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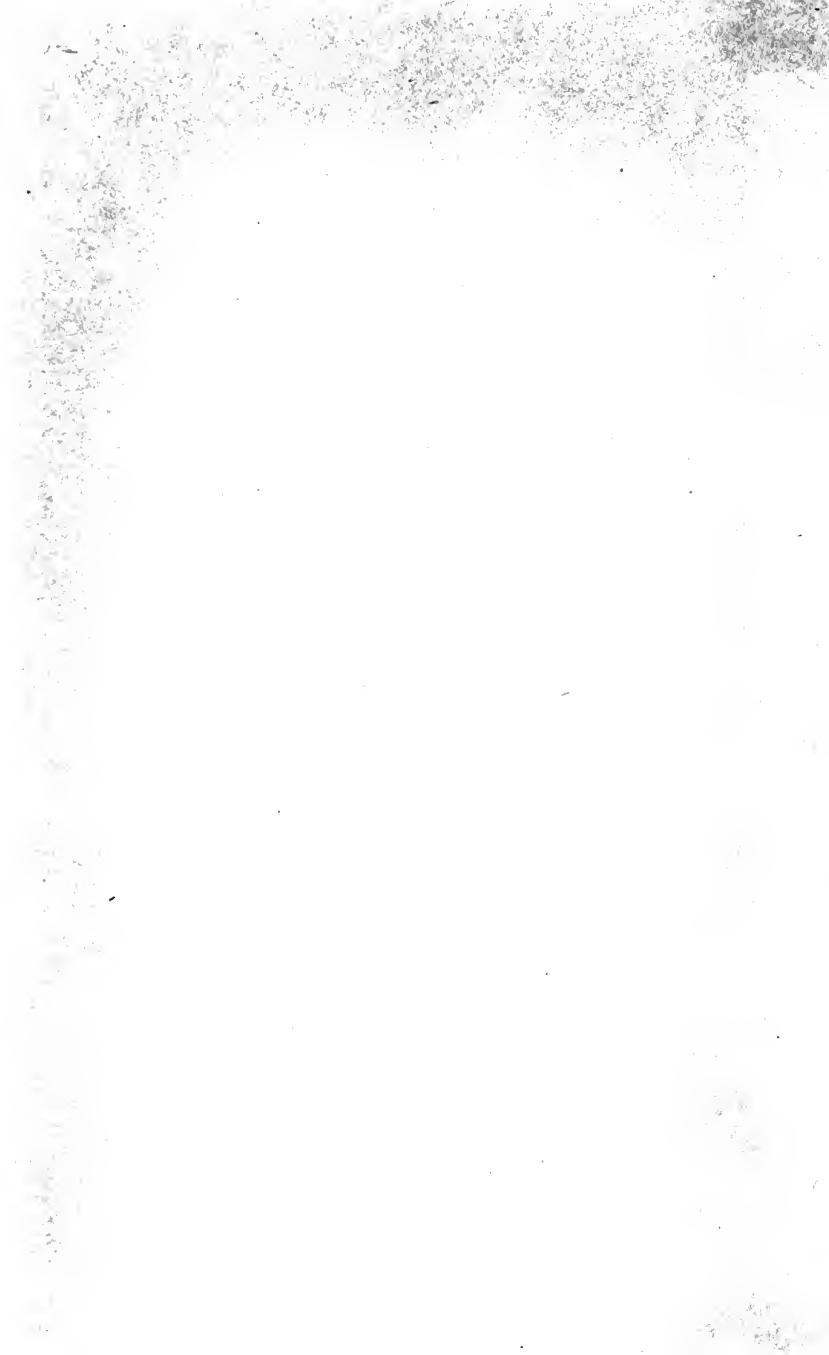
IN THE
FIRING LINE

RÉNÉ GAËLL



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PRIESTS IN THE FIRING LINE

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WOUNDED WARRIORS DECORATED AT THE INVALIDES.

PRIESTS IN THE FIRING LINE

BY
RÉNÉ GAËLL

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WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS

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Photo: Topical.

CELEBRATION OF THE MASS IN EXCAVATION MADE BY EXPLOSION OF A MINE UNDER GERMAN TRENCH AND CAPTURED BY THE FRENCH.

PRIESTS IN THE FIRING LINE

CHAPTER I

THE CALL TO DUTY

"It's no joke, this time," said my old friend the General.

These words were uttered on the evening of the International Congress at Lourdes.

Hearts and voices were raised in prayer.

I, too, was filled with the thought of a peace which seemed as though it could have no end.

But the General was filled with quite other thoughts. "No," he said, with that fine strength which is capable of facing the saddest emergencies and of stilling the fever which the thought of the dreaded future sends rushing to the brain. "No, it's no joke this time. . . . War is upon us."

And he began to explain the international complications, the appalling pride of Germany faced by two alternatives, to expand or to perish.

He showed me the uselessness of diplomacy—

the treachery of international peace-parties—the rush of events towards the inevitable yet outrageous catastrophe.

In a week or perhaps less, millions of men would receive marching orders, and Europe would be bathed in blood.

Five days later, I left a deserted Lourdes. I read on the cover of my military certificate my destination for the first time . . . my destination . . . my orders to rejoin my unit . . . and that simple piece of paper suddenly spoke to me with formidable eloquence.

I was a soldier, and this time it was “no joke.” I was going to fight. The citizen in me shuddered, as every one shuddered in those first terrible hours whose emotion still prolongs itself and is not likely to end soon.

But the priest in me felt bigger, more human. To every one who asked if I were going too, I replied, “Yes, but not to kill—to heal, to succour, to absolve.”

I felt those tear-filled eyes gaze wistfully at me, and that in passing, I left behind me a feeling of trust, of comfort.

A mother, whose five sons were going to the front, and who was seated near me in the train, said in a strong voice, but with the tears streaming down her cheeks: “They have scattered priests

in all the regiments. You will be everywhere. . . . It is God's revenge ! ”

How much anguish has been soothed, how many sacrifices have been accepted more bravely, at the thought, “ they will be there.”

It was at the headquarters of a certain division of the Medical Service, during the first days of mobilisation.

There, as everywhere, feverish preparation was going on—a tumultuous activity. Through the big town, the first regiment passed on their way to the firing line.

How the fine fellows were acclaimed, how they were embraced !

There were a thousand of us already, and we were the first to be called up. Half of us were priests, and our clerical garb attracted a lot of sympathy. The love of our country and the love of God so long separated were now as one. It is no longer time to scoff or to be indifferent to religion. People now wrung us by the hand, and came close up to us.

An officer came up to us and before that enormous assembly of men, said : “ Gentlemen, I should like to embrace each one of you in the name of every mother in France. . . . If only you knew how they count on you, those women, and how they bless you for what you are going to

be to their sons. *We* don't know the words that bring strength and healing, and we are ignorant of the prayers that solace the last agony . . . but you. . . ." And at the words, he wept, without attempting to hide his feelings. He already realised the immensity of the sacrifice, and the powerlessness of man to bring consolation to those struck down in their first manhood.

No, it was no longer "a joke" this time, and every one felt it and showed it by their respectful looks and manner.

The others, those millions of men on their way to the front, were starting for the unknown.

We, on the other hand, knew well what lay before us . . . we should have to succour the wounded and throw wide the Gates of Heaven for them to enter in—we should have to dress their wounds and arouse courage in those crushed, by the burden too heavy for mere flesh and blood to bear.

Never had we felt such apostles . . . never had our hearts dilated with such brotherly feeling.

"Attention!"

Instantly there was dead silence. In imagination we saw nothing but those far-off battlefields.

Our names were called, and we were allotted our several tasks. First the stretcher-bearers. There was a long list of these, and in two hours

they were to set out for the front, to pick up the wounded in the firing line.

From time to time the officer broke the monotony of the roll-call by trenchant remarks—such as one makes on those occasions when one has accepted one's share of sacrifice simply because it's one's duty to do so.

“ You will be just as exposed as those who are fighting. The enemy will fire on the ambulances ; and the Red Cross on your armlets and on the buildings will not protect you from German bullets.”

The list was growing longer. In their turn men of thirty and forty received the badges of their devotedness.

“ There are many of you who will never come back. Your courage will only be the finer. They may kill you, but you will not be able to kill. Your sole duty is to love suffering in spite of everything, no matter how mutilated the being may be who falls across your path, and who cries for pity.”

“ Even the Boches ? ”

The officer smiled, then said almost regretfully :
“ Even the Boches.”

Amongst us there was a hum of dissent.

“ I quite understand,” said the officer, “ but when you remember that your duty is that of

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heroism without thought of revenge—just pure heroism, that of apostles who are made of the stuff martyrs are made of. . . .”

He who had protested, and who happened to be standing next to me, was a dear old friend of mine, one of those valiant souls who fear nothing and nobody. He was a fine, soldierly priest.

He was among the number of those who were off to the front, and his face had lit up when he heard his name called.

“Thank Heaven! I was so afraid of being left behind.”

To be left behind was a kind of disgrace we felt . . . and we old territorials who were to be sent to the hospitals in the west, felt it badly.

The Abbé Duroy was already living it all in spirit. His eyes saw the near future and his heart beat with joy at the thought of his great work. He was going down to the terrible “là-bas,” to anguish unspeakable and to death, and in his person, I thought I saw all the priests of France going towards the frontiers, invested with the divine mission of opening the gates to eternal life to those who were quitting this poor mortal life.

When we had separated, in order to pack our traps, Duroy took me apart.

“You are jealous,” he said.

“Why not?”

“ I understand. After all this new life is part of our very being. Do you think though that it was necessary to be mobilised in order to do what we are doing ? For twenty years, always, we have been patriots . . . soldiers who blessed and upheld.”

There was a bugle call. It was the first signal for departure. He held out his hand . . . our eyes met and spoke the same great thought, the same great fear.

I was the weaker man, and the question which wrung my heart, escaped to my lips.

“ When shall we meet again ? ”

He, proud and stern at the thought of danger, repeated my words.

“ Shall we meet again ? ”

Then he broke the short silence. “ To die like that, and only thirty. . . . I’m afraid I don’t deserve such a grace.”

Then becoming the true soldier he always was, he struck me on the shoulder and said—

“ I’ve an idea, old friend. I’ll write to you from ‘ là-bas,’ as often as I can . . . and from the impressions you get, joined to mine, I’m sure you’ll be able to write some touching pages. I am your War Correspondent.”

He embraced me, and I felt that his promise was one of those which are kept.

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He at the front, I in a hospital, both with different risks to run, occupied with the same tasks . . . it was indeed a tempting offer.

And that is why I am writing this book. It will contain nothing but the truth, written amid suffering and blood.

I was made orderly in a hospital which could be reached neither by German shells nor by their Taubes.

Notwithstanding, I learned great though terrible lessons from sufferings endured for a sublime cause.

Sometimes, as I write, I find on my hands traces of the blood which has flowed from the wounds I have been dressing for hours at a time.

My white apron, now become my uniform, is red in places, and in this corner of the ward where our children sleep or groan, I feel at times the appalling horrors of war. I share the sufferings of the others.

A boy of nineteen, whose left arm had been shattered, said one evening, when I was endeavouring to bring peace and resignation to his heart :
“ All the same, its jolly nice to be taken care of by you, in our wretchedness.”

And when I tried to make him say precisely in what the “ jolly niceness ” consisted, he drew me

close to him like a winning child and whispered :
“ It’s because you love us.”

To love them. It is our task, our duty, our one passionate desire. Every one accords them human kindness, we lavish on them divine charity.

An old campaigner in Morocco, whose shattered fingers had been amputated, called out the other day in the ward : “ I don’t care if I am a bit damaged, so long as one has a priest to look after one, that’s all right.”

At the present moment, twenty thousand French priests are tending the wounded. More than ever God is watching over our homeland.

CHAPTER II

THE STORY OF THE WOUNDED MAN

It was night-time, and I could hear the hours striking, hours which would have been long if I had not had beside me moaning and groaning, suffering to be consoled. We had had to wait for them for a fortnight, but there they were now, filling the great dormitories of a school which had been turned into a military hospital, where we had joined our post in the war. They suffer in silence, or when in the throes of a hideous nightmare, they scream and groan with the torture their mutilated bodies wrings from them.

I went up to a bed over which the lamp shed a subdued light. There lay a young fellow of about twenty, awakened by the intensity of his suffering. I had seen him but a short time before on his stretcher, a poor broken thing, his eyes staring, with the horrors of his dreadful journey still pictured in them.

What appalling scenes had I read in them. All the horrors of war had become present to me.

Stretched out motionless on his stretcher, he looked like a corpse, whose eyes had not been properly closed, indifferent to all around him. Then, when we had lifted him, and with such care, he began to scream and cry out. A doctor should have dressed his wounds at the front, but they had not been done for four days. On being lifted up, his shattered leg, cramped and asleep, gave him excruciating pain, and his whole body writhed as though it had been on the rack.

I had noticed this young Marseillais, with his child's face among all the other wounded men, and I had been attracted by his youth and his sufferings.

I went up to his bed. I leant over him, and said with the instinctive gentleness which compassion inspires one with: "You are suffering, my child?"

Without answering, he withdrew his burning hand from mine, and put his arm round my neck.

"Father," he said, in a weak voice, "Father, am I going to die?"

What answer could I make? I didn't know; besides, even when one is sure, one can't say it out brutally like that.

Then the poor boy guessed I had misunderstood him, and his proud, brave soul wished to keep the glory of the soldier, who has braved danger without

flinching. Now he defied death and found strength to smile.

“ Oh ! I'm not a bit afraid, but I wanted to ask you. . . .”

He stopped and began to cry. He drew me still closer to him. He was no coward, this young trooper. One felt it instinctively. I knew that this lad who had lived through the bloody epopee, was not to be approached by maddening fear. His heart was stamped with virility. A month's campaign had made of him an old soldier, who had gone through tragic adventures.

“ No, I'm not afraid. I've seen so many die all around me, that I don't care a scrap whether I live or die. But. . . . It's my mother, I'm thinking of. If I die, she won't understand, and it will kill her too.”

Little by little the sighs and moans had ceased in the darkened ward. Only his solemn words broke the silence. Everything else faded away at the meeting of the two beings, at that supreme moment, more than mere men, the soldier and the priest, to whom France has confided the guarding of her frontiers and the treasure of her ideal.

Then, knowing how nature rebounds, and trusting to the hardy stock from which he sprang, I dared to assure him that he was not mortally wounded.

“No, my child, you won’t die, you are too young to die.” A sceptical smile stopped me.

“And what about those others ‘là-bas’?”

All the same, I don’t believe that we shall not be able to save the poor, mangled body. The head doctor, whose diagnosis is never wrong, said only a little while ago that he would save him.

“I tell you, you will recover.”

The poor fellow looked at me, and this time believed me. He raised himself a little, made the sign of the cross, and whispered—

“You must pray for me.”

He closed his eyes in prayer, and I could no longer see him, for the tears in my own. To comfort him, I placed my hand on his breast.

He winced. “Forgive me, father, I’ve had a bullet through there too.”

Not only had he a shattered leg, but a bullet had gone through his breast, and another had gone just above his heart.

His shirt was red with blood which had oozed through the dressings. Somehow it did not occur to me to think of his great suffering. He seemed more like a martyr broken on the wheel, with a halo round his head. This young boy,

who knew how to suffer so well, must have fought magnificently.

And I thought as I raised my hand to bless him :
“ How fine he is ! ”

Four medals hung round his neck, and he held them out for me to kiss them.

They tasted of blood, and I still have the strange taste on my lips of those medals which had lain over the wound, which bled above his heart.

“ That one, the biggest, was given me by a priest down there in the ambulance, which was an old farm once, and whose walls are riddled with shells. What a night it was ! and what an amount of blood there was about ! ”

My young Marseillais writhed, not with the pain from his wounds, but with the fearful remembrance of that night. The horror of that superhuman agony took possession of his mind. I wanted him to sleep, but words poured from his lips, in his fever. It was useless to try to stop him, so I let him tell me his sad tale.

“ We had been fighting all day long, and felt death stalking beside us all day too. It was like a frightful tempest, like hell let loose. Bullets fell round us like hail, and I saw my comrades fall at my side cut in half or blown into bits by shell fire. They uttered no cries, they were wiped out instantaneously. But the others . . . those who

were still alive. . . . I can tell you it was enough to make your blood run cold. It was enough to make one go raving mad."

He stopped to drink a little. I thought he was exhausted with the effort of recalling the awful scene.

"Try to rest now, my child. You shall tell me the rest to-morrow."

But he would not listen to me. Up to now, it was the man who had been speaking, now suddenly the soldier awoke, the lover of his country, the French trooper fascinated by the glory of it all.

"It was so sad, yet so fine. War may kill you, but it makes you drunk; in spite of everything one had to laugh. I don't know what makes one laugh at such times. . . . Something great and splendid passes before one's eyes. . . . There is danger, but there is excitement, and it's that which attracts us. . . . The captain was standing, we were lying down. From time to time he would say: 'It's all right, boys. . . . We're making a fine mess of the Huns! Can you hear the 75's singing?'

"So well were they singing that, over there, helmets were falling like nuts which one shells when they're ripe. Their voices shook the ground, and each of their cries went to our hearts and made

them beat the higher. Then we sprang up to rush forward, and then we flung ourselves down again flat, as above us the bullets whistled in their thousands."

He squeezed my hand tighter then, as if to drive home the truth of his story.

"You see, it was fine in spite of everything. Even when a bullet laid you low. . . . It happened to me about six o'clock, just as the captain fell, shouting 'Forward, men, and at them with the bayonets!' We went forward to the attack. In front of us we saw nothing but the flames from the cannons . . . our ears were deafened with the cry of the shells. I took ten steps. We were walking in flames. It was red everywhere, as far as one could see. Suddenly a thunderbolt burst in the middle of us. . . . I fell near a comrade, brought down at the same time as I was.

"It was the chaplain of the division, a reservist, aged twenty-eight, who called out to me, laughing: 'You've got it in the leg, old man, I've got it in my shoulder!'

"He was drenched with blood, and still he went on joking. Then, suddenly, he became serious, and he began speaking like a priest speaks to the dying.

" 'Now, my children, make an act of contrition.

Repeat after me with your whole heart, 'My God, I am sorry for my sins ; forgive me !'

" I can see him now, half raised on his elbow ; his unwounded hand was raised, while the poor fellow blessed us all, as we prayed God to have mercy on those who would never rise again.

" I saw him again in the field hospital, half an hour later. He was breathing with difficulty, but he kept on smiling. It was then that he gave me his medal.

" He died, with his rosary in his hands, and I looked at him for a long time when he had breathed his last. His face was like an angel's, and the blood went on flowing. . . .

" I remember that the doctor stopped at this moment, and bent over him. Then standing upright he called the other orderlies round and pointed to the dead man :

" ' There's a man who knew how to die finely. The poor devils who die before us so often, are sometimes sorry for themselves. This poor fellow has had no thought but for others for the last two hours. Look at him, he is still smiling.' "

The wounded boy stopped, his heart was torn at the thought of his friend. He too forgot his suffering in thinking of the priest whose absolution had strengthened and consoled him in his torture. I gave him something to drink ; he

kissed his medals, especially the big one, his precious legacy, and went off to sleep without dreaming that he had told me a sublime story.

There were twenty-four like him in the ward, and seeing them stretched out there overcome by pain, I told myself that the humblest among them, the most illiterate peasant even, had his share of glory, and that they were all transfigured by the halo round their heads.

Somehow, that first evening in the wards, I felt that I too had my share of courage and of usefulness.

Down there, in the firing line, they had found wherewith to feed their pride; here, the young heroes would be able to unburden their souls. At the front they had seen the living France. In this hospital, perhaps, they would come face to face with God, forgotten, misunderstood, abandoned—God who is so good to those who fall in battle.

A letter from Duroy, come from the thick of it all, convinced me that God had wished His priests to be side by side with His soldiers.

My dear old friend, Duroy, described to me his baptism of fire.

CHAPTER III

A SOLDIER'S DEATHBED

ON this letter from the priest, who had seen the gigantic battle, there was mud and blood. I don't know what mud nor whose blood stained it, but it seemed to me that an entire and sorrowful poem could be read in these dark stains. They bore the marks of the defended ground, the proofs of the frightful sacrifice by whose price hardly-won victory is bought.

“ This time, my dear friend, I am at the post of honour and of danger. It is admirable and terrible. One may die there, and that enchants one. Classed as non-combatants, we are sent into the thick of shell-fire, destined to pick up the victims, we are officially fired on by the Prussians.

“ Everything that is fine, human and generous attracts the fury of these wild beasts who have been let loose. They shoot every one, they destroy the ambulances, and pour grape shot on the Red Cross.

“ So that it is to danger as well as to devotedness

that we are invited, and it is to me an unspeakable joy.

“ I'd like to make you understand the extent of this joy, the thrilling pride I felt last evening when my unit were setting out to pick up the wounded, in the firing line, hardly a hundred yards behind our infantry who were attacking.

“ The major gave us his recommendations and the last orders. He was struck at seeing so many budding moustaches, and beards.

“ ‘ Heavens ! I only see priests to the fore ! ’

“ ‘ Priests to the fore ! ’ That is indeed our motto. Our comrades say we are rash. All the same, they are as rash as we are. *They* go to the bloody business laughing, *we* go praying. There is danger for all of us, but the joy of devoting oneself, makes one defy it.

“ Still, without boasting, I own that one has to have pluck and self-control to go, carrying a stretcher, into that hell.

“ Often you hear the wounded say that a soldier feels daring and sure of himself as long as he has his gun under his arm ; once that's gone he loses his balance and his fine courage wavers.

“ So that, to us priests who never have a gun, and who are flesh and blood like them, you can judge how sometimes our flesh creeps. But we go ahead just the same . . . we go ahead because

its the finest thing to do. Besides, 'là-bas' the poor fellows await us, moaning, crying or in their last agony. . . .

