to a more comfortable and secure part of the field of operations; and the last, being commissioned with my old and loyal friend "Ted", the old Indian

army veteran and some others to take provisions up to the front line, I remarked en route that we had too many people carrying too few things, so Ted's burden I added to my own, requesting Ted to go back and have a rest. Whereupon Ted took both mine and his and proceeded on his way to the front line and it was I who was obliged to return for recuperative purposes. As I turned a shell wailed over my head and burst two hundred yards ahead of me. "Goodbye Gerry, if that's your parting shot. We shall meet again perhaps, some day".

The next few days passed quietly. Sunday, November 10th, my birthday (and Martin Luther's) came and went, uneventful except for the incursion of four regimental stretcher bearers, depositing their burden with us, and remarking, "They say the war's nearly over; they wouldn't think so, if they'd been where we've been" and then began to describe their grim experiences of the last hour or so.

Monday morning November 11th dawned, the feast day of one of the earliest Christian conscientious objectors, St Martin of Tours. I arose from my sleeping quarters at Le Cateau and proceeded to find my way to the "Ecole" in the middle of the city, half a mile away.

When about half way there, I came across the local Y.M.C.A.. hut standing in the middle of the town. Outside of it stood the usual notice board, to which an unusual stream of scrutinizers kept comomg and going. I joined the queue and went up to the board, in silence like the rest and read the stupendous words, "An armistice will be signed and fighting on the western front will cease today, November 11th 1918 at 11am" Not a word was spoken, everyone went their several ways and I continued mine up to the ecole in the centre of the town.

Here in an upper room I found gathered together a general, a hospital matron, and officer's servant, an army chaplain who, with myself, composed the usual type of congregation one had been led to expect at the Lord's own service, though this time it was not on the Lord's Day - that was past - but not inappropriately - on the Monday following, which turned out, on this occasion, to be Armistice Day, and we laid down the arms of earthly warfare and kneeling before the temporarily erected altar opened our mouths at length with words of heartfelt thanksgiving and praise, "Glory be to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men".

Punctually at 11am the "all clear" sounded on the bugle. My "number four" (stretcher squad leader) laconically remarked "There it is" and we "fell in" for our trip back to billets and Premont, an odd aeroplane circling over us to wish us God speed and "bon voyage" on the first stage of our journey home.

In the early stages of our post war sojourn we were received with acclamation "Bon Santé aux Anglais qui nos ont delivres" was the toast at party meetings but this spirit did not always last. "The British soldiers are worse than the Germans" was another sentiment delivered at me in particular and my country in general after I had unwittingly performed some act of vandalism, for which I was, as I afterwards realized, quite justifiably rebuked. About this time, one day when I was on hands and knees scrubbing the orderly room floor, a message came to me that "three educational sergeants" were required and I was to be one of them.

I downed tools and reported at the "orderly room"

to receive further instructions. My instructions were that I was to give a French lesson to battalion troops that were billeted in the neighbourhood, every morning except Saturdays and Sundays at 10am. This I did fairly successfully, till, one day I was told that I was not doing enough so, having a French history book which I had "scrounged" from a derelict French schoolroom in the neighbourhood, I decided to take an hour of French history with my pupils in addition to my hour of "French conversation and grammar". This worked well till an officer tirned up to the class who knew more French history than I did.

About this time I was attached to our M.O.. a graduate Of Edinborough University who spoke very good Scotch, but had not much French to offer. With him I came in contact with many elderly people and children who seemed to me to suffer most from the effects of the war.

Emilienne, a beautiful little twelve year old was one such. Her father, M. Lemaire was a small holder in the village of Clary which had been occupied successively by British and German troops and the populations had suffered accordingly, spending much of their time in cellars as the planes circled overhead. It seemed at one time that Emilienne might recover her former health and beauty, but she wasted away with internal disorders and people began to despair, till one day I decided to take a walk down the village street, the Rue d'en Haut, the anniversary of my confirmation fourteen years ago. I stepped into a house for "une tasse de cafe" to avoid a solitary shower, and a search party with my letters of demobilisation missed me at that moment. I hung about in the neighbourhood of the orderly room for most of the afternoon, but the chance had been lost and

and someone had gone in my place. I decided to go and see my little patient.

But who is this? An angel from heaven? Mary Magdalen returning from the empty tomb? Has she recovered? "Ce n'est pas la mort, c'est un triomphe!" "Not death but victory" And I heard the story of the weeping friends gathered round. "What's the matter with you all? I'm not dead yet. There's Jesus in the room, stretching out his arm, ready to take me with Him into Paradise. No, not there, there by the door ready open for me to go through with Him. Today I shall be with Him in Paradise"

"Fetch all my friends. Fetch my little brother. Fetch any atheist you can find. I'll convince them. Fetch one and all" And Emilienne lay back her head on the pillow and was gone.

That day she was with Him in Paradise.