

## NIGHT DUTY IN THE RECEIVING WARD.

### "SOMEWHERE IN BELGIUM."

A corrugated iron building, wooden lined, English made, sent out in sections and set up by the sandy roadside somewhat separated from the rest of the hospital. Thirty little iron bedsteads, spread with mackintoshes and blankets, four occupied by sleeping orderlies while two British Sisters sit and wait and watch in the tiny room adjoining the ward. An ambulance snorts up to the door in the dark and the chauffeur puts his head in and calls "*blessés*," and we all start to life, fervently hoping that what he has brought are not French. Not that we do not love our brave Gallic Allies, but the only men in the *bleu horizon* uniform who come to us are those so *gravement blessés* that the authorities dare not take them further—thoracic or abdominal wounds mostly, or very bad hæmorrhage cases, and immediate amputations; those French wounded who are at all "transportable" being taken to a French hospital further behind the lines, and for us the words "*blessés Français*" usually herald stretchers bearing pallid, panting figures, blood-soaked uniforms to be cut off, the men prepared for immediate operation in the emergency theatre, or no operation possible, but in any case a grim fight with death all the night through, hourly hypodermic injections, application of artificial heat, all that can be done, and then too often in the grey dawn another gallant life gasping itself away, and another white-sheeted corpse to be carried to the morgue. One such, described on his *fiche d'entrée* as a *brancardier* or stretcher-bearer, but by profession a priest, will long remain in the mind's eye of the Sister who closed his eyes and crossed his hands, as a vision of "rest after toil, port after stormy seas," looking so like the figure of the dead Christ in many a mediæval Italian picture. The love of Frenchmen for their mothers is proverbial and many of them beg to have letters written with messages of farewell. There was one who requested that his father might be informed that he died the death of a hero, and was positively annoyed when told "*nous ne sommes pas encore à ce point là*." This man, who belonged to the regiment familiarly known as the "*Joyeurs*," to which most of the *mauvais sujets* are sent, is still alive and giving a great deal of trouble in another ward. Another asked that a brother might be told of his condition, "*et surtout dites lui la vérité*." Two days after his death his brother, a *gendarme*, came to return thanks for the letter. Besides the real Frenchmen we have also sometimes their colonial confrères, *Diry Said*, *Sidi Abbas*, *Mahommed Djilah*, and others, pathetic, brown, childlike creatures, who suffer and die with a patient resignation that puts many of us to shame.

The majority of our patients, of course, are Belgians, sturdy Flemish peasants whose pre-war trade is usually entered as "*Cultivateur*," some-

times Wallons from the towns and industrial districts. They have charmingly romantic Christian names—Cyrille, Ovide, Ulysse, Achille, René, and suchlike occur much more frequently than the prosaic Jean or Henri. The orderlies, of course, have names of the same type, and one, whose slowness is sometimes exasperating, answers reluctantly to the appropriate soubriquet of *Désiré*! The wounds are terrible, and the taking off of the emergency bandages sometimes put on by comrades on the field, is enough to try the strongest nerves—a poor shattered and mutilated arm or leg is then revealed, and the doctor on guard, who has been hastily summoned, decides that it cannot be dressed in the ward, and orders the removal of the man to the emergency theatre, whence he returns half an hour later to his bed, minus the limb, and has to be watched all night for hæmorrhage. Worse still are the head and face wounds (*crânes sautés*), terribly common on the sectors where bomb throwing prevails. If many patients come all at once and have, as is often the case, multiple wounds, and there are limbs to be set, bullets to be extracted, gashes to be sewn up, the two Sisters have their hands full for an hour or two, waiting on the surgeons with the big dressing trolley with its rows of bottles and serums, drums of sterilised dressings, and other things. Both those patients who have and those who have not had anaesthetics, demand constant attention, and cries resound of "*à boire, à boire!*" perhaps from a laparotomy case, who must not, on peril of his life, be given water, or from a case of trepanning, who cannot swallow water if given to him. One patient who for a previous wound has been nursed in England, and fancies himself a linguist, cries, "Mees, Mees, come to me, take me up. I lie so low I cannot respire."

Either before or after their first dressing all these poor fellows must be washed all over. They often have not had a bath for months, and their nails resemble those of *Nebuchadnezzar*, while those who have been wounded in the neighbourhood of the canals are frequently covered with green slime mixed with the mud and blood. Sometimes the first-comers in an evening will warn us that a hot attack is in progress in their sector and we therefore know to expect further *entrants* all that night, with barely time between each batch to get through the dressing and cleaning, sometimes they come in singly, casualties from isolated bombs or shells, or else from accidents in their own lines, one of the saddest ways to lose a life or limb. And so the night wears on and daylight comes. Those who may or care to eat are served with coffee and bread and butter, everything is made as spick and span as possible, ready for the visit of the day doctor who will decide to which ward or pavilion each patient is to be sent; and then, taking leave with regret of those they have tended for so many hours, and may in press of work never see again, two very weary Sisters give place in their turn to the day staff, and go away to sleep a little if possible in the noise of a busy day's work going on around them.

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