"They wait for the stretcher-bearer; they hope for a priest. To what magnificent repentances have I given absolution! It seems as though one saw them go straight to heaven, so sure is one that God accepts sacrifice and rewards it. . . ."

My friend Duroy, like a truly brave man, has every kind of courage, great and small, that which one must have to brave death, and that other, which I admire, to write to his friends, between two expeditions to the battlefield.

That first letter gave me his general impressions, like a picture of the whole of the greatness of the task to which priests are vowed in this tragic time.

Others have reached me, scrawled in haste with a blunt pencil. Half sheets, torn, dirty, stained, brought me an echo of the great epopee in telegraphese from which I have gathered together words which I should like to have engraved on a golden casket.

"It is evening, night has fallen. Step by step, the moving wall, the living frontier of breasts, has gained ground on the pushed-back invader. Every yard of conquered ground has cost masses of human lives. It is another red-letter day

written in the pages of history with floods of blood.

“The battle is still going on, and terrible aerolites, which explode with the noise of thunder, pass overhead.

“On all sides are corpses and soldiers lying down. Some drag themselves along, and crawl on their knees, on their elbows, to seek some sort of hiding-place. Others lie there and turn and twist themselves about in useless, desperate endeavour. Sometimes voices wrung with pain are abruptly silenced in the middle of a terrible, half-finished shriek. It is a bullet or a piece of shrapnel which, with that cruel irony of unconscious things, puts an end to an already maimed existence.

“In front, the fight goes on, without pity, relentless, furious,—the day’s conflict which goes on beneath the stars.” From the midst of the frightful noise which maddens the brain, and makes the strongest hearts tremble, Duroy writes that one must have heard it in order to compass its full horror. “By the side of it, the noise of thunder is but the faint beating of the drums.

“On the tracks of death, which has moved further away, comes charity, pity which consoles, devotion which restores. Here come the stretcher-

bearers, who range over the field of battle and gather up those who still breathe.

"Here and there, lights gleam in the darkness, and each one brings hope. From the depths of the darkness, eyes follow them suppliantly, and voices call to them.

"It is help that comes, humanity that passes, charity that bends down over motionless suffering.

"Now that the tempest is muffled, the voices on the battlefield are clearer and more despairing.

"It is a sad concert of cries for help. Here, come here! . . . carry me. My legs are broken . . . my chest is riddled. I'm bleeding to death!" "The harvest of death hastens on. Often, beneath the glimmer of a lantern, a hand is raised above a drooping head. A gentle murmur is heard above the far-off moan of the cannons, and of the nearer cries of the suffering.

It is a priest who cures the soul before picking up the body. The Abbé Duroy is filled with the desire of saving souls. He has no other thought at such a time. With one of his fellow-priests, he has already picked up a number of wounded, and they have returned, with an empty litter, to load it up again with a new and sorrowful burden, when a cry which predominates over the others, stops them, while they listen to hear from whence it comes.

It is further on, on a slope, near a hedge. Quite near them, they hear another cry from a ditch by the roadside.

“ Take me away.”

They put down the stretcher.

“ You pick up this one,” said the other priest ;
“ I’ll go and see to the other.”

Duroy looks for the wounded man in the ditch. Poor wretch ! his shoulder has been shattered, and his arm is nearly severed.

“ Shall I give you absolution, my poor child ?
I’m a priest.”

The poor fellow, exhausted, replies, “ Yes,”
with a sign of his head.

“ Don’t tire yourself ; I will recite the act of
contrition for you.”

Another soul reconciled ; another who will die, and shortly, for he swoons, and his face, utterly bloodless, becomes that of a corpse. Suddenly the priest, who is trying to lift up the dying soldier, starts, and stands up. Two shots have been fired quite near, over by the mound where his comrade has gone to help the poor wretch who was calling so loudly for help.

“ Help ! ”

It is the voice of his companion, and the voice is that of one who suffers, who has been struck down.



Photo : Topical.

“THE LAST POST.”

Handwritten text, possibly a list or notes, consisting of several lines of small, illegible characters.

Duroy rushes towards the hedge. A vague, but poignant fear oppresses his heart when he arrives. No one is standing, but by the light of the overturned lantern, he sees his friend, stretched on his back, his arms behind him.

In front of him is a wounded German brandishing a still smoking revolver.

The priest had fallen on his mission of charity, killed by this broken-legged brute, whose savage hatred still burnt brightly. The German officer had fired his revolver at a peaceful Red Cross soldier.

“Then,” Duroy wrote, “a wild rage took possession of me at this abominable murder, and I too understood at that moment the horrible nightmare of seeing red. I wanted to save my friend, struck down in so cowardly a way by the German assassin. It was useless; two bullets through the heart had struck him down, and the terrible cry I had heard was almost a voice from beyond the grave.

“Then, seeing that that life had escaped me, an irresistible feeling of vengeance shook me to the soul. This thought forced itself into my mind, ‘the man is a robber, and mine is a legitimate case of defence.’ I picked up a gun at the end of which was, sharp and fatal, a bayonet, and I sprang towards the decorated ruffian.

“The coward began to yell, but with fright this time, putting his hands above his head as their soldiers do when they give themselves up to our troopers. And it was pitiful, and unheard-of, I assure you, to see the terror of the ignoble brute, threatened with death.

“I stopped myself in front of him, and another strength than mine unlocked the grip of my hands, and the gun fell to the ground. The priest in me overcame the man, and the voice of my priesthood protested violently in my heart. ‘You are not here to fight, and you have no right to kill even the man who has massacred your brother. Your sole duty here is to do good. One cannot put an end to the wounded, even criminals. Leave to others the war which is their task. Yours is to pick up and to succour the wounded without knowing whether he deserves your forbearance or anger.’ I did right, did I not? Several stretcher-bearers, attracted by the shots, came running up. They too guessed what had happened, and three of them threw themselves on to the Prussian, who began to moan from the pain of the wound which his effort had reopened.”

But Duroy stood in front of him, and defended with all his strength the murderer of his friend.

“No, you shall not do that; you have no right to.”

And the others recognised that the priest was right.

His conscience imposed the rule of humanity. The sanctity of his priesthood overcame their doubts and appeased their desire for vengeance. They felt that the voice of charity proclaimed the true moral law.

“It is not our business to administer justice.”

The doctor who was at the head of their detachment came up to them. He looked with disgust on the assassin. However, he bent over him, verified the horrible wounds which had broken his bones, then addressing the two men, he said—

“Take him away.”

Duroy, helped by several of his comrades, put the body of his friend on to a litter, and went off across the field of death, reciting the “*De Profundis*.”

All night long, these valiant fellows went over hill and dale, for fear of missing even one wounded man.

But, each time he went back to the ambulance, my friend made a pious visit to his fellow-priest, in order to draw from the sight of the great sacrifice a renewal of courage for the terrible work.

Then, in the morning, when these good workers,

tired out, stretched themselves out on the straw to snatch a little necessary sleep, Duroy went off to dig a grave in a little orchard which the battle had left untouched, and which was green and flower-decked. There, surrounded by a few stretcher-bearers, he recited the prayers which escort the dead on their last journey.

A few words from his account told me of the last act of the tragedy. But through those brief phrases, put down in haste on bad paper, I saw the drama and I understood the tragic grandeur of it.

I was moved to tears when I read this last page of the letter—

“ It was a Sunday. We put up the altar over the grave, in this quiet garden. Several wounded men had dragged themselves there in order to pray and meditate. I said Mass for the dead and the living . . . for the present and the future . . . so that the war may be a glorious one, and for peace in the near future. I had a sorrowful heart, but it was full of hope. The Blood of God was mixed with the blood of the priest-martyr. Nothing was wanting to the sacrifice: neither the willing victim, nor the pardon which his soul had desired and which my lips had pronounced.

“ In the distance, with the daylight, the

formidable voice of the guns grew louder and yet more loud. But one would have said that in the troubled air from whence rained death, hovered the picture of Christian priesthood and the grace of victory besought for by the priests of France."

CHAPTER IV

THE PRIESTS ARE THERE

THERE was, with *us* priests of forty and over, kept in hospitals a long way from the front, a painful feeling which made us pass through hours of vexation, almost of humiliation.

“The others are ‘là-bas,’ and risk their lives. At the front, they will be in peril, and will pass through dangerous hours which call for devotion and prepare for sacrifice.”

In these times of virile courage, when the first dream of everyone is to give oneself madly, to remain far from the fighting line seemed a loss of one’s manhood. To remain behind seemed to us almost synonymous with hiding ourselves away.

The first train of wounded gave us back assurance and self-respect. Before these bruised beings, these youths cut down in their prime, we understood the other form of valour, and the sight of so many hideous wounds gave us the assurance that we too should have our share in the work of war.

One man convinced us of this, and his fine, apostolic ardour filled us with the certainty that kindness to those suffering horribly equals and sometimes surpasses heroism.

One of the admirable characteristics of this campaign was the co-operation of the two great consolers of humanity: the priest and the doctor.

Our head doctor had left, voluntarily, an immense practice where he was the saviour of despaired-of cases.

He was imbued with vigorous strength aided by immense talent, and whose professional boldness bore the mark of unruffled knowledge always on its guard against dangerous impulses.

He believed in his priesthood and all his efforts were directed to the more perfect fulfilment of it. His soul was united to ours, and he knew that we understood the generosity of it, and delicate sentiments which can appreciate fine feelings to their full. A feeling of brotherliness had established itself between him and us. He knew that he could ask anything of us, for he knew our desires, and never doubted of our good will always ready for work, night and day.

He wanted priests to serve him, and it was a security for him. He had the assurance that we should finish his task. Our care would continue the work of his medical intervention. He called

us " my infirmarians " with a solicitude in which was a streak of pride. In the operating theatre, which had been a school, now transformed, he wished the Crucifix to remain. And when grumblers remarked that neutrals might object to it, he said—he who is not a practising Catholic—

" I don't know what you mean."

And the Crucifix remained. The symbol of divine suffering, it looks down on human suffering. More than one wounded man whom we have laid on that table of suffering sent forth a cry of faith to it as the chloroform began to work in his brain.

What an amount of blood we have seen shed, and which was in the main, that of the great sacrifice of " là-bas " continued beneath our eyes.

Those diminished members, those hewn flanks, those cut-off fingers, how they conjured up the bloody vision of the shambles, and gave us the illusion of being witnesses of the massacres, necessary for the living triumph of our country.

Men of peace, we had our share in the tragic horrors, but Christian thoughts and the comfort they bring with them, softened the cruel emotions which they awoke in our breasts.

Those men, whose life might ebb away in a rebound of the compromised organism, were in our hands. And whatever one might do, the priest at certain times, completes the infirmarian,

and through the human task the divine offices assert themselves.

The little Marseillais of whom I have spoken was gloomy for a few days. His big wound had been more painful, and he had had a relapse, which had exasperated him.

The poor lad no longer had that gaiety of the first days, and which with all French soldiers asserts itself more than ever as the pain grows worse. It is a way we have of defying suffering, one of the admirable forms of the fine streaks which every man has in him and which he shows in hours of uneasiness, of peril and of trial.

It lasts sometimes! but a young man, wounded as our young friend was, cannot see for long, without dismay, his shattered leg, and in consequence his life in danger.

He laughed at his pain, and humbugged us, showing his courage. And we admired him, thinking: "What wonderful resources our fine race has, if a being cut down in his splendid youth can accept thus, the sacrifice after having defied death in so downright a manner."

The lad was sad. He watched the doctor's hands while they examined the wound and found fresh tender places. He tried to read the thoughts and opinion of the doctor in his eyes . . . perhaps, who could tell, his doom.

The head doctor knew the danger of letting the patient know too much about himself—the madness of despair. He was, to a certain extent, unmoved by the dangers of the complications, which he discovered. But he, too, was a Father, and having suffered in his affections, allowed his tender pity to be seen.

He frowned slightly, almost imperceptibly, but it was enough to make the poor boy uneasy, for he had hoped in vain for a reassuring word. Then, his fear and extreme anguish was revealed in the following words—

“ It’s very bad, Doctor. I’m done for this time, eh ? ”

The Major began to laugh. “ Hold your tongue, you little fool. At your age, is one ever done for ? It’s quite certain that you won’t be able to walk in two days, but we’ll put you straight, my lad, never fear.”

And as the wounded boy remained pensive, he insisted, and pretended to be quite certain.

“ Such a sore ! You’ll see how jolly you’ll be when I’ve performed a small operation on you.”

“ Oh,” wailed the poor fellow, “ you’re going to operate on me ? ”

“ I shall jolly well have to, if I’m to send you back whole to your mother.”

“ When will you do it, Major ? ”

“ Presently, my young friend. It’ll be over in five minutes.”

He patted him on the cheek. “ Hurry up and laugh ! ”

And he awoke in the boy’s soul the courage he knew to be there.

“ You’re not afraid, by any chance ? ”

The youth sat up. “ I ? Good Lord, no. Who told you I was afraid ? ”

The musketeer revealed himself in the young trooper, who for more than a month had behaved heroically under fire.

As we followed in the doctor’s wake, we heard our young Marseillais still protesting and saying to his comrades—

“ Pah ! funky, Good Lord, I don’t know what funk is ! ”

When it was no longer necessary for the doctor to hide his anxiety, he said in a low tone—

“ Poor chap, if only it isn’t too late.”

These words filled us with sorrow, we weren’t used to these tragic things. Our hearts were wrung, and we wanted to comfort our little friend with hopeful words, and to say to him—

“ Don’t be afraid, we are by your side, and our prayers will give you strength.”

But already a note of gaiety rang through our sadness.

In front of the operating theatre, a big chatter-box of a Zouave was gesticulating and amusing a jeering audience by his droll remarks.

“ Oh no ! I won't be put to sleep. I'd rather die first, than be laid out on the table, like a corpse.”

This fellow went by no other name but that of his wound. For two days he had been called “ Bullet in the back.” Besides, that's why he walked bent double.

The Major took him gently by the arm. “ Come along, my lad.”

But he drew back and tried to impose his conditions.

“ No chloroform, then, please, Doctor. You must do it just as I am . . .”

“ I shall do what is necessary, my friend. It's not your business.”

The Zouave, who didn't agree to that, made a gesture.

“ I beg your pardon, my skin's my own, and my carcass too, I suppose.”

The table stood there, draped in white, and looked like some nightmarish beast standing up on its thin hind legs.

When the Zouave saw it, he stopped on the threshold, and let fall a bad swear-word, which he covered up by adding hastily, in perfect taste—

“ Ah ! none of that for me, thanks.”

He was pulled and pushed about, like one condemned to death, and his despairing protests only met with shouts of laughter from the other room. Pity would have been misplaced, for the wound was not a dangerous one, and would leave no evil results.

“ Come, now, you great noodle,” said the Major, “ you don’t want to remain all your life like that, with German lead in your loins ? ”

That sufficed to encourage the good man, and he vented his spleen on the Boches then.

“ The . . . ! at any rate try to put me straight so that I can go back and give them a jolly good licking . . . ”

Then he undressed bravely, and as they were about to help him on to the table, he said—

“ Leave me alone ; hang it all, I’m still capable of hopping on to the perch.”

A few minutes later, he was reduced to silence and lay motionless. The bullet had gone in a long way, to the left of the spinal cord. The doctor’s hand, that clever surgeon’s hand, which seemed to be gifted with sight, felt about in the blood, and did not mistake the trail. The metal rang against the forceps, but refused to budge, like a hunted beast defends itself in its lair.

An adjutant whispered to us. “ If you want

to know if the bullet is coming out, look at the chief's face, not at his fingers."

In truth, so long as the projectile resisted, his face revealed the anxiety of his thoughts and the talent which fights every obstacle. There was silence round the table. Each one of us seemed to share in his preoccupation and to feel the resistance.

Suddenly his features relaxed their tension. His eyes spoke before his lips. He had got it. His forceps brought it out, red and twisted.

"There it is, the pig!"

As the Zouave heard the remark, in his semi-consciousness, he muttered between his pallid lips—

"Ah—ah—the dirty brute."

We carried him off to his bed, where doubtless the pain of the deep incision made him dream that he had got a whole shell in his back from a Boche cannon.

All the same, the German rubbish was no longer in his body. It lay on a table beside him, waiting the moment when it would hang as a charm from his girdle, when he returned to the front to settle his account with the Germans.

The same stretcher brought in the young Marseillais, whose turn it was now.

One of us went up to him. "Courage, little one, courage."

He'd got plenty of it. He'd got himself well in hand. The valiant soul of him had mastered the tortured body. He showed me the four medals hanging round his neck. They were covered with drops of sweat.

"Father, you will send them to my mother, if I don't come to again."

He smiled resignedly, as he looked at the operating table.

It is there that one feels profoundly the immense sacrifice of the mothers, whose anguish at knowing that their sons are in danger is doubled by the torture of uncertainty.

"How is he wounded? How to get at the truth? If, picked up alive on the battlefield, he should die, far away from me, without my having seen him again!"

The young fellow went off quickly, and the surgeon's business began. There were crushed bones which had to be removed one by one, an artery to be careful of, possible hæmorrhage which would be fatal. We anxiously followed the phases of the operation. Sometimes the body would give a jerk, there would be a suffocating sigh beneath the mask; then there would be a glimpse of the livid face down which the sweat trickled.

The removal of the crushed bones made us shudder. We guessed what pain this new, but

necessary, wound would give, when he came to. Tears of emotion rose to our eyes.

The doctor went on unmoved, with his work. Sometimes he made a short remark, which revealed his well-controlled impatience, and above all his regret at having to cut away living flesh and the crushed thigh-bone.

We looked in vain for a sign of hope on his face. Does one ever know if there is hope for those wounded who have been left for days and days without the most indispensable attention?

The doctor who was giving the chloroform broke the painful silence.

“The heart’s not going. I’m afraid he’ll collapse.”

We looked at one another. Supposing he were going to die, in this way, while our priestly hands and lips possess the grace of imparting the last absolution.

One of us spoke our thought. “Would it not be well to give him absolution?”

The head doctor did not hesitate. “I think it would be wise to do so, Father.”

Then we witnessed that beautiful and magnificent spectacle. Eternal faith, which goes beyond the horizon of our poor human knowledge, took the place for a moment of human science, which doubts its own powers.

The priest approached, and the learned doctor moved aside. For one moment, one forgot the failing body, to think of the soul which entreats.

Bent over the bloodless face, the priest called down, in a broken voice, the mercy of God, the greatness of the sacrifice and the grace of contrition. Then with his hand which made the sign of redemption, he confirmed and completed the virtue of the all-powerful words his lips had pronounced.

The divine task being accomplished, he moved away and made room for the scientist who can still heal.

Our chief worked his "miracle"; the lad did not die in our arms. For two whole days we watched by him in his weakness, often during those anxious hours we looked for signs of the turning-point.

Our lad lived. He took the great step. His hardy youth, aided by his determination to get over his illness, conquered. We got to love him still more, for he cost us many an anxious moment, and his life was precious because we feared to lose him. Four days later, he wrote to his mother, that he had felt death very near, when on the operating table, as he had in the trenches. But he finished, with the following beautiful sentence, in which he evoked, with the danger he had run,

the beautiful confidence which had remained in his soul till the end.

“ I am saved, my dear mother, thanks to the surgeon who looked after me. Besides, you know, even at that terrible hour, I wasn't afraid—the priests were there . . . ”

CHAPTER V

MASS UNDER SHELL-FIRE

I COULD not understand, I who had not the joy of being at the front, by what miracle of courage Duroy could write me so faithfully his impressions of the war. Every fortnight, or about that, a letter in a filthy envelope, which I loved to look at for a long time before opening it, arrived for me.

It was the messenger from the mysterious "là-bas" where they walk without faltering, and where they suffer with the smile which irradiates hearts, in love with the ideal.

"Never," wrote my brave friend, "had I known till now, the sovereign beauty of a priest's life. He is to be found in the thick of the fight, and he drinks in from the burning lips of the wounded and dying, sentiments which sing like the notes of a clarion in the heart of a Frenchman. Would you believe, my dear friend, that these poor fellows want to die, without leaving around them any sad memories, any melancholy or regretful thoughts?"

“ A young workman, whom I picked up outside a trench, whose chest had been crushed by a bursting shell, said these disconcerting words to me, as I leant over him to see if he were still alive : ‘ You may look, old chap—one keeps on smiling till the end . . . ’ And indeed, the dying man smiled ten minutes before he made his exit into eternity.

“ He had the astounding courage to add : ‘ Leave me here, don’t pick me up. My body and those of my comrades will make such a high barricade that the Germans won’t be able to climb over it.’

“ And I, whose eyes were blinded with tears, I had to overcome the violent emotion which threatened to overwhelm me, to tell this fine young Frenchman that I was a priest, and that he could tell me the secrets of his soul.

“ He went on smiling. His glorious courage triumphed over his pain. His sublime soul survived his almost annihilated body, gave to his countenance the aspect of an unfamiliar life, more powerful than the other, and that death seemed to respect. He murmured—

“ ‘ I went to Communion this morning under shell-fire. So that I am ready to go now—the priest told us so.’

“ I bent over him, and pressed my lips to the martyr’s forehead. With that brotherly kiss

warm upon him, he ceased to suffer, and set out for the other world.

“ Oh! that Mass under shell-fire! what an echo of happiness and pride did the words of the dying soldier awake in my mind! It was I who had said it, and it was I who had promised heaven, in the Name of God, to all those who made their halting-place of hope and faith around the altar. I shall never live through such glorious hours again. I am sending you a few poor notes. Give to them the resounding sonorousness of the far-away cannonade, the voice of battle, the majestic music of the batteries, thundering all together. Relate in touching words that feast-day, such as you will never see but which you can imagine, because all French hearts possess the intuition of this tragic grandeur and of these glorious emotions.”

On this woof which seemed to me to be woven with gold and light, woof of glory and rays of light, I reconstructed the real scene. By dint of re-reading these eloquent words, and the short phrases which seemed to evoke superhuman beauty, I too saw that grandiose Mass and heard the formidable music which accompanied its Credo. . . . It is six o'clock in the morning. The rosy dawn reveals the fantastic ruins, among which the steeples, wounded to death, seem

to weep, steeples like enormous spectres of sorrow and horror. One would say that they were looking out in the distance, following with their long shadow the barbarians put to flight by our regiments. All round about is the devastation of the villages and fields, the misery and suffering which ascends from earth, under the growing light of the dawning day. A heavy silence hovers over the immense sadness of the ravaged fields.

But suddenly, at the bend of the forest, hacked down by yesterday's battle, a movement of life shows itself; of human life, which arrives in hurrying shoals. They are the blue trousers of our foot-soldiers who march along singing. It is the inexhaustible youth of France which flocks here to fill the vacant places, the yawning gaps hollowed out of the living wall. They are the sturdy flesh of the robust body, which of itself, repairs the wounds of the giant, so often struck but never dejected.

Here are our troopers. Only to see their "képis" makes the countryside less mournful. The ruins are less lamentable, and the sunrise more golden. They are there: they pass by, scattering in their wake strength and confidence which makes one certain that France is marching to victory.

What a picture, that march past of our soldiers in the glory of the rising sun! They are the

same colour as the ground, covered with mud, booted with red clay. They have been sleeping in the black holes of the trenches, with empty stomachs, their feet in water, having, in the midst of the darkness, no other light but the hope of victory. And it is in this ray of light that they have seen the beauty of living and the grandeur of dying.

There they are, and it seems as though the profaned sun quivers with joy.

Victors the night before by their patience, they pursue victory during the coming day. These beings with their stained cloaks, with their faces bristling with bushy beards, with shoes that splash along the road, weighted with the trampled earth : these foot-soldiers, so dirty as to frighten one, pass on their way like a legendary excursion in search of glory.

Then they break out into Gallic songs which rise in the air like the song of the larks.

“ William’s head,
 We’ll have it, we’ll have it !
 William’s head,
 We’ll break it.”

An enemy aeroplane rushes up in full flight, and flies above them. The bird of prey which was watching them, described great circles far up in the sky. A cry is raised and is carried on by a thousand voices : “ Fire a volley at the cuckoo ! ”

The cannons rose up, all together, with the same bound, in the direction of the vulture, and with a crackling which rends the silence of the clear morning, a volley of balls riddles the raider in the sky, which wobbles, head first ; then, its wings broken, falls in a far-off valley whilst an immense cry of joy hails its fall.

“ They aren’t dangerous, the dirty drones, only they stain the sky,” remarked a sergeant.

But to that boyish remark the voices of “ là-bas ” reply, the voices of the Germans, who do not know how to laugh and always growl. The aviator’s signal had been understood. The Boches’ cannons grow angry and spit out their shells. They fall to left, to right, everywhere ; a few képis lower themselves and bodies sink down. But the marching troops advance in the magnificent order of a regiment which is rushing to its duty.

All of a sudden, the Colonel’s sword cleaves the slight mist which rises from the slope. It is the order to halt, and all obeying it, remain motionless and follow with their eyes death, which is passing overhead, and which they mock at with scoffing looks.

“ Let them growl,” said the Colonel, pointing with a disdainful gesture at the terrible horizon—
“ let ’em bellow—we are going to hear Mass.”

Duroy is there. He follows the column in his capacity of stretcher-bearer.

“A priest of good-will,” demands the Colonel.

My valiant friend comes forward.

“Present.”

A church, still standing to the left, a white church, almost new, whose ogive enlivens the countryside with its shining, untouched walls.

“Who wants to hear Mass?” asked the superior officer.

“I—I—I.”

Arms are raised, hands are waved.

“All right, all of you. We want to ask God to make us braver, and to give us the heart to fell them like monkeys.”

A thrill of joy went through the ranks. And from the moment that joy is in French hearts, of course those others “*là-bas*” must hurl steel and blood on the dreams of our troopers.

Three stray shells pierce the slope and mow down half a section. Two men are killed and nine are wounded. What does it matter! The regiment has just invaded the too small church; the others remain outside, and through the great open door look at the altar, where two wretchedly small candles are burning. A seminarist has installed himself at the harmonium, and with his fine tenor voice intones the hymn of hope and

peace, which has become the war-hymn of all these young fellows who have not forgotten the so-oft sung tune—

“ Nous voulons Dieu dans nôtre armée,
Afin que nos jeunes soldats,
En défendant la France aimée,
Soient des heros dans les combats.”

It is a fine and striking sight to see this regiment which has received its baptism of blood singing out its faith, beneath the vaults of the church, where the priest-soldier is imploring Christ's mercy for so many men alive to-day, who will be dead to-morrow. Outside there is the uproar of shells falling in the dawn and hurling themselves in rage on an enemy who has for an instant laid down his arms, and made a truce.

The foot soldiers don't budge. The thunderbolts bursting around them seem to have lost their annihilating strength and their horror. Sacrilegious Germany, who profanes weakness and fires on Christian churches, is powerless to disturb the prayers of these men, who feel, hovering over the future, the covenant between heaven and the mother country.

And Duroy, whose trousers come below the soiled lace of the alb, recites, accompanied by the music of the cannons, the prayer for peace.

But everyone knows that it must be bought

with sacrifice. Victory is a sublime thing which we must pay for with holocausts and voluntary sufferings.

That is why the soldiers hear Mass so tranquilly, with an heroic smile, beneath the volley of shells.

Meanwhile, the far-off hubbub diminishes. The silence of the quiet countryside again enfolds the church, where twelve hundred motionless men listen to one of their comrades speaking to them of the ancient Christian faith whose sweetness reawakens in their transfigured souls.

Magic words sound in their ears, sing in their souls, touch the harmonious fibres of their hearts.

“ War has made us grow ; face to face with death hourly, we feel the beauty of sacrifice, and we understand the sense of our magnificent duty. God, who asks of us to suffer and die, gives us with the ordeal the superhuman joy of having been chosen as heroes of liberty and martyrs of outraged rights.

“ The fields, reddened by our blood, will imbibe the ruddy seed of battle, an eternal seed of victory and redemption. Between the bullet which kills and heaven opened, there is no halting-place for the stricken soldier whose life is done. Go towards death for France, with a prayer on your lips and faith in your hearts. To fall for one’s

country is not to die ; it is to take eternal life by assault."

And Duroy, whose burning words whet their courage and arouse energy, lances the heroic challenge by Deroulède into their midst :

"En avant ! tant pis pour qui tombe.
La mort n'est rien, vive la tombe
Si le pays en sort vivant:
En avant !"

"En avant !" This one word makes them hold up their heads. The desire to go "là-bas," where one dies, makes their hearts beat and their eyes sparkle. To-night, there will be, quite near the church, on the line of defence tightened against the invader, a regiment whose terrible pluck will terrify the Germans decimated by a legendary charge.

In the meantime, our troopers are singing the Credo, and shells have begun to rain down on the road, on the deserted orchards. The din of battle mingles hollowly with the quiet harmony. The voices of war affirm the Christian beliefs, which mouths proclaim, and give them a definite and sovereign meaning.

"I believe in the resurrection of the body, this body which near by is crushed, mangled, torn, quivering, hacked to pieces. I believe in the life everlasting, to which bursting shells, bullets and bayonets open the splendid portals, and reveal the beauty that endures."

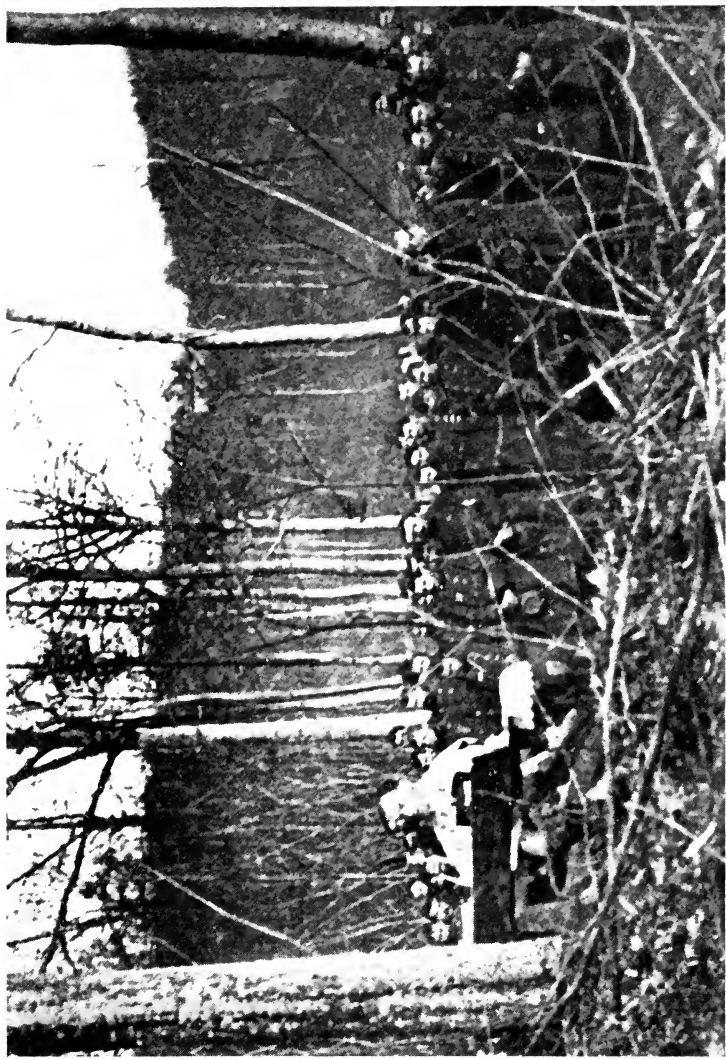


Photo: Topical.

CELEBRATING MASS AT DAWN BEHIND THE TRENCHES.

And Mass goes on, in the midst of the clicking of rosaries, for many of these men have them again at the bottom of their pockets, just as they have revived their consoling faith whose all-powerful help assists them in that hour when courage must go beyond ordinary limits.

It is over. The priest-soldier has just given a big blessing. The halt near the Good God is over, and the march to battle begins again. Belts are buckled on. Knapsacks are adjusted. Rifles are shouldered. The noise of jolted bayonets rings like a prelude to the charge. The thought of war has taken hold of the soldiers, who for weeks have lived in the thought of it. But their energy is redoubled. The sign of the cross is on their foreheads and breasts like invisible armour, which later on bullets may pierce without lessening its resistance.

Forward! After God, the country. Never did troopers set out so calmly to meet death. From the altar-steps, Duroy waves them a last farewell, a salute of faith, which emboldens; and of hope, for whate'er betide.

Suddenly there is a crash of thunder on the sanctuary roof. The shaken wall totters, and stones rain down from the arches, from the broken ogive, struck down by the malignity of the barbarians whose far-off hatred continues

untiringly its wicked work against peaceful churches.

Outside, the roaring of the shells which shriek in the tempest, and "lâ-bas" the thunder of the batteries let loose in the surrounding country. There is a rush to the door, and one hears voices exclaim—

"No, no, I can't die like that——"

The walls of the choir are shaken and oscillate before they fall. Duroy, still wearing the chasuble, remains before the altar, and waits quietly, till all shall have left the church. A lieutenant runs up to him, and points out the danger he is threatened with, then, seeing his obstinacy, wants to force him to come away; but he still refuses to move.

"No, it is my duty."

"What," protests the officer, "our duty is not to allow ourselves to be buried alive beneath these walls."

The priest points to the tabernacle. "I must save the Blessed Sacrament."

The priest turns round to take the consecrated Hosts. The back of the sanctuary gives way, and a beam falls. But neither the altar nor the priest are touched. It won't be for long though, the roof is sagging, and the framework is giving way. It is the affair of a few minutes now. From

the door, fifty voices call out : " Save yourself, Father, save yourself ! Heavens ! "

No, he does not want to save himself. His priestly courage tells him that he ought to remain there, and that soldierly courage will support the heroism of the priesthood.

An enormous stone falls at his feet and makes him totter. The lieutenant, who had remained a little behind him, rushed forward to drag him from the rubbish, thinking him dead or wounded. But Duroy is on his feet, trying, in vain this time, to reach the tabernacle buried in the midst of heaps of broken fragments.

Then was seen this unpublished scene, worthy of embellishing a page of our history of the war ; ten soldiers rush up to help the priest to withdraw the ciborium.

" Wait a bit, Father, we'll give you a hand to get the Bon Dieu out of that. "

The vigorous efforts of their strong navvies' arms, so used to digging trenches, push away the new stones of the church which is now in ruins. And when Duroy, trembling this time from emotion, withdraws the Blessed Sacrament and carries it away, the fine workers of the divine rescue kneel down, bent beneath the crumbling vault, fearless of death, suspended but a few yards above them. Then, when the pious task is done,

and the lieutenant wants to make them go outside, one of them, smiling, shows him the breach of the shell which has fallen on to the altar steps. From his tunic he tears a bunch of carnations which he had gathered a little while before in an abandoned garden. Quietly he places them in the vase formed by the broken projectile.

“Excuse me, mon lieutenant, for two minutes, while I put this in front of the Blessed Virgin. It will be in memory of the regiment.”

CHAPTER VI

SUFFERING THAT SMILES

“ It’s enough to make one laugh and cry,” said a poor little devil, ingenuously to me. His leg, horribly fractured, kept him for a long time among us.

These wounded soldiers gave us without knowing it, noble lessons in courage and heroism. To them, suffering is like bullets ; you must keep them if they can’t be extracted.

French gaiety, and playing the fool are the order of the day. In our wards, with their wide ranks of beds all alike, bursts of laughter alternate with moans, wrung from the suffering patients by the hand of the doctor who is dressing their wounds. The involuntary cry of suffering revived is heard through the hilarious echoes. And the sick man joins in, rallies his damaged carcass, and laughs at himself, so as not to give his comrades the joy of having the first laugh. He takes the offensive, as one of our Bordelais used to say saucily. This fellow had had the comical idea of looking at

himself in the glass each time they tended him. Then to cheat the pain he let himself go, and administered to himself all the puns in the vocabulary of a trooper.

“Now, old fellow, what grimaces you make. Ah! shut up, will you, you beast. You look like a Boche confronted with Rosalie.” Rosalie was the name given by our foot soldiers to the terrible Lebel bayonet.

During this fooling, the others, lying in wait for an opportunity of snapping their fingers at their comrade, could find nothing to say, and contented themselves with admiring him. Besides, our Bordelais foresaw everything, overwhelmed himself with pleasantries, and conjured up in his imaginations all the fooleries that could possibly arise in the brains of his cunning companions.

“You wouldn’t believe what an idiot you look, twisted up like a whale. Don’t you know that the others have to put up with as much or worse?” When he saw the stopper of the bottle of tincture of iodine arrive on the scene, that liquid fire, each drop of which burns the flesh to the quick, he shouted out orders as though he were on the battlefield, in order to hide the torture.

“Attention, you fellows, we are going to charge.

Keep on, for goodness' sake, and keep your heads screwed on straight. No excitement, and above all lunge 'em through the stomach, so that the bayonet will go slap in and come out quicker."

Then, when his wound quivered at the touch of the antiseptic, he would shout in a voice of thunder, "Forward! bayonets, spit all those blackguards for me!" Then he would imitate all those awful cries made in a charge, the panting chests under the stress of butchering, the roaring of men fighting in close combat, in the awful carnage and in the fearful transport of the fray.

It made us laugh, and the pain evaporated in gaiety. Sometimes, the sweat burst out on his forehead, and tears forced themselves into his eyes. Once the dressing over, the brave boy allowed his exhausted body to sink back. But here, as well as "là-bas," he had faced suffering without flinching, and when I approached his bed, to say a few friendly words, he would take my hand gently, to thank me for the compassion I had shown him.

"What's it matter, Father, here one must do one's duty as well as when one is fighting."

His duty! I never could hear that word without emotion. He understood, that lad, that to suffer far away from the battle-field, was the

mission of continued sacrifice, the prolonging of valour, and the crowning of heroism.

Sometimes, on the days when high spirits failed him, because he had had a bad night, spent in the nightmare of undermining fever, he would ask me to help him through those painful moments, and to hearten him up.

“ I haven't courage to play the fool to-day, but I don't want to scream. Will you remain by me, and say a little prayer, while they dress me? ”

On those days I gave him my hand to hold, and he would grip it with the whole strength of his muscles. Between the priest and the wounded soldier there was a kind of exchange of resignation and courage. But he never made it up to himself, for those bad moments, when the bandage being fixed and the sitting over, the Major went off to see to his neighbour, a German prisoner who had received a splinter from a '75 in his ankle. Every morning the doctor examined the horrible wound and repeated, as though doubtful of curing it,—

“ I must really take that bit of steel out.”

“ Ah, Major,” my Bordelais would say jokingly, “ leave him that in his paw. He is so mighty glad to have bagged something of ours ! ”

And the head doctor would scold him in a fatherly way, smiling—

“ Will you leave him alone, you little monster ? ”

And he would insist with that spirit of devilry of the Southerner whose pleasantries are never spiteful—

“ Besides, nothing proves that it’s a bit of iron he’s got in there. Perhaps it’s only a cathedral, which he wants to take off with him to the Kaiser.”

The Boche had at the time only one anxiety, to get his lungs in trim so as to be able to bellow like a bull. Ah ! I can assure you that he had no self-consciousness ! Every morning, he would give us an entertainment of vocal music loud enough to smash all the windows. During the process, the Prussian, to whom the other wounded men paid the most delicate attentions, almost spoiling him at times, had a most extraordinary success, which seemed to make him more furious even than his wound.

It was useless for the doctor to advise them to be more careful, the wounded men took their revenge for all the lead and steel with which their members were crammed.

A musician in a bed opposite his, never failed to remark at his first roar—

“ Don’t interrupt, gentlemen, it is a bit from Wagner.”

And the concert would proceed. The urchins of troopers would imitate his yells, mimic his

gestures and his voice. Then the kind-hearted fellows would throw him cigarettes, which he invariably caught in the air, in spite of the torture of the dressing, which provoked such atrocious suffering. Then, surrounded by that gaiety, which he knew was free from any hatred, the poor Boche would finish by laughing through his tears. But where French larking towards him showed itself in its most mischievous way, was when the Bordelais took it into his head to teach him to speak French.

This idea came to him one day when the Prussian was twisting and turning on his bed, tortured with a more violent bout of suffering. He was giving utterance to unintelligible words, and was roaring like a wild beast caught in a trap. In his most serious manner, our cunning lad began to speak in signs, and his mimicry was so expressive, his looks conveyed his thoughts so well, that the Boche, interested in his grimaces, couldn't take his eyes off him.

"Old chap, one must never yell about nothing. Whether one shouts or screams, there are words to do it in. So, as your paw gives you gip, don't haggle over it, you must bellow as though you had six riflemen at your heels, 'Oh, là, là!'"

An eloquent gesture accompanied this theory, and the German, mesmerised by the persuasive

lesson, repeated with the solemnity of a professor from beyond the Rhine, the exclamation which expresses, with us, every kind of pain.

“ Very good,” said the Bordelais, “ when you’ve got a bit better accent, you’ll be able to get yourself made a spy in Paris. Now, that’s not all ; to complete it you must add, ‘ I’m better, I’m much better ! ’ ”

By dint of hearing that phrase pronounced, the Boche, a good parrot, finished by taking it in. At the end of a quarter of an hour, he repeated it, with such throaty efforts that showed evident good will, and which convinced him that it was the most perfect expression of acute suffering.

Perhaps he imagined that it was a way of making the doctors pity him, and of making them acknowledge that his cries were justified.

The next day, when the head doctor arrived on the scene to give him his daily dressing, there was a hilarious time for the wounded in number two ward.

Hardly had the doctor touched the wound, than the Boche gramophone pulled out his big stops, and gave full play to his lungs : “ Oh, là là ! oh, là là ! ” Then seeing that this had no effect, he gave vent to the second phrase which he embellished with his German accent, “ Za fa mieux —za fa pocoup mieux ! ”

“That’s a good thing,” remarked the doctor, who did not dream that it was a joke; “only you needn’t yell it so loud.”

But the Boche went on rolling his wild eyes, and twisting his wretched broken leg, and wishing to be well understood, repeated in earsplitting tones the phrase which he thought to be the faithful expression of his suffering.

“Za fa mieux—za fa pocoup mieux !”

“Well, then,” said the Major impatiently, “since it is so much better, it isn’t worth while breaking the drum of our ears with your roaring.”

In the ward the others were laughing. Only the Bordelais, who already regretted having made game of such suffering so close to him, remained sad, he who had produced the harmless comedy. The mischief was after all only a piece of mischief, and even less grave, since the German could not suffer from it, as he had no suspicion of it.

Well, I shall never forget the heartbroken expression that saddened his face when he called me to him with a quiet gesture.

“You see,” he said in a low voice, “how wrong it was of me to do that !”

I tried in vain to comfort him.

“I tell you it isn’t fine at all to mock at those who suffer, specially when they are one’s enemies.”

I should have liked to have hugged the brave-hearted fellow, when I heard words of such delicate and exquisite pity. His neighbour had not suffered from this uncomprehended and hence ineffectual teasing. All the same, my French soldier boy judged himself with severity and regretted having let himself be carried away by a harmless piece of mischief.

Not content with regretting it, he wanted to make up for it by giving the poor Boche a proof of friendship. He desired to show him that his suffering, and that of his stricken enemy brought them together, and placed them in the ranks, on an equal footing, of that common family in which each member has no other name but that of wretchedness shared. He held his little purse out to me.

“Take fivepence out of that, please, and have a bottle of wine bought for the poor devil.”

He had tears in his eyes, this good little trooper of ours, whose charming action revealed the beautiful generosity of his race, the admirable tenderness which prevails in the heart of Frenchmen, who are never really happy till they have loved.

And whilst the radiant Prussian, his face lit up with a rather whimsical smile, drank the wine of reconciliation, I thought of our wounded on the

other side, and of their gaolers with their brutal faces. I thought of those letters from women, found in the pockets of some of our prisoners of war; of those monstrous phrases written by the vixens from Germany, counselling their husbands to massacre our soldiers on the battle-field.

The Boche was petted just as the others were. No dainty was offered to the others of which he did not have his share. He was to us a sacred object, the conquered, the victim, the powerless, weakness succoured, misfortune respected.

One of our troopers, drawn by chance from the ranks, blamed himself for having made fun of him, without even hurting him, because he was a disarmed enemy.

“Za fa pocoup mieux,” reiterated the wounded man, as he sipped the French wine.

And those words, awkwardly pronounced by the unconscious lips, revealed the superiority of the French race over the barbarians. Yes, surely it was a good deal better than in his own country, where the Huns, not content with shooting our wounded who are at their last gasp, give orders that their own men, who are deemed incurable, should be left to die, because it is useless to tend them, and because it costs too much.

Christian pity, charity inspired by faith, human virtues which the thought of God renders divine, sublime brotherhood which turns help to the suffering into a sweet task, and makes of heroic devotedness a duty, it is in France that all these beauties spring up again and flower in the warmth of love.

They had known and felt heavenly kindness around them, these wounded men, whom the priestly stretcher-bearers had picked up "là-bas," beneath the tempest of shells.

And how good it was, and how proud we were to hear them recount the prowess of our brothers in the priesthood, who had faced death for the sake of human life, while others sacrificed their youth for their country!

Those whom we surrounded with our care, and especially the young Bordelais, gave the right note of what passed down there, of all those heroes whom the war had raised up, of those who fight for others, among whom priests ranked gloriously.

"As for me," he used to say, "it was a stretcher-bearer, without a moustache, like you, who picked me up under fire, amid the hell of a frightful artillery action.

"They had not told him to do it . . . the medical service is not obliged to take mad risks

. . . under shrapnel fire . . . the head doctor reproached him, and I heard him say—

“‘My poor abbé, you are losing your head . . . you have risked being killed a hundred times.’

“‘The young seminarist replied simply : ‘ That is how I understand my duty in the war.’ ”

CHAPTER VII

THREE HEROES

DUROY's diary used to reach me from the most wonderfully zig-zag journeys through France, containing admirable news, announcing the magnificent hopes which rise to Heaven from our country of France.

“ I am like a harvester of fine ears of corn, hurried in the task, so that there is not even time to gather them into a sheaf. Take the lot, dig among my treasure : everything is fine and great ; one would say that the thunders of battle shake the skies, which open wide their portals. God smiles upon us, and the faith reawakened, born again, French faith, at the present moment, inspires greater deeds than our legendary epopees.”

When I read these words among others which extol our lofty heroism, I could never prevent myself from an emotion drawn from the deepest sources of Christian greatness.

In striking at France, in dealing her their formidable blows, in bruising her, the Prussian

cannons have caused to gush forth, dazzling and dominating, the divine, slumbering idea. Charlemagne, Saint Louis, Joan of Arc must be holding out their arms to it, from above, and must be thrilling with joy at the sight of sacrifices so nobly borne which will be its splendid baptism.

It is "là-bas," at some unknown spot on the living frontier. It is a warfare which never ceases, the bloody endeavour kept up by the superhuman courage of our soldiers who have taken as their device the hackneyed motto whose eloquence maintains itself by actions which defy description.

The chances of war have led my friend in front of a line of trenches taken and retaken four times. He is working heroically at his task of succouring and consoling. Work is not wanting. Bodies strew the terrible field, in thousands. Cries of pain, sighs from shattered throats, the death rattle of those in their last agony, who are rendering up their life in delirium. Arms raised in appeal and despairing signs which call.

They go forth, these good Samaritans, across the red harvest-field, visiting these remains of humanity, living tatters, either motionless in a death-faint or who are twisted up by their frightful contractions.

The priest lives in anguish which lasts for hours, and is augmented by the number of victims

afforded to his pity. He sees a human soul in each mutilated body, and the mystery of salvation proposes itself to his uneasy mind.

He would like to go up to those who are dying, whose life trembles in the balance. But in face of the immense task, he feels the extent of his powerlessness. He must pick him up before consoling him; place him on a stretcher before absolving him. Scarcely is it possible to bend towards a head whose eyes are closed, to whisper the words of contrition, to raise his arm, and to forgive in God's name.

“ If you knew how I suffer,” wrote Duroy, “ at not being able to multiply myself as one ought to be able to do. All the same, I'm confident that God only expects a thought sent out to Him, in order to efface sins and to receive with open arms these souls of goodwill. So that, across the immense field of resigned suffering, of generous expiation, I stretch forth my hand which the priesthood has hallowed, and I cry out to my Maker, ‘ Deign to accept these infinite sufferings, these tortured bodies, these distressed hearts. Have mercy on these young men who have done a manly work. Have pity on our soldiers, since to fight for Your kingdom of France is to fight for You! ’ ”

They go off through the fields ploughed,

hacked up into quagmires, picking up corpses sometimes, in their anxiety to assist all those still breathing, even those whose minutes are counted.

Over there, propped up against a tree, is a wounded man who is patiently mopping up the blood from an open wound in his left breast. He utters no cries, makes no despairing signs for help ; he is not one of those poor wretches who dread the thought of solitude and of being abandoned. His face is resigned, strangely calm, almost impassive. His features reveal the stoic energy of one who accepts the frightful ordeal and who deliberately drains the cup of sorrow.

When two stretcher-bearers come up to him, the soldier smiles with his pallid lips, with his eyes, in which are still reflected the lightning-gleam of courage, whose brilliance has not been quenched. His valour has only taken another form. A little while ago it took that of activity which carries along the body, over which he was master. Now, it is concentrated in the higher effort which masters the tortures of a murdered body.

“ What’s the matter with you, my poor fellow ? ”

The wounded man does not answer this question inspired by brotherly pity. He raises himself a little, and shows with his right hand, the only

one he can move, the horrible mess which calls for immediate attention.

“ See to the others first ; there’s no need to worry about me.”

The stretcher-bearers insist on picking him up.

“ Now, now, leave it to us. You need looking after just as much as the others.”

But he insisted, and his voice all at once became imperious.

“ Take those first. You can come back for me later on.”

The ambulance-men went off shrugging their shoulders, and one of them growled—

“ Since he insists, it is useless to carry him off by force. We’ll come back for him presently.”

And the other can’t help observing : “ Well, he’s obstinate if you like.”

An hour later, when Duroy’s detachment passed by the slope where the wounded man lay, the priest went up to him.

“ We are going to carry you off, my friend.”

Then, suddenly, an exclamation of surprise and pain escaped him.

“ What, it’s you who are wounded ? ”

And he bent over the friend whom he had recognised, and opened his tunic.

“ Where are you wounded ? My God . . . it’s awful ! . . . ”

He looked more at the man's face than at his wound, and wondered if at this time and place, where so many unexpected things baffle one's reason, his eyes did not deceive him and if it were indeed the curé from the parish adjoining his, the gentle confrère, whom he finds exhausted leaning against that tree, perhaps wounded to death.

The other priest forestalls his question, dispels his doubts.

"Yes, it is I, but I am not worth much—besides, it doesn't matter, I must not go back—it would spoil it all."

At these strange words, Duroy felt surge up in his heart a great anguish caused by regret for his friend in danger, but stronger than that even was his feeling of boundless admiration which rejoiced his soul.

"Come now," went on the dying man, whose voice held a strange boldness. "You are not going to be astonished that a priest, that all of us, can look death in the face, or can even desire it."

While he was speaking, the stretcher-bearer was asking himself how it came about that he found his friend here, whose age ranked him among the classes who had not yet gone to the front.

And this time, too, the wounded man forestalled his question.

“ I went off because it had to be, in order to be a priest such as we all are nowadays ; to preach my last sermon, which I had long prepared, but which I had not thought to preach so soon.”

He added, laughing, a soldier right to the end.

“ It will probably be the best of them all ! ”

Then, whilst Duroy tried hopelessly to staunch the wound which had played havoc with the thorax, the sergeant told him his sublime story simply.

In the garrison town where he had been mobilised, one of his parishioners, a younger man, had told him he was going off to the firing line. The man was the father of a family with five children and a sixth coming.

The priest, weak on the chest, had been given a job which prevented him from any risk of being sent off.

An idea came to him, which rapidly took the form of an obstinate resolve, to take the soldier's place and give him his. It was possible to do so, in spite of the difficulties. The father of the family was a malingerer, and was in ill health. For two days the abbé multiplied his endeavours and finished by succeeding.

“ My fine fellow remained behind : I came away, and here I am ! ”

It was the end of his story, and he who had sacrificed himself refused to acknowledge its magnificent eloquence.

He had still the lovely smile of joy in his eyes, but Duroy, beside him, remained stupefied, almost overcome by the beauty of this tranquil heroism.

The sergeant added, to cut short the inevitable expressions of praise, with which he did not wish his sacrifice to be spoilt—

“Now, my dear friend, I’m going to confess myself, for I feel I’d better hurry up.”

Duroy thus finished his letter, which brought me the following trait, which will figure among the innumerable pages in our golden book.

“I was able to administer Extreme Unction to my dear friend, who made all the responses. Then I had to go further on, borne on the flood of our daily tasks. I don’t know if he still lives. But I pray for him as though he were dead. God accepts *such* abnegation to the end.”

France needs much, or even more than that of her soldiers, the blood of her priests, so that she may triumph and be born again. But what a seed of fecundity is the blood of our soldiers, regenerated by Christian thoughts, which gives to their valour a definite meaning of complete heroism. Jeerers and scoffers in civil life, these children of a race, whose virtue has not yet

diminished, go of themselves to those who baptised them, when the troubling hour of danger has rung. They go to confession, to Holy Communion, then they don't hide their faith under a bushel. They put into practice, and without delay, the splendid flight towards death which it inspires. Battalions are transformed into sacred phalanxes; in the breast of each trooper beats wildly the heart of a paladin.

“ Left leg broken in two places; chest pierced by two bullets; not dying,”—for all the caprices of projectiles are not mortal—“but gravely wounded; the affair of long weeks;” that is the report on the two riflemen whom I wash and dress every day.

And this is the strange, disconcerting way in which they were hit. They told me all about it themselves.

“ You'll see that it is just the story for a priest—— ”

I will allow Brigeois to speak, while Planteau smokes his pipe and interlards the story with his growlings: “ Oh, my bally old leg.”

“ On the 6th of September, we were having a terribly hot time on the Marne. It appears that Joffre found that we had played the lame dog long enough, and that it was time to do like everybody else, and to go ahead.

“ You can guess that we others knew jolly little about the big battle. All the same, in our little corner, we saw that the Boches bit the dust and lay in the fields longer than live men would. They had even to be carted away in truck-loads, and nothing could awaken them again, not even the pointed snout of Rosalie. One morning, while we were rubbing our sides, stiffened by four hours' wait in the rain, Planteau said to me :

“ ‘ I say, old chap, I think we are going to get something for our cold.’

“ I answered, ‘ What a fool you are to have such gloomy ideas like that, you know quite well that there are draughts all round our carcasses ; bullets always turn aside when they come near us.’

“ ‘ I know what I'm talking about,’ he replied. ‘ The battalion is ordered to defend the village whose belfry is sticking up at the left of the wood. And you know that we're not known by any number but by the motto which I don't know which general has stuck on to us, “ Go ahead or burst.” To-day, there will not be any choice : first we shall go ahead, then we shall burst.’

“ ‘ Well ? ’ I said to Planteau.

“ ‘ If it's Major Dargis who is going to open the ball, we certainly shan't need to think about our evening soup, because, old chap, it isn't in the Marne that we shall cook it.’

“ Well, it was just as this chap here said. It was Dargis who was to do the trick. It was no goodfunking it.

“ ‘ Oh, well, then,’ he said to me, ‘ we’re done for.’

“ ‘ Done for,’ as he said to me, ‘ and you might add, squandered.’

“ At first, the thought of seeing ourselves with our skins turned inside out, that worried us a bit. We were stuck down there in front of our bowl of coffee, just as foolish, so to say, as a Boche before an empty bottle of champagne. Then, all of a sudden, Planteau gave me a smack across the shoulder-blades.

“ ‘ Look here, old chap, we’re not going to face it like that ? ’

“ ‘ Like what ? ’ said I.

“ ‘ Like chitterlings, to be sure ; like calves going to the slaughter.’

“ ‘ Oh, well, how do you want to go, then ?

“ ‘ We must,’ he said, ‘ go decently.’ And if you’d believe me, well, not later than at once, that is to say immediately, we went off to make our confession to the sergent-curé, and to make him sign a passport with the date of the return. Would it be all right ?

“ ‘ To be sure it would be all right.’

“ ‘ Only, I told him, what about our prayers,

'tis a jolly long time since we scattered 'em round.'

"At first Planteau remained as dry as a gunshot, but it would have taken a lot more to put him out—the beast.

"'You silly ass! Of course, prayers are useful in civil life, but at present one must do as one can. One learnt the theory, well, once upon a time. Do you remember any of it? Now then, do you think you can say any of it, you blighter? All the same, it doesn't prevent you from sticking plums into those gentlemen "là-bas." Well, prayers, it's the same thing. The Bon Dieu knows that one must take things easy. He knows, the good God! I promise He'll dispense us from our prayers, for once.'

"What answer could I make to that? I was screwed down tight.

"'Well, is that all right?' asked Planteau again.

"'Course it is. Now we must buck up and do the trick, it isn't the day for marking time.'

"It happened, that in the section alongside ours, there was a priest reservist, who used to preach a sort of well-tuned little sermon, something in this style:

"'Children, we're going to get it hot, presently, and three-quarters of us won't turn up for the

roll-call. We must set out in our Sunday best, with our souls furbished up along all the seams. We may come out of it, but we mustn't count on doing so. A bullet or a bit of shrapnel, and then the jump over the wall of life. And it's not a question of firing a broadside with the devil. That's good enough for the Boches. We've got to arrive in front of the Good God with our arms flying, with our buttons shining, and our knapsack full of orders.'

"There must be no shilly-shallying. We'd gone in search of him, this little curé. It was Planteau who spoke up.

" 'Excuse me, Father, can we have two words with you, each one alone and in turn, because you see——'

"I should think he did see. He took hold of him by the shoulder.

" 'Chuck yourself down there, on your knees, old fellow, and speak low, so that the others don't hear anything.'

"Planteau, who doesn't like mannerisms, said squirming—

" 'Well, what does it matter if they do hear?'

"He soon put himself straight, and I too after him.

" 'Now,' said the curé, 'you can go, boys and if you are picked up on the way, I can assure you

that you won't take long to go from here up above. You will be received like volunteers, and you will have won the prize . . .'

"Two hours later, there was an appalling drubbing, a mixture of horses, of men, of cannons, a salad of uniforms and pointed helmets. It rained lead, it hailed steel, death fell all round about. Our battalion was horribly smashed up. Our comrades watched their heads rolling about on the field, and ran after their legs, cut in four. Planteau and I kept a whole skin whilst aiming at the Boches. Heavens, the heads we broke that day; one could have built a country house with them.

"We two thought we were doing nothing out of the ordinary, when Major Dargis came upon us and let forth this compliment.

" 'As to you, my lads, you are fine fellows, I will have you mentioned in the orders of the day.'

"Well, after all, we hadn't done anything very remarkable. We did our job as smiters, neither more nor less. It wasn't, however, the opinion of our leader, who whispered in our ears—

" 'I want you to be fully worthy of the distinction I'm going to ask for you. I've got a job, for which I must have men who will be ready for any emergency. You're not afraid?'

“ I replied, ‘ Oh, that’s all right ! ’

“ Planteau, who has always the vocabulary of a gentleman, began to yell these words (I must tell you he yelled because of a shell which was bursting ten yards off)—

“ ‘ Oh, Major, you shall see.’

“ ‘ Well, then,’ said Dargis, ‘ go and climb that hillock where the big cross is. From there you’ll be able to see where the Boche guns are. Look with all your eyes and then come back and tell me.’

“ Planteau replied simply: ‘ But what if we are cut in two before we get there, or on our way back ? ’

“ The Major began to laugh, and said as he went away—

“ ‘ Oh, well, you’ll send me the bits ! ’

“ And off we went—Lord ! what a job.

“ When the Prussians saw us climb up there they fired at us for all they were worth. Bullets and so forth. You can imagine that it put them out badly to see us climb up that wretched hillock, because besides the guns, the cannons hurled plums at us ! Cannons, just for us two ! Planteau shook with laughter.

“ ‘ Well, old chap, we are evidently worth something, since they aim a battery of 77’s at our heels.’

“ ‘To be sure,’ I said to him, ‘they take us for Père Joffre, doubtless.’

“ ‘When we get to the top Planteau stuck himself behind the cross, and gave orders.

“ ‘Now, we’ve got to light up, and spy out the land.’

“ ‘But suddenly, he raised his eyes to the Christ, and knelt down. I did the same, without knowing it, because I always obeyed the beggar, who is sharper than I am. And then, would you believe, the fellow began to pray, but it was a prayer of his own inventing, to the Bon Dieu, who looked as though He were looking at us only at the time. Oh, it wasn’t a long one, it was something like this—

“ ‘Oh my God, the curé of the company told us that you died for us all a long time ago. Well, if it please you, we can do the same for you. Only if we pop now, or even a little further on, you must not leave us in the lurch, but give us an honourable mention in the order of the day, in your regiment. Now we’re going to work for the Major.’

“ ‘We got up, we looked about. The Boche battery was to the left of the wood.

“ ‘That’s all right, we can do a bunk.’

“ ‘But just as he said that, pum, pum, pum ! a shell fell right in front of the cross and landed

us each a lump in our legs. There we were with our feet in the air.

“ ‘You’re not dead?’ asked Planteau.

“ ‘I don’t think so, old fellow. What about you?’

“ ‘Me?’ said he, ‘I’ll let you know presently.’

“ And I saw him go off, dragging himself along.

“ I remained behind. My paw was done for. It weighed a thousand kilograms, but I said to myself—

“ ‘Since he’s got away we’ve done some good. If only he’ll get through.’

“ He did get through. He apprized the Major. A battery of 75’s came galloping up, and in a quarter of an hour, the wood was ours.

Brigeois added with a sigh—

“ And in spite of our good will, we have missed the gathering up above.”

But Planteau, who had finished his pipe, deigned to speak in his turn.

“ Shut up with that, you silly fool. If we’ve missed heaven this time, it explains itself. We weren’t in the class called up.”

My two wounded men began to laugh. They had just done an almost superhuman act of bravery, had contributed, these modest fellows, to the great victory, had drawn upon the divine

strength which made them heroically rash. They forgot to notice it.

But while they refill their pipes, and speak of other things, I admire them tremendously, and love them as one loves beings of beauty, of valour and of virtue, whose courage triumphs over brute strength and saves one's country.

CHAPTER VIII

ABSOLUTION BEFORE THE BATTLE

ONE must not imagine that the wards of our hospitals are dismally sad, and that our wounded men keep either on their faces or in their souls the traces of the frightful tasks they have accomplished. I have already spoken of joyous suffering, of that fine temper which defies pain and gives its beautiful quality of magnificent swaggering to the courage of a Frenchman.

Here, as "là-bas," they suffer heroically, and it happens that the heartiest bursts of laughter come from the lungs of those oppressed by fever.

Our hospitals in which those wounded in the war are tended, sum up the whole combatant army. There are infantrymen, cavalrymen, artillerymen, and Turcos, Zouaves and Senegalese sharpshooters, fraternising at the end of one day like old acquaintances. Each one of them had lived through the epopee, had lived in the black hole of the trenches, had tramped the fields and

the woods, had passed days and weeks without stretching out their limbs elsewhere than on the bare ground or on the grass by the roadside. War, with its adventures, was around us, and Napoleon's growlers are not one whit finer or more worthy of admiration, although they put in a longer time with their adventures.

One could lean over any couch, and find a witness of the war, an actor in that frightful drama from which all the bad memories had evaporated.

"It seems as though it had been a dream," they declared.

I have never found one who owed a grudge to the bad times they had been through, or who regretted the past, whose hours had been sometimes dark and always tragic. The war raised the level of courage to an extraordinary height. The humblest peasant, the commonest workman, described his many encounters with death in the ordinary tone of one telling customary stories. Here was a linesman, aged twenty-two, whose left foot was broken in three places. Hardly was he in bed before he began to chatter as though just back from leave. I asked him, from a curiosity that was never sated :

"Were you a long time at the front ? "

"Since the 7th of August."

“And you’ve been in the thick of it since then?”

“Pretty nearly. The regiment rested for four days.”

So he had been in the thick of war for months, in the constant uncertainty for the morrow, and even more for the following hours. Shells, bullets, shrapnel, storms of iron and lead hurled themselves upon him, killed thousands of men, each day beside him. He had run appalling risks.

In ordinary times, a man who found himself in such danger for five minutes would keep the memory of these frightful moments and the picture of his fright all his life.

My trooper never thought about it. He had known the defeat in Belgium, the retreat towards Paris, the hard fighting on the Marne, the chasing of the Prussians right to the north of France, always marching, always shooting on dark nights, and rainy days. Then, with an ardour sharpened by the hope of a now certain victory, though a hard one, which would take some winning, he flung himself in pursuit of the invader, put to flight in his turn.

And this cool boy, this country lad with his sluggish emotions, showed me a so patriotic and radiant a joy that in listening to him, I felt

prouder of France. He laughed with all his heart, this valiant boy from Champagne, in describing the magisterial drubbings administered to the Boches. In this body, thinned down by unheard-of fatigue, by privation and the rude ordeal of war, the valiant soul triumphed in its joy, stronger than all the brutality of the rough life of a soldier.

When I asked him if the thought of his family had not saddened him during those terrible days, he made this admirable answer.

“ My father, my mother, and my sisters were mobilised with me. Whilst I was fighting, they loved me all the more, and were praying for me. It is one way of fighting for one’s country.”

These words threw light on one phase, and not the least noble one, of the drama which we are living through.

Whilst our dear ones stem the tide of the barbaric flood, victoriously, they have the certain help of more powerful love which accompanies them, and the efficacious prop of prayers which support them. That is what one does not speak enough about, and yet it plays a magnificent part in those hours in which the certainty of conquering cannot prevent the anguish of daily expectation, prayer. If prayer does not occupy an official place and a preponderating one in the military regulations, it is certain that each soldier

makes up for this sad omission by a personal effort, and by the alacrity of his own initiative.

“Nowhere else have I seen so many medals and rosaries,” said a politician to me on his return from the front. “Never had I thought there was so much faith in the soul of the French people.” And he added, with a look of moved respect, he who, like so many others, had proclaimed the intangibility of lay principles, “When I saw them pray like little first communicants, I understood that it was from prayer that they drew their finest courage.”

The God who had been hidden from them in their childhood, they had found Him again miraculously at the same hour when they felt, by instinct, that their country could do nothing without Him. And with the enthusiasm of young neophytes, they stretched out their arms to Him, as to a superior power, without whom human strength remains unavailing and sterile.

My peasant from Champagne—any trooper, drawn by chance, from among the millions of our fighting men—gave me the comforting assurance of it.

In war time, one would sooner go without bread than without prayer, and when one has heard Mass, one fights with an irresistible spirit. Mass for the army. You should have heard our

wounded men describe these solemn mysteries performed by a priest in blue trousers, on the borders of forests or in a field dug up into bloody trenches. When they speak of it, they see it again, and their whole soul quivers with emotion in recalling these memories of their campaign. And it is not only Mass that puts them in the presence of God, it is the sacrament of penance which does so too, this passport for the Great Beyond which makes them bend low beneath those brotherly hands, raised to bless and pardon.

My wounded man from Dixmude lived through one of these splendid hours recently, and he gave me the moving details of it all. The story is imbued with superhuman grandeur, and whilst he described the scene to me, I reflected that no other historic episode in our Christian annals could surpass it in heroic beauty.

The infantry regiment had just arrived in position. It was in reserve behind a little wood, six kilometers behind the firing line. In an hour the last order would be given. In their turn, these three thousand men would be hurling themselves on the enemy's front and would receive, under the volley of shells, their baptism of blood. For many of them, it was the last halt in their lives. The cannon which roared seemed already to sound the roll-call of death. And in the silence of

recollection, which hovered above these young men, dedicated to sacrifice, one seemed to hear the clumsy beating of the wings of fate. It was not that courage was weakened. But, instinctively, the mind turns back upon itself in the feeling of uncertainty, that preoccupation which takes hold of the bravest. "Where shall I be in an hour, and what shall I be?—a mangled worm or a corpse?"

The colonel knew his men, knew by experience that it is dangerous to those who need all their energy for the greatest of sacrifices to give way to undermining thoughts. To those imaginations, who are menaced by melancholy thoughts, a powerful diversion is necessary, a sight which will impress them, and at the same time will give them the maximum of confidence and bravery.

He called the standard-bearer, a young second-lieutenant, without a moustache, who three weeks before had been singing Mass in his village church.

The officer, his eyes aglow, advanced, the staff proudly borne against his breast, shaking the colours fringed with gold, which trembled in the gentle breeze whispering over the plain. Quite near there was a mound, which seemed to offer itself as a pulpit, a pedestal or an altar. With a

sign, the colonel points out the place, and the lieutenant who has understood, climbs the slope, slowly, with the recollection with which he had in times gone by carried the monstrance. It was already a festival for the regiment to see, framed in bayonets, the sacred emblem which floated in the air, in the hands of a man to whom God had entrusted His omnipotence.

“Father,” said the Colonel, “those who surround you are believers. They know that the next hours do not belong to them, and that soon a certain number of them will perhaps be lying on these fields, where a grave will be dug for them. Tell them that there is another life, other hopes after death, a reward for those who are brave. Do your duty as a priest!” Then, speaking to his men: “All those among you who wish to die as Christians, close up round the flag.”

A movement of the mass of human beings drew the ranks closer, and grouped together the soldiers, gaitered, girded, accoutred, their haversacks on their backs.

Not one was lacking. They were all there, their eyes raised, fixed towards the two living realities raised on the hillock and which towered above them. They listened to that manly voice speak to them of eternity, of the great truths which rise above human fears, of things so lofty

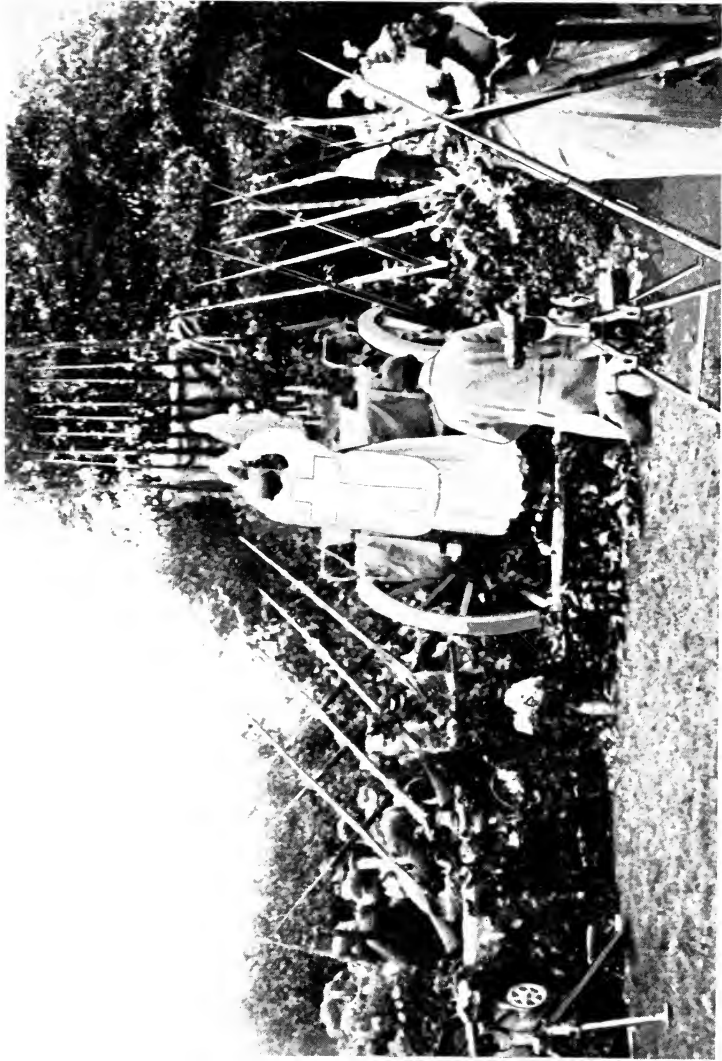


Photo: Topical.

HIGH MASS AT THE FRONT.

This improvised shrine was made from two machine guns and ornamented with crossed rifle.

and so solemn, so sweet and consoling, that even the voice of the cannons screaming death are but far-off echoes, dream-voices almost unnoticed.

The gestures of the priest caress the folds of the flag, and his appeals harmonise with the tricoloured silk whose flutterings seemed like the breathings of a troubled breast. One felt that courage flooded these hearts, poured out as from a generous source, from the living emblems which exalt sacrifice and make it resplendent with definitive beauty. From his eminence, the second lieutenant greeted the living, and blessed those who were to die.

Then the Colonel, in his commanding voice, announced to his companies: "Now for the absolution!"

By instinct, and without having to be told, these men uncovered as one man. For the order has come down from on high, and it is their faith which they obey and no longer man's commands.

"File off in sections!"

The defile began. Kneeling on the grass, each group in its turn received absolution, then got up. And it lasted for half an hour, in the silence of which the emotion of so many souls dilated by this new baptism, trembled.

And as they passed, one sign alone enwrapped their bodies, agitated the hands ready for such

terrible deeds: the sign of the cross. The troopers, strengthened by the absolution, became instantly the warriors whom the battle was calling. To the left, the battalions massed and formed up in order of marching, ready to depart as soon as each company had received the sacrament. And when the last of these brave men had bowed his head before the hand of the priest, still standing before his flag which he had raised like a cross, the Colonel, his sword pointing towards the plain where the appeased voice of thunder rumbled, commanded in his fine impassioned voice:

“Forward!”

The column moved on. The hour had struck. The fight which roared beyond, called new lives to the sacrifice and to immolation in the supreme endeavour of resistance. At the head, floated the flag, whose tricolour wing was stretched to the formidable “là-bas,” and seemed to fly before those whom she urged along. One could hear nothing else throughout the countryside but the noise of muffled tramping, of the clinking of bayonets on the cartridge-boxes, and the murmur of remarks passed in a low voice.

Suddenly, an enemy shell whistled over the regiment, alighted in a deserted field, exploded in hollowing out the earth. Then with one same

sign, the troopers raised their arms towards this first messenger of death.

Then, disdainful, rash, superb, these young soldiers of twenty-two with their pure hearts and transfigured souls answered back with a magnificent burst of laughter, the laughter of children, in defiance of the barbarians, and went off to die as Christians, as Frenchmen.

CHAPTER IX

THE BLOOD OF PRIESTS

THAT which I had feared and dreaded, though refusing to believe that such sorrow should darken the calm days at the hospital, the apprehension which had haunted me like a sad presentiment, had become realised ; poor Duroy had been wounded. To tell the truth, when the news reached me, I thanked God that it wasn't worse. This brave fellow, whose fearlessness I knew so well, might have been killed on the battlefield. I'm certain that he desired that reward, the beautiful setting forth of a true hero whose life had been directed towards so glorious an end.

"I am wounded," he wrote, "but almost slightly, just enough to have seen the blood flow, and to have proved that it is red. Again, you may thank God that it is the left arm. For if the Boches had rendered my right arm useless, what a face you would have made, my poor chronicler ! However, my good hand is left to me, and unfortunately plenty of leisure in which to write

you long letters, in which you will be able to dish up thrilling actualities for your readers. One of these days you will receive pages and pages of stuff, written in the deuce of a hurry. This time, I send you the assurance of my joy, thrilling and stirring, without any vanity, but proud and grateful to the beast who made a hole in me. I, too, suffer in the flesh for my country, whose majesty I have seen face to face. Yes, they pretend that those who tend the wounded are not exposed in any way and are funklers—now I know what answer to make to these calumnies.

“The watchword of the Germans is this, and I had it from the lips of one of their wounded men : ‘Fire first of all on the field hospitals.’ Yesterday, there was a great distribution of prizes ! I picked up two, but the one in my leg doesn’t count. As to my arm, why—that was a better shot ! Only, the bullet did not remain there. Your friend’s always the same, he never could keep anything ! I’ve also got a gash in my hip, but I should finish by feeding you up, if I were to describe to you all the presents that I’ve received from the loyal soldiers of the Kaiser.”

Poor Duroy ! He joked, but beneath the playful tone of his letter, I could guess at the gravity of his wound. Then, too, there was nothing about the circumstances in which he had got his

wounds. Nothing! that meant that he had gone out in search of them in one of those acts of bravery which make those say, who judge from a merely human point of view: "He was imprudent!" I, on the contrary, thought, "He is magnificent;" otherwise, had he been struck by chance, in one of those circumstances which hide merit, or take away from the glory, he would have told me straight out.

Three days later, a letter came from the front speaking of him, written by some one else. His comrade, a priest too, told me what I already knew so well. Duroy owed his wounds to an act of devotedness, to his splendidly rash courage, to the fine swaggering of his valour. He had fallen through having put in practice the noble device, engraved in his priestly soul, and which he had made his unalterable rule: "Priests should be right in front and among the first to face death."

It was because he was right in front, and the first, that he was now lying in an ambulance, the prey to the sharp pains of severe wounds, which might cost him his life.

It was in watching by him at night, that his confrère wrote this letter to me, in which sadness is brightened by admiration. But uneasiness peeped out of each page, and the sincerity of the

account filled my heart with heavy apprehensions and vague anguish.

That day, the doctor-major of the ambulances had gathered his men together to ask of them a fresh sacrifice.

There were near the enemy trenches, hardly fifty yards away, over twenty wounded men, who had been lying there since the evening before. The Germans were watching them, and had their eye on the stretcher-bearers, whom they knew to be charitable and courageous enough to go out and pick them up. These poor wretches were sad hostages, kept in sight by the wild beasts; they count on our pity to draw us on in this way. They were sure that we should not leave our brothers to perish and they waited for us.

The doctor lowered his voice, which was broken with emotion and trembled with indignation: "They are waiting for us, to do for us."

At these magic words, he looked fixedly at his men, standing motionless in front of him. Not one had stirred. He went on, with a smile caused by his pride.

"It is a task which I can't and won't impose on you. Our duty does not go so far as that. Besides, I've no right to waste your precious lives. Still——"

He stopped again, frightened by the importance of the sacrifice, for which his words might inspire the desire.

“ Still, if there are any among you ? ”

They did not allow him to finish ; there were thirty-eight of them ; thirty-eight arms were raised and thirty-eight voices were blended in one, the heroic voice of bravery and of accepted death.

“ I ! . . . ”

The doctor looked at them fixedly for a few seconds, silently. The light of pride irradiated his face, a joy stronger and more luminous than the shadow of death, hovering over that little group of men, in which not a single one was inferior to the others in valour. For he knew that this word decided their fate, and that of these men sent into danger, not half would return. He went up nearer to them to show the real brotherliness that united him to his stretcher-bearers. Then softly, almost tenderly, he said : “ That’s right—I thank you all. I counted on you to do it.”

But he wished to explain his idea, to give his reasons for the determination he had just taken, so that each one of those brave men might go to the sacrifice with a clear consciousness that an imperious need demanded this immolation.

But still, he knew that words were vain and comments useless, guessing that all had already understood.

“My friends, all those who suffer have a right to our help and our pity, cost what it may. They have a right to our toil, to our night-watches, to our efforts, to our self-sacrifice. All the wounded are the creditors of France, and it is us whom she has chosen to pay the sacred debt of gratitude. She counts on us every day, but she counts doubly on us when her victims are exposed to the cruelty of the executioners. Struck down in the fight, our brothers over there must not expire in humiliating captivity, and worse still, in torture, inflicted by their calculated barbarity on these disarmed, these powerless, these conquered men. If they must die, they must not die twice of German bullets and of the bestial hatred which finishes off the dying.

“That is why I ask for your supreme devotedness. Besides, it is a challenge of their cowardice and our valour and our pride. They would like to be able to say: ‘Frenchmen abandon their wounded when they see above them the muzzles of our guns, and our mitrailleuses.’ That they shall not say. These brutes must, from the bottom of their holes, be forced to admire us. It is perhaps folly on my part, but it is fine folly. No! I’m not mad,

since you have thought as I have. Our minds agree with our hearts, and our consciences tell us that we have done well."

A thrill ran through the ranks, a thrill of splendid emotion, but one also of impatience. Not a word, not even a "yes." Words would not have expressed the greatness of the sentiment, which made these souls thrill. Only their looks spoke, and what they said at that minute not human tongue could ever construe.

The Major came nearer still: "I want twenty men."

This time a voice protested: "Only twenty? Why not all?"

The doctor explained, rather embarrassed by this claim, which he had foreseen.

"I can't expose you all—sacrifice you all."

"But," said the voice indignantly, "what about the others, those who will have to stay behind?"

There was another silence. He who spoke expressed the thought of all.

"All the same . . ." objected the doctor.

He did not finish his objections. He felt in that heroic minute the urgency of imposing his will, as commanding officer; the imperious necessity of putting a stop to this impatient manhood, ready to dash madly along in the race to death.

And he gave these orders: "I have spoken; twenty, not one more!"

Again, all hands were held up as in defiance.

Coldly his features became severe, in order to hide the emotion, which made him tremble, the Major ordered—

"The twenty youngest, step forward!"

The sorting out was done automatically by order of the mobilisation, and when Duroy advanced, carried away by his desires and the certainty that he could not be among those who remained behind, the doctor, having counted, dismissed him with a sign.

"I've got my right number. Duroy, go back into the ranks."

The priest took a few paces back, and became very pale. He opened his mouth to protest, but his sense of discipline kept back the words on his lips.

The twenty chosen were already separated from the others, who looked at them in consternation, and devoured them with eyes filled with such envy, that one guessed that they were jealous and humbled.

"You are all tough, all strong, and fit for the job?" said the Major.

All heads were bent in assent, but from the side of those who had not been chosen a protest burst forth.

“ No, Major, not all.”

“ Who called out ? ” said the Major.

“ I,” said Duroy, coming forward.

“ Why ? ”

“ Because I know there’s one among the twenty who can’t run and can hardly stand.”

“ Which one ? ”

Duroy pointed with his finger to the second stretcher-bearer in the first line.

“ That one—Leroux ! ”

Duroy went up to him. “ Look, my dear fellow, you know perfectly well that you can’t go ‘ là-bas ’ ; that one of your legs is done for by the blow you got the other day—by your wound.”

Leroux tried to humbug him.

“ Get out, you joker.” Then laughing heartily he said, “ The fact is, Major, he wants to take my place.”

But the latter, standing right in front of him, demanded :

“ Are you wounded ? Good Heavens, and you wouldn’t have said anything about it ! Since when ? ”

It was Duroy who answered : “ Three days ago, Major ; it’s a piece of shrapnel in the left calf, and he wouldn’t let it be dressed. Make him walk a few paces, and you’ll see that he limps and is suffering, I’m sure.”

Leroux stood up very straight, his eyes burning. Then in a hard passionate voice he said—

“ Do I look like a liar, by any chance ? ”

The doctor looked at him silently, and all the men made a circle round this soldier, aged twenty-seven, who had by this reply raised himself to the height of the most famous warriors in the Great Army. A tender emotion wrung all hearts in the presence of this heroic liar, who for three days had hidden his wound and wanted to go on all the same.

The doctor held out his hand to him, and hiding his admiration under a commonplace phrase, he drew him to one side.

“ You’ve done enough, my lad, I order you to go to the field hospital to be looked after.”

And as the young stretcher-bearer did not budge, saddened now, almost confused and disconsolate at seeing his dream slipping away, the Major said to him—

“ Come now, you must leave something to the others.”

Then addressing Duroy, who wished to explain what he had done : “ Yes, my friend, I understand, you are worthy of one another.”

The priest placed his hand on the other’s shoulder.

“ You are not angry with me ? ”

Leroux did not reply, but he leant towards the man who had just taken his place, and with one accord the two men embraced, because their souls were alike.

A few minutes later, the company went forward. The roar of battle, subsided for an instant, made the ground tremble, and beat time to their hurried steps. Around them already there was a hail-storm of lead and steel. And these twenty men, setting out through the hurricane of death, were superb to see in their smiling calmness.

At a run they got to the top of a hillock which separated them from the level, and crossed the line of sharpshooters, in their hiding-places in the thickets. Five hundred yards away on the left, rose the terrible wall of earth, from whence the enemy's guns spat forth bullets by thousands.

The doctor ordered the stretcher-bearers to take shelter behind a small ridge of earth, which hid the zone exposed to the enemy's fire, in which all those who dashed through ran the risk of never returning.

The twenty men, impatient to be off, waited, palpitatingly, for the order to advance, to begin their risky task.

"No," called out the Major, "it's mad what we are going to do. I have not the right to send you to the slaughter."

But the brave fellows, their faces glued to the ground, called out all together :

“ We risk as much in retiring as in advancing.”

Duroy said the words which settled the Major.

“ The wounded men await us—those in the trenches and the others ! ”

They started off and skirted the hillock. The infernal conflict increased, and still louder than the tempest of the firing of volleys were the cries of the victims, which came up to them. Then, hearing the appeal of these lives in danger, the stretcher-bearers set out at a run. The Red Crosses beflowered the field of slaughter. And their action was so fine, their boldness so magnificent and so striking, that the Germans turned aside their guns from these voluntarily unarmed men.

They went quietly and unmoved, in the midst of the carnage, about their sublime business, without a shudder, without a look in the direction of danger. Now, from every point rained the deadly sightless bullets, which formed about them a network, each mesh of which bore death.

The tempest raged on, immense, whistling, furious—and still standing among the fallen bodies, the twenty stretcher-bearers, greater than all, seemed to conjure up in the eyes of the combatants the image of that immortal and invulnerable thing : bravery defying the most frightful dangers.

Sometimes, from the depths of that hell, cries broke forth, bearing to these magnificent heroes, the homage of the fighting men.

“ Bravo, stretcher-bearers ! ”

Their unheard-of boldness stupefied the soldiers, in the thick of the fight, and drew forth the ardent admiration of these men, drunk with the butchery, who were hurling themselves the one against the other, in monstrous blows. The sight of that bravery astonished their hatred, and forced it to bless charity.

And still, beneath the atrocious firing, the messengers of pity raised up the wounded, then carried them, without, haste to the shelter prepared for them. Still three more to bring in !

Duroy rushed towards the farthest off. In his unarmed hands hung a rosary. In the midst of the danger which surrounded him, the tranquil soul of the priest prayed. He bent over his brother in distress, stretched out towards him succouring and consoling arms. But suddenly, he who bent down to enfold the head of the dying man, fell inert, then a few seconds later, the body itself sunk down on to the ground, struck with impotency at the moment of the last effort.

And yet, though overcome by the pain which had struck him down, he gathered himself up, and with his right arm raised in the midst of the fight,

he traced the sign of absolution over his dying comrade.

Then, having accomplished his task to the end, he disappeared in the blood-stained grass.

Thus was my friend Duroy wounded, a priest of France, struck down on the field of honour and honourably mentioned in army dispatches.

CHAPTER X

TYPES OF WOUNDED MEN

It was a Sunday. Showers drenched the courtyards and the shrubberies in our park. A tinge of sadness hovered over our wards, and one would have thought that the minds of the wounded were benumbed.

We should not see, that afternoon, strings of lamed men hopping along in a crowd towards the cloisters, which they have baptised "the front." There, on fine days, bullets do not rain down, nor shells hail upon them. Our combatants are overwhelmed there with cigarettes and biscuits only. They are like a troop of usurers there, who know how to put a value on the least detail of their wounds.

The scarves were wider and the bandages more visible, more to the fore.

As to the crutches, they held up by dozens, hanging legs, which wave up and down like the shin-bones of a Punch and Judy on wires. There is so much "go" in this pack of wretchedness,

so much of picturesque in this group of men, tried by fire, that one could laugh at it heartily, without constraint, nor risk of saddening the actors in this little saraband. They themselves would take off, with grimaces and comical positions, their crippled ways.

They were there of all regiments and of all countries, drawn up against the walls, not beggars by any means, but heedful of the packets, whose coverings gape, and pour forth little presents. Each one would set about telling his story and describing the tragic moment when the projectile found him, in order to annihilate him. There was no false sentiment about these brave fellows; one would have said that they were describing a dream or repeating the adventure of some hero in an old story.

And one heard, for example, such words as the following, which reveal the soul of the race, in the depths of its bravery.

A lady, who had two sons fighting, asked a little foot-soldier, with a bashful countenance, who looked at the long file of visitors with an indifferent air, where he had been wounded.

“ At Montmirail, madame.”

“ Did many die around you ? ”

“ Oh, heaps.”

“ And you were not frightened ? ”

“ There was not time to be.”

Then this taciturn fellow became chatty and described the skirmish, the charge with bayonets, the rush on to the Boches who were fleeing. He became animated and lived over again the most tragic moment in his existence.

“ But, when we got to the crest of the hill, the German cannons began to pepper us. It was hailing all over the place, and my comrades were falling like puppets. I saw one, near me, cut in two by a bursting shell—— ”

The lady, horrified by this very simple description of so horrible an incident, interrupted the story-teller.

“ Good Heavens! it is appalling! And you, what did you do during this time? ”

Then the young soldier, astonished at such a question, looked at her ingenuously, with no thought of his sublimeness, and said—

“ What did we do? Oh, well, we waited for our turn.”

Now, in the well-being of recovered tranquillity, and the pleasantness of a happy convalescence, our good fellow, like the rest of them, *awaited his turn*, to get the tobacco which generous hands were distributing.

But to-day, the rain had stopped the finest flights of our convalescents. Some weeks ago,

these gallant fellows did not sulk even under fire. Watered so often by shrapnel, without bending their backbone beneath their deadly squalls, now they are almost mollicoddles, so much so that a big Parisian, whose legs are done for, makes fun of his companions and of himself. "And to say, you owls, that before the Boches, we marched all the same, without dragging our feet."

In the noisy wards, there was the jolly brightness of a full house ; even the most suffering were infected by the good humour, and from their beds, where painful wounds would nail them for a long time, they followed without losing a detail, the evolutions of the convalescents.

There was the Senegalese, Amadou, with his great head like an orang-outang, which he swings about like a bear begging for a nut. Mischievous and greedy, always ready to appeal to the powerful authority of the corporal on guard when the horse-play seemed to him to go a little too far, the one idea in his noddle, with its primitive brain, was to call out to the visitors, and to hold out huge paws, with the shameless gestures of a beggar, absolutely devoid of all sense of self-respect. He had, too, the manner which attracts attention and provokes generosity. A monkey and a buffoon, with the soul of a nigger, whose sole preoccupation was to obtain anything, he soon acquired good

manners and possessed ideas of gallantry, which flattered the ladies and appealed to their kindness. He had his little formula, always the same, childish and native, which never failed, and with it a smile, invariably.

“Bonzou, Matame, tu vas ti bien, toi! . . .”

Naturally, the lady would approach him and reply laughingly to this courteous advance.

It was then that our diplomat would unmask his batteries and ask with confidence the question.

“Toi y as ti apporte cigarettes? Thou have brought me cigarettes?”

His two hands like claws moved restlessly about, and the setting into motion of his crooked fingers explained the real reason of his exuberant politeness.

The asked-for cigarettes would fall in sufficient numbers to satisfy an ordinary wounded man. But, instead of the usual thanks which would be appropriate, Amadou would protest, looking at what he had just received with a disgusted air.

“Na, na, na! not good; give more, thou.”

And this lame creature, as agile as a tiger-cat in spite of his broken leg, would clutch hold of furs, would cling to pockets, would hunt in muffs, would make a prey of the visitors, here to be rifled, and would empty their bags to the bottom, unless the infirmarian did not keep him in order.

And his grimaces, so natural, his clownish contortions made the joy of the little girls, who at first kept at a respectful distance, on seeing that face of ebony with its white shining teeth ; but gradually approached with confidence and put their little white hands in his black, wrinkled paws.

And that makes me remember the pretty lesson which a mother knew how to give her little daughter, who refused with a slight disgust to have her pretty fingers stroked by the black man.

“ I wish you to shake hands with him. He, too, is a French soldier, and he has shed his blood in our defence.”

Poor Amadou ! poor, big child, who made everyone laugh who approached him, it is true that he, too, was a soldier of France. Far away, in the bush, in his village lost among the African forests, he once knew the country, which knows how to bestow brotherly love on men. He saw with his wonderstruck eyes, the tricolour wave, this flag which he found again on the frontiers, waving above the bloody firing, and which made to live and breathe in his sight that mysterious France which he loves without knowing why, as one loves a lovely dream made of sweetness and of light.

For he has known the hardships of war, and for *us*, without owing us anything, he fell beneath

the tempest of fire, keeping for our country a veneration of love, stronger than his instincts, and more lasting than his superstitions.

In this strange brain, where the thoughts are not like ours, an urgent idea, like that which made us all come forward to face the invader, forced itself on him, irresistible, overwhelming. France was in danger; our arms and lives belonged to her; let us go and fight so that she may triumph.

“Toi y as ti apporte cigarettes!” I should think that they have brought cigarettes, indeed, and sweets with which to fill your big fingers, and toys to amuse you with, and even flowers from our gardens. . . . Poor old comrade! if your skin was black and ours white, there was something in us which was the same colour—our blood. And yours, and your brother’s, mixed with the blood of rich and poor, of gentle and simple, yours which I have seen flow, has baptised you a Frenchman for ever.

We had several men from Senegal or Guinea, grievously wounded, and who seemed to find it natural to have taken part in the great sacrifice and to have had their bodies mutilated, in defending our national honour.

They were not vain of it, never made a parade of their devotedness. They knew nothing of the pride or intoxication of glory. They fought as

one plays a game, and many died without a complaint being made to tarnish the serene beauty of their agony.

One of them revealed to me, thus, the feeling, which moves them all, when they fight for France.

While I was asking him if he did not regret his own country and the mortal risks he had run for us, Keita, a superb lad from Konakry, made his ivory teeth shine in a brilliant smile.

“ France is my father, mother, village, all.”

One day, the fine fellow showed me a letter from his adjutant, who had remained at Dakar, to form the new black troops destined to reach France the following summer.

The reading of it made me understand what they are worth, those “ niggers,” and just what one can expect of devotedness, of sacrifice and heroism from them.

The subaltern gave his old soldier news of his company, with a charming simplicity and a visible desire to show the affection he had for his valiant sharpshooters. He said it was they who had been fighting in the Cameroons and in Togoland. “ These countries are ours now,” said he. Then he added, “ The Company may be proud of this conquest. They behaved admirably and half of them are dead ; but it is to their valour, that we owe this victory.”

And the adjutant cited this trait which ought to figure among the feats of the war, which are daily offered to our admiration. An English officer, whom they had never seen, had just taken over the command of the detachment. At the end of half an hour he fell, mortally wounded. Of the decimated troops, there remained only fourteen standing, and the enemy were advancing in numbers. They might have fled in search of shelter, in a retreat whose necessity seemed absolute, and leave lying there the dying captain, no longer capable of leading them.

But no! the fourteen Senegalese organised a resistance in front of their dying captain, making a living protection for him with their breasts, resolved to allow themselves to be killed in the fulfilment of their sublime duty, right to the end.

And they all died, impassive beneath the bullets, firing their last cartridges, breaking their guns over the heads of the enemy, whose masses submerged them.

Then, the task done, and resistance become impossible, the survivors formed a wall round him who, though fallen, still represented the country for which quietly, stoically, they were giving their life. And when the last discharge felled them, they fell all together, raising above

the body of the captain a tomb of quivering flesh, a fearful and magnificent mausoleum.

Keita, who knew that fine story in all its details, and wore the letter which recounts the splendid adventure over his heart, thrilled with emotion, when we complimented him on the valour of his friends. And he said jovially, simply with the gesture of a child and a radiant smile of joy—

“They good, over there, here, it good too; when me go soon break Boche heads.” Besides, his adjutant had strongly recommended him to do so.

“You are a good shot, Keita, and you will be able to do for a good many, if you’re careful.”

The pupil would not forget his lesson, I’m sure, and I pity the German who finds himself at the muzzle of his gun, when soon our leather-skinned friend will be back again at the front.

Meanwhile he plays dominoes, and cheats boldly, with two bronze statues, who answer, in the third regiment of Algerian sharp-shooters, to the names, with a truly oriental flavour, of Braim-Hansour and Ammar-Meli.

These, who were only wounded in the hand, might, like others, go about the wards and amuse themselves by visiting their comrades. They had good feet and good hands, strong calves and muscles which projectiles had left whole. They

were condemned, however, to remaining where they were, for it was not enough to be strong enough to walk about the hospital, one must besides wear breeches. And our two fellows were wanting in that accessory, sufficient but necessary for being respectable, elsewhere than in bed.

By order of the head doctor, Braim and Ammar had to remain between the sheets for three long days, for having gone out into the park without permission. They were locked up as one locks up people who cannot be confined to the cells, punished as one punishes the sick in military hospitals.

At the next ray of sun, these two prisoners chained by the elementary social decencies of life, and riveted to their mattresses by order of the chief, had to content themselves with following through the window, the movements of their more reasonable and more enlightened comrades.

Or, forced to be philosophical, they might seek in the spectacle of the scene inside, a remedy for their passing melancholy.

Truly fortune favoured them. The wounded man opposite them, a river porter on the quay at Tunis, with the face of a brigand, took upon himself, in spite of his shattered thigh-bone, to provide them with comical or tragic distractions.

Abidah had the face of a clown, which he could

dislocate at pleasure, and which he made undergo astonishing and hideous transformations. The attention of the gallery would excite his clownish vanity, and the bursts of laughter from the audience, would make him discover inexhaustible resources of grotesqueness. On this occasion, the Tunisian was in a good temper, which is not always the case—especially when the hour for dressing his wound has struck. This savage detested being attended to, and instead of blaming the Boches, he would attribute the increase of the pain to the doctor who tended him. Hence this scene: the house-surgeon charged with looking after the broken leg, touches the wound with iodine; then such jumpings, yells, protestations.

“If you don’t stop, you, you’ll see.”

The house-surgeon jokes, banteringlly.

“What shall I see?”

Abidah, who had found it necessary to expostulate, but this time in a gloomy manner, seized his fork and brandished it with so menacing a way that the staff of infirmarians judged it prudent to step back, while the other threatened—

“You’ll get that in your belly, if you hurt me.”

This sort of thing frequently occurred, and what means could one take to punish him? One couldn’t illtreat a poor wretch whose leg was crushed, however quarrelsome, and almost an apache.

It was on such occasions that we intervened by our patience, our gentleness, our charity. Abidah had become transformed already. A priest-infirmarian who had charge of him, had made himself loved almost, by this brute with his furious rages. From him the enraged man would accept anything, and through him, the Bedouin without culture, understood the necessity of suffering, when one must, in order to get well quicker.

He did not preach at him and lost no time in advising him to be resigned. He contented himself by responding to his boorishness by an increase of attentions and gentleness. And the Tunisian slowly took in the kindness which surrounded him as one breathes healthy air without noticing it. It is, perhaps, the trade of a knife-grinder, and the apostleship would be a long one, doubtless, but although it fell slowly, the good seed would keep nevertheless its germs of fruitfulness.

Then, too, our friend liked his task and would not have given it up to any one else for anything in the world. He explained, too, ingeniously, the reason for the joy he feels in devoting so many hours to this ungrateful task.

“In that way,” he said, “I am well in tune with the war on the barbarians. Only, whilst

at the front our soldiers shoot them, I make a virtue of civilising them. Later on, if he gets back to his quays at Tunis, I wager that our savage will find in his wicked heart a tender memory, when near him, he will see the cassock of some French priest."

CHAPTER XI

HOW THEY DIE

NEWS reached me after many long days of waiting and uneasiness, from my friend Duroy, wounded in the war, under the circumstances I have already recounted.

News, but not about him. Just six lines to say that he is getting on well, and that he is ashamed of being in a good bed, with white sheets, when so many others lie on trusses of straw, when they have any.

“The Boches have above all wounded my self-love. There is nothing more humiliating than to remain immovable when others go madly ahead. I am jealous of my comrades who run about, see danger, are in the thick of it all, and die in full activity.”

If my friend had not, at the time, whole legs, my comrade had excellent eyes, and he saw beside him comforting heroism. In that hospital, at the front, where the badly wounded are sheltered, one witnessed fine acts, and sublime feats, which

are the prolongation of warlike heroism and gives to it a definite meaning.

There flourished magnificent virtues, and in the tranquillity of repose, too often broken by pain, blossomed forth the noblest acts of generosity.

Those who were heroes on the battlefield, continued to be heroes now. When one is brave, one's heart finds everywhere the occasion for showing one's valour, and the bullet which is working about in one's flesh has never broken the resistance of strong souls. Duroy described to me the fine devotedness of a wounded priest, nearly in his last agony, and who seeing himself about to die, was a priest to the end, a sublime apostle, who shortened his life to bring God to a soul who had lost Him for many a long year.

The hospital ward was dreary, almost silent and funereal, with its two long rows of beds, in which a too lively suffering prevents drowsiness and suppresses sleep.

Around these forlorn couches, little hope remained and the wounded men made for themselves no illusions. They knew that the least wounded, those who may be saved perhaps, have been sent off to some far-off town in the middle of France, to those parts which the noise of war will never disturb.

With the instinct of suffering beings, whose uneasy thoughts turn back upon themselves in the preoccupation about their ills, these great victims thought : " If they nurse us here, quite near the place where we fell, we must be very ill."

And they felt ill too. Their faces spoke it ; and their features, thinner already after a week, revealed an upheaval of the organism, a rapid fight with life, which could not hold out in these devastated bodies.

There, one did not know how to laugh, or rather one could not. In each one, it was the expiation which continued ; the redemption of the Mother Country, which was achieving itself.

Providence does not only exact bloodshed in torrents for the tremendous redemption of nations. It demands also *that*, shed drop by drop from open wounds, and which will flow for a long time. Sometimes in silence of resigned or sullen suffering, a cry would be raised, heartrending, which would end in wailing, and die away in sighs. There would be low moans almost like the death rattle. And to complete this horrible picture of war, the far-off bellowing of the cannons which howled of death.

That hospital at the front was another lugubrious corner of the battlefield. And who was to know, besides, if soon some German

commander, annoyed by the peaceful sight of the Red Cross waving through his field-glasses—who was to know, since the sight of human pity excites indefatigable rage—if they would not make this hospital the object of their murderous delirium?

In any case the poor fellows, who were suffering, lived with the nightmare of it still, and whilst the others, happier than they, only heard in dreams the fury of the fight, these are thrilled with the growling of the thunder, close by.

They suffered and were saddened. A lassitude almost as wearing as the pain of the wounds, overwhelmed their souls. That which they desired above all things and for which they thirsted, was to rest in some peaceful spot, far away from the war, which no longer tempted their powerless youth.

In front of the enemy, for days at a time, they had seen death face to face and had looked upon it with that fine smile of defiance which light up, when they are fighting, the faces of our admirable French troopers. "Là-bas" death is beautiful and seductive in its sublime horrors. Towards it, our young warriors go forth singing, and their dream of magnificent madness is to receive its kiss and to go off to sleep in its arms.

Here, death has not the same aspect, it has lost its halo of glory. Even its name is changed.

In the ardent rush of battle, it calls itself a bullet through the heart ; a bursting shell through the breast, a quick short-cut to eternity. It hastens from the red horizon, in great onslaughts, and its pale countenance is lit up with the brilliant reflections of victory. Here, it slinks slyly about, stifling its steps, which come from the shadows—stretching out its long, terrible arms above its disarmed prey, powerless to ward it off by a vigorous effort or by a wave of the hand even.

“Là-bas ” it hovers above the field of honour. Here it lies in wait for its victims, in front of each bed in the hospital. And that is why these desperately wounded men feel their courage ooze away and their bravery totter.

All the same, devoted care is not wanting to them, and attentive pity watches over their misery. There is all round them smiling kindness, to compensate for the barbaric brutality which has made of them lamentable human wrecks. They have more than brothers to console them, they have sisters, women's hearts which cherish them, even before knowing them, and who wear themselves out in tenderness so as to give them hope, or to shed rays of light on their agony. For if coming death, whose clammy touch they already feel, is more fearful and menacing with its mysterious face and its implacable grin of

defiance, these soldiers, recollected in their suffering, do not turn away their gaze. And knowing that they must die in obscure solitude, they have still the valour to accept the inevitable sacrifice like Christians. God visits them and speaks to them, for they have merited the highest graces. He speaks above all to those who have forgotten Him for so long.

He who is moaning at the end of the ward was just baptised, and that's about all; then drifting along on the tide of life, he had never given a thought to the fact that he had a soul, and that in the other world there is a Judge who demands His dues. Yesterday, he was railing against religion and was blaspheming. To-day, he is thinking of the near future, and wishes to ensure his departure for the next world. The blood, which he has shed in the great cause, has re-baptised him as a child of God beneath the gaze of his country, which is fighting for justice sake.

“ Sister, I should like to see a priest.”

A priest ! The nun looks at him while she tries to keep back her tears. The unheard-of sufferings which she has witnessed and tended have never shaken her valiant heart. And now a great anguish seizes hold of her and moves her at the sight of this soul's distress.

A priest ! They are “là-bas” the priests, both

chaplains and soldiers, all doing their task, all occupied in the urgent business of battle, which requires their infinite devotion.

This evening, certainly; presently, perhaps, some of them will come in, since now by divine permission they are all over the place, during the war. A priest will come—but when? And this poor fellow, like so many of the others among the thirty wounded in the big ward, may die so easily before they return.

The sister leaned over the dying man, and spoke of contrition, helped him to repent, awakened his conscience in which she saw confidence and good will spring up. And yet, the good woman cannot stifle her regrets and sobbed aloud—

“My God! no priest for these poor dying children.”

The man in the next bed, who heard her cry, called her.

“Sister—a priest—there is one over there at the bottom of the ward.”

“A priest? there is a priest here——?”

“Yes, but so ill—so ill—his two legs are crushed and, besides, he has something the matter with his chest too—and his shoulder as well—we fell together, near enough to touch one another. It was he who gave me absolution . . .”

And he pointed with the only finger which

remains to his whole arm, to the place occupied by the abbé, right at the end of the ward.

The nun rushed towards the young abbé, who did not see her coming. In front of his bed, she stopped, hesitating, and murmured—

“ My God ! it is this man ! ”

And her two arms fall back, showing by the gesture her immense deception.

“ It is this man.”

Hope, ardently cherished, died.

Poor little priest ! He had been in a swoon ever since his arrival this morning. It had been impossible to put life into this body, with its corpse-like face. Not dead, but so near the end ! A little while back, the doctor who examined him hurriedly, pointed to the pool of blood, in which he was drenched.

“ There is nothing to be done. It’s all over.”

And these words still resounded in the ears of the sister, whose last hope had just been extinguished, before that motionless body.

Nothing more to be done ! And the other who awaited help, and would not get it !

Then, stronger than her fears, and trusting to the impossible, which sometimes happens by a miracle from God, she went close up to the priest whose features were all relaxed.

“ Father—Father—— ”

What divine power God sometimes gives at certain hours—at the voice of imploring faith! The dying eyes opened, and hearing that voice the wounded man, almost dead, felt the last spark of his ebbing life flicker up. He did not speak, but all the strength of his mind was concentrated at that moment in the clearness of his glance.

The nun, understanding that his moments were numbered, and knowing that all is possible, even a superhuman effort to the priest, the guardian of divine power, the good sister who had regained her courage in the tragic moment, dared to transmit to the dying man the request of the other dying man.

“Over there, a poor fellow is dying, and begs for absolution.”

In a whisper, the priest-soldier murmured, so low that one had to guess at the word which accepted the sublime task, on the threshold of eternity.

“Carry me there——”

Four infirmarians took up the bed, and slowly, to avoid jolting, which would hasten the end, carried the consoler towards him who waited. Again, the eyes closed, and the sister asked herself in her horrible uneasiness, whether it was not a corpse which passed or not, to the astonishment

of the great, silent ward. They reached the bed of him who called for help.

“ There,” ordered the nun. “ Put their heads close to one another—gently, don’t jolt him.”

Then, again, the priest opened his eyes, and in an almost strong voice, and looking towards his comrade, he said—

“ Come close up, my lad—let us be quick—there’s no time to lose—— ”

The infirmarian went a little way off, and the confession began. There was a whispering of voices, words which slipped between the exhausted lips. Both hastened ; death, counting the seconds, hovered over them both. On their pale faces a few fugitive impressions passed, and then came a glow from some invisible fire. Then the absolution.

The priest recollected himself in the solemnity of his ministrations. The remains of life which animated him rose from the depths of the soul which was tottering in his annihilated body. He tried to rise, with an effort, so as to raise his hand in benediction over the penitent. But his hand remained inert, it was already paralysed, rendered useless by the last swoon, which paralyses the limbs. Then, with a supplicating glance, the priest called the nun.

“ Sister, you must raise my arm, and help me to finish my task.”

The wounded men, touched with emotion, raised themselves in their beds, to see a sight which they had never seen before—this superhuman beauty, which the hideous war had created.

The infirmarians, struck by the grandeur of the divine act, had knelt down. And they all gazed at these two dying men, so fine that their souls alone seemed to live and to act in this drama, which unfolded itself between earth and heaven.

Piously, with her two trembling hands, the sister took the priest's arm and raised it towards the dying man who was praying.

“ Dominus noster Jesus Christus te absolvat . . . ”

The voice ceased in the pitiful mouth. But an act of will mastered the fatal weakness, and the words slipped from the apostle's lips, imperceptible words which were poured forth in a last effort.

“ Ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis, in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. ”

Then, a silence. The nun looked at them both and they seemed paler to her, through her tears.

She waited a few seconds longer, then, feeling the arm was heavier and the flesh colder, she understood that all was over; the act of the highest devotion, and life.

Two sighs, mingled, which form but one, announced to the kneeling woman the end of these

two lives, which had finished together. At the same moment the priest and he whom he had just saved, expired. In the distance, the incessant roar of battle went on. One would have said that all the great, lugubrious voices of the war were ringing the majestic death-knell for them.

The nun brushed away her tears. The beauty of their end banished the sadness of mourning. As they have obeyed the orders of their superior officers, so the two soldiers have gone together as such, when the Master called them.

Then wishing to affirm their brotherly love by a definite sign, she joined their hands together by the gentle chains of her rosary.

But, by one of those mysterious contrasts which Christian hope explains, in that ward where every heart was moved with keen emotion, now it was the infirmarians who wept and the nun who smiled.

CHAPTER XII

THE MEDAL

It was a sad morning, after a night disturbed by cruel nightmares ; a morning in a hospital heavy with slumber which could not stifle the moanings. Forty bodies stretched out which had been overcome momentarily by the sharp suffering of interminable hours—bodies exhausted and weighed down.

Arms were stretched out over the sheets, in white bandages, spotted with blood, and stained by the deep wounds, at which infection gnawed. Heads swathed in bandages which made one guess at broken skulls which exposed the brains, as we had so often seen.

Swellings in the bed-clothes revealed the protecting apparatus for broken limbs, to which any contact with the sheets is an insupportable burden.

On all their faces was the trace of unassuaged pain, the hectic flush of fever which burns and ravages the organism.

Duroy came to in the middle of silence ; and the dawn of day showed him the full horror of this wretchedness.

He had known them for a long time now. He had seen worse still ; heaps of flesh cut into bits by projectiles, gaping wounds which drenched his hands with blood. He had known all these horrors and had felt his heart revolt at the sight.

He had lived for weeks among the panting wounded ; and with the dead. But "là-bas," it was the fine exultation of devotion in the midst of activity, expended with the ardent desire of being charitable, and of uniting the self-denial of the priest to the courage of the soldier.

That had been the endeavour, dreamed of by every soul who gives itself to noble causes and who multiplies his generous efforts in a still greater sacrifice.

There he had been a stretcher-bearer, that is to say, a man of initiative, a valiant man who tastes and enjoys the virile joy of danger which confronts him, and which he desires to be still more terrible, all the time.

Here, Duroy was nothing more than a wounded man, condemned to supineness, harder than all risks, undermining, distressing, discouraging.

On this particular morning, my friend was more melancholy than ever ; and, still more than from

his wound, he was suffering from anguish increased by uncertainty. "How many days and weeks will it take for me to get well and become what I was before?"

From the neighbouring church, the seven-o'clock Mass bell was ringing. He had not even that consolation. He was a prisoner, whom the pain of a serious wound reminded at each moment that the time of his captivity would be long, and that his patience would undergo cruel trials. Even the thoughts of his friend, so far away, could not easily reach him in his solitude, fenced in, in the zone of the armies and almost at the front.

He thought sorrowfully of those he loved, since now he could no longer do anything else.

Oh! those cruel hours through which the wounded must live; the bitter thought of feeling oneself useless, and of not being able to give one's country anything else than the cheery acceptance of one's suffering.

Little by little the hospital would awaken and become noisy with the daily coming and going. First it was the arrival of the infirmarians with coffee; the noise, almost clatter, of the morning's duties. Then there was the sadness of the moans of those in torture, which began again, and of those who dreaded the advent of the doctors,

who would feel their wounds, press them, widen them, cauterise them.

Already were the instruments laid out in rows on the table, with their queer, alarmingly shaped, twisted blades, with beaks and claws.

Then the doctors would come in, in their white coats, their hands gloved in indiarubber.

And Duroy would prepare to undergo his daily dressing and force himself to endure it silently, courageously. He would put his pride into suffering without a moan, in forcing back the cry so often wrung from one by the tortured and rebellious flesh. Even there, and there above all, did he wish to give an example and to show people that one can suffer greatly, without the will giving signs of weakness.

But what then could be the matter with the head doctor to make him pass his bed to-day, without saying a word to him? Ordinarily, he would hold out his hand to him, would encourage him with an affectionate word, would treat him like a friend. What could such a silence mean?

He saw him at the bottom of the ward, chatting with the adjutant. From time to time he would look at him and shake his head as though he were the cause of their preoccupation.

Elsewhere, all that would pass unperceived. But to a sick man, no detail is indifferent, and the

entire life of his mind is confined to the narrow circle to which his illness chains him. Ordinarily, it was with him that they would begin their rounds. On this occasion, they seemed to forget him on purpose. And that vexed him a little. "What have they got against me?" However, at the end of half an hour the doctor came to the priest's bedside. As usual he was smiling, but to-day, it was a graver, more mysterious smile.

"Well, my dear abbé, how did you pass the night?"

"Not badly, Major."

"A little feverish?"

"I don't think so."

The surgeon smiled again, and his expression mystified the sick man still more.

"That's a good thing, my friend; for to-day I want you to be in good spirits, because you've got some hard work to do."

Hard work! What an odd remark! If he had not been so wide awake, Duroy would certainly have thought he had heard it in a moment of delirium. But no! he was quite calm, and his astonished gaze silently questioned the doctor, who added—

"A famous job, my friend, but one which will not tire you too much, I hope. Farewell for the present."

And off he went, without any more explanations.

When the dressings were finished in the ward, the doctor nodded significantly to the abbé. And he went on talking to the adjutant in a low tone, the latter nodding his head in approval.

An hour passed, and my friend had almost forgotten the astonishment which the inexplicable attitude of the head doctor had caused him. The monotonous daily life began again in the ward. The wounded men chatted among themselves or moaned painfully in the grip of that obstinate and wearing companion—awakened pain. Then there was a commotion near the open door.

A head doctor with five stripes entered, followed by the head surgeon. The latter was looking very happy, but a little moved. He pointed to my friend's bed, and soon he was surrounded by decorated officers.

“Abbé Duroy, stretcher-bearer of the — section !” said the head doctor.

The visitor held out his hand to the abbé, who raised himself a little so as to receive more worthily the sympathetic homage of a superior officer. The latter questioned the wounded man, asked him where and how he had been wounded ; he wished to hear the exact circumstances, and took a great interest in the details of it all. The

priest dwelt on the difficulties of saving the wounded under the flying bullets. He recounted it all simply, in a very impersonal manner, like a witness who had not himself been mixed up in the drama, nor had run any risks. And he finished with these regretful words about his companions, who, less fortunate than he, had fallen mortally wounded.

“ They did their duty right up to the end.”

The head doctor looked at the Major, then he said, very softly—

“ They are all the same ; they only think of others.”

“ And what did you do while your comrades were devoting themselves ? ”

“ I did what they did.”

“ Only that ? ”

“ Just that.”

“ Nothing more ? ”

“ No.”

There was a short silence during which the superior officer kept turning and twisting a small red leather casket about in his fingers.

“ Do you know, monsieur l'abbé, a stretcher-bearer who said to his companions, hesitating before a more pressing danger, ‘ Come on, my friends, it is neither the moment for stopping or turning back ! ’ ”

It was Duroy's turn to smile.

"Any one would have said that, at such a moment."

"Do you remember that this same stretcher-bearer, exposed to the terrible fire from the enemy trenches, drew himself erect in face of the Germans, and by the authority of his gestures, when pointing to the wounded, decided them to turn aside their deadly fire from the stretcher-bearers?"

Duroy blushed and looked uneasy. He who had defied death, and had forced it back by the strength of his daring courage, felt shy and non-plussed, while listening to that voice which recalled the heroism of his superhuman act to him.

"Yes, I understand," continued the head doctor. "You looked at the others, and it is the remembrance of their courage which remains in your mind. Only one has been left out from the homage of your admiration; that was natural. Happily your superior officers have a better memory than you have."

Then, slowly, in the midst of the astonished silence of the whole ward, he took out of the red leather casket that which seems to hold within its glittering circle the smile of a country, grateful to those who have served and defended it even unto death. And from that military medal, the sight of

which makes the hearts of our soldiers thrill more than the bursting shells or the horrible thunder of war ; from the symbol in which a hero sees himself in a true light, as in a magic mirror, burst forth in rays of light the generous grandeur of France, heedful of paying in glory for the blood shed by her sons.

Duroy saw it glitter in the hands of his officer, saw it approach his breast, and saw it pinned there, the golden dream, on his woollen vest, where other medals testified to his confidence in Our Lady, to protect and defend.

“ In the name of the Commander-in-Chief, the military medal is conferred on the soldier-stretcher-bearer, Duroy, for his fine conduct and for his bravery in saving the wounded under the enemy’s fire.”

But his joy is saddened with regret, which comes to him at the thought that his absent companions were as courageous as he was, and will not receive the reward, which they had deserved for a similar display of courage.

“ Doctor, what about the others ? ”

The head doctor conquered his emotion, then squeezing his hand tighter, and steadying his trembling voice, he said—

“ The others—there are no others—they are all dead.”

Then, at that moment, Duroy as never before, understood the danger he had run, the immensity of the peril from which he alone had escaped. He saw again the frightful hour, when his tremendous will mastered his horrified heart. He heard again the thunder-claps of death, and quailed with a fright, which he felt for the first time.

“My God!” he muttered aloud, “I did not know that it was so easy to be courageous.”

And it was still in a sort of dream, in which the words seemed to acquire a sonorousness of a far-off echo, that he heard the Major proclaim the heroism of priests on the battlefield.

“At the present moment, more than five hundred priests are proposed for the military medal or the legion of honour. Combatants or stretcher-bearers, in the trenches as well as in the field-hospitals, they are admirable everywhere, and give a magnificent example to all around them. In this war, in which all is greater, more terrible, more generous than ever before, they had to have their share and represent God in a war in which right and justice are united in order to crush error and barbarity.”

Duroy had got himself in hand again, and he thanked the doctor with a smile—this doctor whose kindness for the wounded showed itself in so delicate and paternal a way.

“ To-day, you will have a real festal dinner, with flowers, cake and champagne, in honour of your little curé ! ”

Then he bade him a farewell full of touching solicitude, and recommended him to be prudent ; to hasten, by his patience, the perhaps lengthy cure ; to remember that he must return, one day, to the front, then further off, pushed back almost to the invader's country.

“ Alas ! my friend, there as here, the wounded will not be wanting, and we shall need tough non-commissioned officers to form our men. For,” added he, “ I was quite forgetting to tell you that you have been made a corporal. And you will not remain that for long.”

The doctors went off with him. As they went along they continued praising the newly decorated man, and included with him all his confrères, everywhere remarkable for their bravery in the war.

Duroy described this touching scene in twenty words. The details of it were given to me by a mutual friend later on. My valiant comrade, of whom I am so proud and a little jealous, contented himself with expressing his joy at having been able to contribute to the golden account book of the French clergy.

“ One more decoration is a gem added to the radiant crown of the Church, and, to-day, it is I

whom France has chosen to make this offering, beflowered with my blood. For a long time, the Church has lacked the renewal of that aureole, that magnificent ornament of honour and bravery. In all times, she has had her martyrs and apostles, her conquerors and heroes. Now she has to complete her guard of honour, her troopers of 1914-1915."

A few days later, the head doctor brought Duroy the official list, which contained the names of the priests killed by the enemy, cited in the order of the day, decorated for their fine conduct in the war. An incomplete but how eloquent a list !

On glancing over this page destined to be placed in the golden book, he felt a thrill of bravery run through it, a great harmonious wave of patriotic courage come from past centuries, from the far-away periods of history. And they were the same voices that spoke, it was the same ardent clarion call, which had sprung up from the hearts of the priest-soldiers, the same boldness in the sight of death, the same blood always offered up without counting. With pride, the priest read the list, lengthened each day by the indefatigable young curés, harvesters of glory, whose hands, blackened by gunpowder, rest from their heroic labours, in the supreme gesture of

absolutions given to the soldiers, their brothers. Officers, non-coms., soldiers, they were superb, foolhardy, madly brave, winning, gentle as great friends, gay as "mousquetaires."

And when Duroy, closing these pages, which the names of unknown confrères rendered illustrious, saw a doctor approach his bed to congratulate him, he spoke to him of the admirable part played by the curés of France in those dramas, where a heroism of superhuman beauty is revealed.

The doctor was one of those who know how to understand events, and are penetrated by their profound lessons. He, too, knew the high deeds of the French clergy, and had felt a lasting emotion from its perusal. More than an emotion, the upsetting of his way of thinking about the Church and her apostles.

"Ah! Father," he said to my friend, "I, too, have misjudged religion, and have not known priests. When war broke out I did not dream for a single instant that I should meet you, speak to you, undergo the influence of your example, and bless the law which made you soldiers. Now, I own that, thanks to you, I have seen God hovering over our armies and His all-powerful hand leading them slowly, by the road of sacrifice and expiation, to a final victory."

Duroy smiled. He accepted that sincere homage for all the clergy under arms to-day.

And yet, his loyal soul wished to proclaim the merit of others, the heroism of all Frenchmen united in a splendid outburst of courage—a collective heroism made up of all personal acts of bravery, without distinction either of beliefs or professions.

“It is the heart of the country which acts at this moment, through the arms of all her children.”

But the Major wished to specify the homage, to make it more absolute for those whom he had the more greatly admired.

“Yes, Father, I know it; we are all brave, generous and great in these magnificent hours; but you priests are among the best, the most valiant of us all.”

And, as the abbé wanted to protest, he said:

“Now, you don’t know anything about it. What I say there is what one of our generals on the staff declared. Good Lord! when it’s a case of judging of his soldiers, acknowledge, all the same, that he knows better than you do.”

CHAPTER XIII

A BRETON

ONE day, at four o'clock in the morning, there was at the hospital an extraordinary signal for action, which awoke the staff, and made them get up in a hurry. From barracks and rooms, the infirmarians rushed precipitately, their eyes blinking from the sudden awakening whilst they were fast asleep.

The corridors were lighted up, and in the wards, the wounded men, especially those who had but lately come there, looked as though they had awakened from a nightmare. This hubbub in the middle of the night had perhaps made them dream of an alarm, and the so recent memory of nocturnal surprises came back to disturb their minds for an instant, overworked during so many days by the terrible watches in the trenches.

Outside, the motor-ambulances were hooting. Stretchers were being got ready, stifled moans were heard behind the curtains.

It was new suffering which was arriving for us,

wretchedness and pain. It was another convoy of wounded, who had paid dearly for the re-taking of a few mole-hills—advances of fifty yards, which we regard as insignificant, and which are so many victories.

We ought, however, to be accustomed to these painful sights, which the unpacking of these poor human wrecks, panting and pitiful, so frequently repeated, offers us. All the same, a feeling of anguish would seize us each time, and I know nothing more painful than the sight, in the pale light of the lanterns, of those outstretched bodies which one had to raise so gently, so as not to exasperate the wounds with which their flesh was riddled.

They were for the most part Bretons, who had come from the Somme, where, like so many others, they had held the line, and had borne the brunt with an endurance more admirable even than the activity of our legendary offensives.

There were four in the first ambulance, four stretcher cases, that is to say badly lamed ones. When we opened the doors not one of them spoke. It seemed as though they were asleep or dead. But their eyes were wide open, but such quiet eyes, holding no impatience in them. They were waiting. Patience had become to them a virtue of every day and in all circumstances.

“ Well, comrades ! you must be horribly tired.”

A cheerful voice, and certainly one not belonging to a dying man, replied, revealing a stupefying good humour—

“ One is a good deal better off in this than in the trenches, I can tell you ! ”

“ That man’s a philosopher ! ” remarked one of the infirmarians who was helping me to unload these four jolly fellows.

We began with the one who had answered us, and he began at once to play the fool.

“ Go ahead, my friends, lift out my old carcase, and if you hurt me, you may be sure I shan’t yell. I’m not a little girl ! ”

Ah ! the brave boy, the fine Frenchman, that Breton was ! His wound was appalling. An exploding bullet had laid open his forearm. Presently when we should dress his gangrenous wound, we should see a gaping hole, an opening through which we could put three fingers, a wide breach in the limb traversed by only two tendons, which have withstood destruction.

And this badly wounded man, who certainly had never had the habit, and especially at such a moment, the desire of showing off, this man of thirty-six made a joke of his pain, and found amusing epithets with which to describe the Boches, who have crippled him for life. And in

spite of everything, his gaiety was so catching that we laughed heartily while we were carrying him in. He had just explained how it came about that, being wounded in the arm, he had travelled on a stretcher.

“ It’s because those vile brutes chucked another lump of lead at my right flank.”

And off he started about the Germans, at whom he railed in his lusty way, without anger, in the calm, singing voice of a peasant from Finistère.

“ Oh, I shall see them again, one day or another ; we shall meet again. All this has been taken into account, and must be settled up.”

It was more than probable that he would never see them again, and that for him, the war was over. But, the idea had taken root in that obstinate head, the idea which keeps a soldier still standing and forces him on ; revenge for the harm that has been done. And it was in continuing to jeer at the Boches that our new boarder, Michel Kergourlay, made his entrance into ward number three.

This man was the father of five children. He had been fighting for two months without stopping, filled with anxiety for his own life, and for that of his wife and bairns, which was much more poignant. He was neither discouraged, nor demoralised.

On the contrary, he brought with him, from those rabbit-holes where our sublime army fights obscurely, a strength of endurance, a reserve of courage which the ordeal had doubled. And they were all the same. Not one complained or rebelled. The idea which governed anxiety, overcame discouragement, cooled impatience, was the same which inspired the magnificent watchword "to hold on to the end."

And they had "held on" these Bretons, with a valiant obstinacy which caused their territorial regiment to be mentioned in the order of the day.

Kergourlay described the last fight to me, the last great morning of his life as a warrior. This tiller of the soil struck the true note of real patriotism; and the story of their last charge, in which moreover a priest played the leading part, was a page which must not be allowed to perish.

My Breton and I began by not being friends at all. Even truth obliges me to own that from the first day he awoke in me a most pronounced antipathy. Not that, as one might imagine, because of any argument, or, at the least, a spontaneous misunderstanding between him, a layman, and me, a priest, or for any religious reason. On principle, but for quite a different reason, Kergourlay sulked with me, and even

went so far as to employ hard epithets, because he had suspected me, not without cause, of laughing at his Christian faith.

We had just landed him in front of his bed, and like all those who had forgotten the delight of tranquil repose, and the voluptuousness of white sheets, the fine fellow had given himself up to my care. I tore off his tunic after having cut it away in places so as to free his bad arm. As to his trousers, they were grey and shining with hard clay. The material had disappeared beneath the coating of wet earth which had dried on the way. Think of it! After having existed for sixty days in the muddy trenches, in the sticky, slimy water, after having sojourned in the midst of these swamps, ceaselessly diluted with fresh rain, after having lived for two months in that, hardly leaving at all those holes which wild beasts would have deemed uninhabitable!

Must not our French race, lovers of light and of exploits in the full light of day, have seized unanimously, fully, the sense of the new kind of heroism!

Only by seeing this man so frightfully, so inexpressibly dirty, did I understand better than ever the meaning of this war of ferocious patience, of audacious tenacity! the heroism of these fine "poilus," descendants of our famous musketeers,

whose dream it was to die clean and beautiful—who now fall beneath the bullets of the Prussians, already half-buried in the mud of their fortresses. But what a symbol, too, this mud from the defended country, these particles of earth, stuck to the flanks of its defenders—earth of our country, which clothes with sacred covering those who fight for her, and go forth to die, with a fragment of France to cover them, to protect them, to serve them as a winding sheet. It was thus that I saw my Breton, and without his guessing it, I admired him, the impassive Celt, who gave himself up to our care and, docile as a child, allowed himself to be undressed.

Anxiety for his small belongings worried him quite as much and more than his wounds. I fumbled in his pockets, and one by one, took out from them the odd, useless, strange objects with which they were filled.

The pockets of a soldier at war are the most extraordinary jumble imaginable.

In them he carries everything that is dear to him and that he wishes to keep, in spite of everything, even when wounded or even dead. Knife, chocolate, letters, cartridges, folding fork, tobacco, washball, fragments of shell—all that was spread out on his bed, and my lad stroked them, and gently put them in order, as though he were

stirring up with these objects, all his tragic memories.

“Look in my tunic again, to the right, there is something more.”

I plunged my hand again in the opening hemmed with mud which crumbled as I did so, and right at the bottom, entangled, but whole and unbroken, I drew out a rosary of hard beads strung on to a rusty chain.

A rather mischievous idea came into my head.

“What do you do with that, my lad?”

And perhaps beneath my moustache, a smile made itself visible, which was certainly not a mocking one, but my Breton considered it certainly as disrespectful, since abruptly, insolently, and taking me assuredly for someone else, he took me up in these terms—

“What I do with that, you stupid fool, that’s not your affair, and those who won’t be pleased, can tell me so.”

At that moment, another pain than that of his wound clouded his face. With an abrupt gesture he laid his rosary well in sight on the coverlet, and in the same tone that he would have used to tell the Boches to halt—unanswerable: “It never left me in war, and it isn’t here that I’ll let it go.”

“Stupid fool!” I think that never did a bad-sounding epithet seem so agreeable as that

which my friend Kergourlay shot forth at me that morning, point blank.

At first I did not want to disillusion him ; I wanted to see how far his faith went.

It was useless for me to redouble my attentions, and care for the Breton ; from that moment he suspected me, and showed me, without any circumspection, the antipathy with which I had inspired him. In the afternoon I was bold enough to ask him in an aggressive way, what he meant to do with his rosary.

“ But, in short, do you want to sleep with it ? ”

This time he replied by calling me one of those names which are at present reserved for the Germans, and for which one employs a synonym, even in cookery books. And Kergourlay turned his head away in a rage, so as not to behold the miscreant, which I seemed to be, any longer.

I had no longer the courage to play such a shabby part, and, taking him by the hand, I said—

“ Old friend, I was only teasing you when I made fun of your rosary. I am a curé, in spite of my moustache, and we shall be the best of friends.”

His face lit up, and he shouted with laughter.

“ Oh, that’s better, I must say. Only, you

must own that if I called you bad names, you jolly well deserved them ! ”

From that minute I devoted myself to assuaging his pain, and in the evening, seated by his bedside, I listened to the fine recital of what he had seen and suffered.

As to him, all the toil of war, all its perilous enterprises, its deadly risks, and unforeseen terrors were framed in one village only, one of those spots ten times lost, ten times regained, in which the most tragic days of his life were spent. An obscure combatant, he did his duty to the last, between a little wood and a cemetery. It was there that he saw, like so many of his fellow soldiers, how the curés of France spread around them the flame of heroism which dares all dangers and induces victory.

It was the last day, two hours before the terrible blow which smashed the arm of my new friend. At dawn, the order had reached the captain to dislodge at all costs an enemy battalion, which never ceased peppering our trenches. Cost what it might, they had to get from under cover, hurl themselves with their bayonets on the enemy, surprise him with the suddenness of the attack, and do for the demoralised Boches on the spot. The men had closed up round their officer, clutching their weapons, ready to spring. One

of them said laughingly, "We're done for, captain."

The captain replied in the same way: "The lieutenants and I are, that's certain, as they always begin with us. As to you other fellows, I wouldn't give a halfpenny for your hides."

A murmur of hilarity ran the length of the trench. Those men, sick of doing nothing, were intoxicated with the thought of moving about a bit, of making an advance, of running, of being brave in face of the enemy and in the face of death.

The order was given, and they all, like a force let loose, sprang up the bank, and the dance began.

It was terrible. On both sides it was one of those massacres in which the adversaries spit out their hatred, tear at one another, and strangle one another; too close together to shoot or to run one another through.

This lasted twenty atrocious minutes. There were hardly any wounded; most of them were dead, hacked into pieces, trampled to death on the ground, soaked with blood. Once again had the French bayonet opened a breach in the German wall, and the heroism of our men had beaten the way to a glorious halting-place. The Boches went back into their holes to prepare for a

renewed attack, whilst their guns, even with the ground, swept it, and rendered it untenable, so that it had to be abandoned.

Not one officer remained of the company. As the captain had said half an hour before, it was a settled thing for them.

One commander alone remained to that little troop of forty whole men; a little sergeant of twenty-five, a priest, the curé of the company.

Around him, his arm was bleeding without his seeming to notice it, confident in his tried courage, the soldiers grouped themselves. They looked for courage in his eyes; they counted upon his words to give them the necessary energy for completing their formidable task. For they knew that soon the others, "là-bas," would return to avenge their loss, and that they must again climb the tragic slope, and repulse them victoriously, so that this trench, a fragment of France, should not fall into their hands.

The priest sergeant was quite a little man, with a timid air, in spite of all that he had seen and done. He was one of those in whom the gentleness of the priesthood is most apparent.

And yet, the forty "poilus" who surrounded him, knew that he was more of a commander by his soul than by his rank. And these big children,

covered with mud, stained with blood, smiled on him with joy, as strong men smile at the fulness of courage which they admire and which subjugates them.

“Sergeant, while we’re about it, we must get out of the mire, and give them a last pounding.”

The abbé looked at them, and silently questioned them. Some of them looked sulky. Their nerves were still quivering from the fight, and their flesh shuddering from the frightful encounter. It was at them that the priest looked fixedly. Then, in a voice which seemed strange in his small child’s mouth, and whose jeering tone revealed an old stager in war, he said, “Great Scott! one would think that there were some among you who are funking it!”

He went up to four or five men who looked as though they did not want to quit the trench, simply because they were dog-tired, and certainly not because they were afraid.

“Well, then—what is it? Is it funk or what?”

“It’s not that,” grumbled a Breton, “I dunno what it is.”

The young sergeant smiled as he looked at them.

“I know what’s the matter with you. You don’t care a hang about death, what’s bothering you is what comes afterwards. It’s the fear of not going to it properly—it’s the fear of not

knowing where you'll wake up on the other side."

They held their tongues, and their silence gave the answer.

"Ah, that's what troubling you. Well, my men, you may thank God that I'm still alive to set you on the right road to the great halting-place.

"Now, my children, go down on your knees and say the act of contrition. Let each one pour forth his sins into the hands of the great Commander who is here, who is looking at you. I give you a minute to demand and to obtain the pardon which will send you to heaven, as straight and as quick as a bullet."

There was silence, moving, sublime, during which grimy hands made the sign of the cross on the breasts which were to be so shortly shattered.

Then, erect, the priest absolved these men who were so soon to die. Then, as soon as they had all risen, their eyes aflame with a new bravery, and which one felt was invincible, the sergeant commanded in a low tone—

"Now, out you go, there's only one order; take the trench, and after that, the roll-call—up above!"

And with his thin hand, he pointed to heaven.

A prodigious rush, a terrible flight, a formidable spring through the hail of bullets and bayonets with which the German line bristled. Thirty men were killed. The sergeant was the first of all. But the trench was taken.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CONFESSION ON THE PARAPET

A VERY animated gossiping had grouped six wounded men round the bed of my Breton, Kergourlay. These jolly fellows had almost forgotten the tragic life led by them for so many months, and they would speak of the terrible days through which they had lived, with the same serenity with which they recalled, in order to distract themselves, the terrifying episodes of the strangest story of adventures. I listened to them. They had, in order to describe the war, such vivid words that they seemed to reproduce the situations with the fidelity of photography—and to depict them in their living colours.

It seemed to me, while listening to them, that I was witnessing unreal scenes, conceived by some imagination, creative of the fantastic and fabulous.

Each one of these jolly fellows recalled his souvenirs and became by turns picturesque and touching.

Glory triumphed and displayed itself to these

lads whom death had grazed so often. And from those brave young men with their heroic souls I learned the history of what will be, later on, the great epos of nations. I listened to them speaking of their Christian faith, revived or resuscitated. And priests, religion, fine inspirations were mixed up so intimately with the prowess of war, that my wounded naturally made an eloquent vindication of our curé-soldiers, those fine musketeers who imposed respect and enforced admiration.

Around Kergourlay, stretched out on his bed, the gossiping became more lively. The playing cards were scattered about on the neighbouring bed, and with his pipe in his mouth, and with an important gesture his neighbour, Le Noc, was telling in a simple manner this story which made one laugh and cry.

“ My dear fellows, I didn't do anything more startling than you others, but one evening, the Boches used quite a hundred kilograms of iron and lead on my solitary carcase, alone.”

A young fellow, class 14, cut him short.

“ That was the evening of the 7th of December. I believe you, old man. I was there.”

The first speaker, Le Noc, hastily took up the thread of his discourse again.

“ Precisely, he was there, and it was in ‘ the

rabbit-hole,' and I'll chuck my pipe out of the window if I exaggerate by one word."

Then he looked at me, flattered by my attention.

"Ah, Father, this will please you, because it's about a curé, not a funkler, and who knew his trade jolly well.

"That evening, the Boches bore us an ill-will which surpassed the average. They hurled nuts weighing fifty kilograms at us, so that one would have said they didn't know what to do with them.

"We others were singing away in our dark holes. There was Sergeant Ristoulet, who made us roar with laughter at his gascon jokes and words, which he alone manages to find. When the thunder-bolts made too much row, he would hit the roof of the trench, crying out: 'Really, you up there, you mustn't make such a beastly row. There are some fellows who want to sleep on the ground-floor.'

"Then, when they smacked at the embankment of the trench, which was half beaten in, Ristoulet would put on an angry expression.

"'By heavens! there are some bad-manners about in this world. For goodness' sake don't bang the doors so loudly that it shakes all the fixtures . . .'

"This quaint sergeant never stopped. There or in open country he always found something

to say. That trench, it was almost a box at the Vaudeville. Only, there were no cushions, and besides, the water came up to the middle of our calves. But, after all, one can't have everything . . .

“Everyone was so jolly in it; it was in laughing like madmen that we awaited the hour when ‘Père’ Joffre would permit us to poke our snouts out and to look about a little to see if the sky was still in the same place.

“It's true that we giggled in our bear's den, and yet, sometimes, there would pass through one's heart a kind of draught, which froze it. It wasn't absolutely funk, but something which seemed to bear a family resemblance to it . . . we weren't frightened, if you will, but it was as though, at those times, someone behind us called out: ‘All the same, you'd be safer anywhere else but here.’

“Then, when that little feeling had hold of you, the ‘marmites’ of the Boches made the devil of a row, and the men, smothered with splinters, looked more than twice dead. What would you? It appears that everyone goes through it.

“That evening, it was my turn. It was a Saturday; the rain was streaming down from above, as though specially charged with filling our bathing-tubs. All my past filed off before me.

I had a sort of cinema in my pate, which made me see different views of my village: father, mother, my sisters, a heap of people who never stopped crying, and repeating the same thing over and over again: 'Where is our son now? Alive or dead, prisoner or wounded?'

"It was no use my crying out inside me, 'that's enough, I don't want to see any more!' the machine kept going on, and the more I shut my eyes the clearer it was.

"And with all that, a voice kept calling out at the back of my noddle. 'Poor old chap! it doesn't matter what you do, you'll never escape. There are Boches all round and you'll all clink, every man jack of you!' Ah! I can assure it wasn't pleasant. I couldn't laugh. I had a lump of lead in my swallow. The fellows, who saw quite well what was up, took it out of me and said: 'Oh! so it's your week to be funky!' I can tell you I had a blue funk on me!

"Besides, worse than the worry, which gave me thoughts blacker than Chinese ink, I had arrears of old tom-fooleries on my conscience—like an entangled brushwood. And through all that, death seemed more beastly and more horrible. For I must tell you that we weren't always giggling and fooling in our trenches—and when one is forced to keep silence, a whole

heap of sad thoughts crop up, about things one thought one had forgotten.

“One knows that one isn’t an animal, and that a man’s end is not at all the end, but the beginning of other things.

“It was that, particularly, which upset me that famous evening. My conscience kept on chattering: ‘The moment has come, my lad, for pulling yourself together and for giving me a clean up!’

“I was quite keen to do it, but how to manage it? One can get into mischief alone, quite well, but to get out of it, there must be two of us, me and the curé. And where was the second to be found? There had been one in our den, as it happens, some days back. But, poor devil, he was far away now, very ill certainly, perhaps dead, seeing that a splinter of a shell had wounded him in the stomach. All that was very true, but it didn’t console me a bit. The more worried I was the more I had a wild desire to confess myself. Alongside us, in the other trench, there was also a curé; we knew one another very well, for we had just missed being bagged by a patrol of Uhlans the pair of us. But, for the time being, we were separated by thirty yards of ground, more difficult to get across than the distance from Quimper to Paris.

“ I kept thinking of him, of how to manage to see him, of the ways of getting to him without being spotted, because I told myself : ‘ If you’ve got to be killed first, it’s not worth while putting your nose outside.’

“ And you’d never guess how much the idea tormented me. It worried me so that the fellows thought I was like a death’s head at the feast, and amused themselves by jeering at me in a most unpleasant way.

“ ‘ Le Noc has got a stiff neck ! ’

“ Or else they would tease me unmercifully. ‘ Call his nurse then, and tell her to bring him a jug of cider and pancakes of buckwheat.’ They said so many things that time, that I was in a furious rage. But the angrier I got, the more did those barbarians make fun of me. At last the sergeant thrust a flat hand on my shoulder, and with an air of selling me at a reduced price, he said : ‘ Old fellow, if it’s because you want a little fresh air, don’t be shy ; go and take a little stroll on the balcony, and see what kind of weather it is.’ I looked at him without laughing and demanded : ‘ Is it true ? Do you mean it ? ’

“ ‘ Right-oh. It’s time to find out what those others in front of us are up to. If they make a hole in *your* skin or in someone else’s, it’s all the same to me.’

“Oh, I can tell you I didn’t wait long. I snatched up my things, and I said to them—

“ ‘Good-night, my friends, for the present, and there’s my address. If I don’t come back, you may be sure that there’s been a smash up. Neither wounded, nor prisoner, nor missing. There’ll be no doubt about it ; have me put down as dead, without any fuss.’

“One gets so used to that kind of thing, that my pals, when they saw me get out of the hole, didn’t even *dream* of seeing me cut in four, or riddled like a sieve, or disembowelled. My best friend wrung me by the hand, and said—

“ ‘Go ahead, old chap, and without wishing you ill, if *that* must happen to you, I’ll try to get hold of your boots, because mine drink up more water in five minutes than I drink wine in five weeks.’

“I grunted as I gripped him by the hand—

“ ‘That’s all right. You may as well take the feet with them. That will save you the trouble of unlacing them !’

“Well, there I was on the parapet. The fog was so thick that one could have cut it with a knife ; but one would think that those devils of Boches have candles in their eyes . . . because I hadn’t gone three steps, when a dozen bullets whizzed round my ears. I, who had become quite jolly,

merely through breathing a little fresh air, I made this reflection—

“ ‘If you remain still, stuck there like a telegraph pole, they’ll knock you into pulp.’

“So I got down flat on my belly, in the mud and water, and I began to crawl at the rate of fifty metres an hour, at the most. And, by gum, I can tell you it’s no joke to play the snail, under the circumstances. So much so, that when I came to a barrier, I almost felt inclined to turn back. The disgusting trench gave me the impression of being a magnificent room, compared to the filthy muck in which I was dabbling like a badly brought up duck. I’ll bet my comrades would have given their heads to have been able to see me stuck in the mud! . . . My lor! And then, in spite of my wretchedness, at each yard I gained, I said to myself: ‘You’re making headway, damn it all! Only to be going to confession in this manner, will earn you half of your absolution.’

“I spent a good twenty minutes in getting past the two poles which barred the entrance to the field. Three bullets caressed my skin, without going through. They may have thought that they would catch cold in passing through my carcase, which was colder than the bottom of a well.

“At last, I got to the edge of the trench, and

I was just going to run the risk of putting my head over the parapet, when I saw a great shadow rise up, which had jumped up like a Jack in the box.

“ ‘Just you wait a bit,’ it said to me, ‘my good fellow, and I’ll teach you to make us visits without being announced!’

“ ‘And I saw him raise his bayonet with which to run me through.

“ ‘Hullo!’ I said very softly, ‘you’d better see if you’re not taking me for some one else, first.’

“ ‘Then the shadow began to giggle and even to shake with laughter.

“ ‘It’s you, Le Noc?’

“ ‘Good Lord! who else do you think it would be, at such an hour? And you, you are really Maranson?’

“ ‘I rather think so,’ replied the shadow.

“ ‘Maranson, the curé?’

“ ‘There aren’t two Maransons in the battalion.’

“ ‘Then,’ I said to him, ‘my good Maranson, it’s not a case of putting it off for long. Confess me quickly, so that I can get it off my chest as soon as possible. I’m coming down . . .’

“ ‘Hold your tongue! you’re all right where you are.’

“ ‘Where I am, flat on my tummy?’

“ ‘One does as one can,’ said he kindly. ‘Now,

go ahead ! I'll dispense you from the Confiteor . . . lump 'em together, and begin with the biggest . . .'

" ' Well, you see, old fellow—Father, that is to say—its years and years . . . '

" ' I tell you to do what you can without bothering if its years or centuries. Besides, look here, I'll drag it all out myself.'

" I only had ' yeses ' and ' noes ' to answer. And, in proportion as the business advanced, each time I came out with one of my sins, it seemed to me as though a splinter of a shell had been taken out of my chest.

" The Boche cannons were bellowing horribly overhead, but I didn't hear them. Only one sound filled my ears and my heart, that of the low voice of the abbé, who was saying to me : ' My boy, it was fine of you to do that. Now it would be very astounding if you were to be afraid. You are vaccinated against the microbe of funk. God is with you, and He is a jolly sight stronger than William. Try not to lose Him again, now that you've hold of Him. And then, you know, death is not any more dangerous than an empty cartridge. A bullet which would knock you on the head would be neither more nor less than a first-class ticket to Paradise.' He gave me his blessing, and then we embraced one another.

“ ‘And now,’ he said, ‘you are going to crawl back to fulfil your mission. If you don’t get back, well, we know where we shall meet again.’

“I went off backwards, on my elbows, and I was so happy that I chuckled quietly to myself and made all kinds of ridiculous remarks. ‘Don’t be afraid, my boy, if by chance a bullet were to get you. I’ll guarantee that you will not do yourself much harm in falling, since you are already on the ground. Only, you must not remain there, all the same.’ I had a mission entrusted to me, and they did not let me out to crawl along the embankment just to get plugged by a bullet or so. ‘Down there, in our hole, the others are waiting for me, and who knows? perhaps that beggar is already dreaming of the pleasure of pushing his old feet into my new waders.’

“In front of me, a hundred yards away, was the Boche trench, and when I listened attentively I heard hollow movements and a noise of iron clinking which was suspicious.

“In our own trenches, the men were easy in their minds, and counted on me, and suddenly in thinking of that, my blood began to run cold . . .

“ ‘Idiot!’ I said to myself. ‘Will you wake up and do your duty?’

“Then off I went, always on my stomach, in the direction of the German trench. Well, I can tell

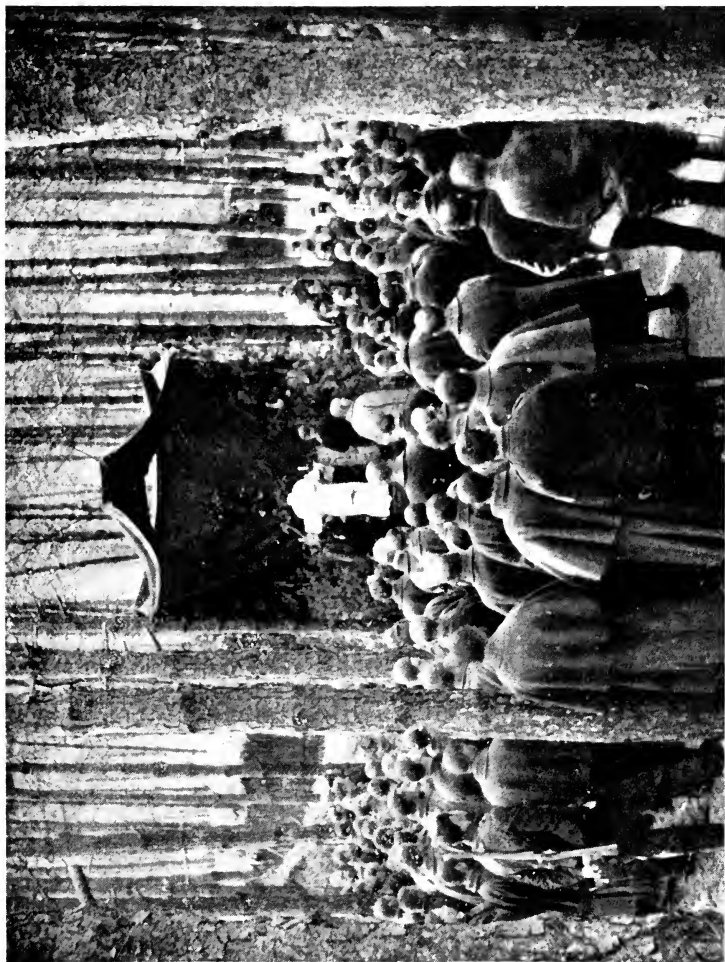


Photo: Topical.

GOOD FRIDAY AT THE FRONT.

you it was just in time. Hardly had I got round a big oak-tree when I saw, facing me, black shadows gliding along on four paws, towards my trench, towards my pals, towards the ditch, which was then one of the barriers of France . . . Ah ! it didn't last long. I sprang up, I jumped a heap of stones, I bounded towards our molehill, yelling for all I was worth, so as to be sure that they would be warned before the attack.

“ ‘Hi ! sergeant, hullo, comrades, attention, the Boches are coming !’

“ You can imagine that, me alone, standing in the dark, what a target I must have been to those damned Prussians. There was nothing else to be done . . . Bang—bang—to right, to left, all over the place. It was the moment for recalling the sermon of my abbé, I can assure you. ‘A bullet is a first-class ticket for Paradise.’ All the time I was running, I expected it, that ticket, and at every step, I said to myself : ‘ Provided that the others hear me . . .’ and I kept on calling out, until I felt a formidable blow on my right shoulder . . . and then in my mouth, something warm, and which had not a first-rate taste. I fell two yards from the trench . . . My ears buzzed with the noise of the storm, through which I heard the gun-shots which burst forth in tens and hundreds. And then, at the end of I

don't know how long, I felt that they were carrying me down into the trench, and then an idiotic thing happened. I was breathing behind just as much as I was in front . . . I should have said at that moment, that I had my mouth in my back. I opened my eyes ; there were four of them round me and the sergeant said : ' He's certainly had a bullet through his lung.' And my friend, who I suppose, still had his eyes on my waders, repeated again and again to those who were looking at me : ' Poor devil, assuredly he's done for.' And it was always at my feet he looked."

Le Noc having finished, without the least bit of bragging, the story of his fine adventure, burst out laughing, never dreaming that like so many others, he was simply one of those young heroes whom our golden books will never mention.

" Ah ! my hat ! " cried he, " but what a face my pal must have made when he saw me go off with my waders."

Then, seeing that his story had greatly interested me, because of the religious note which gave it its value and its heroic turn :

" And then you know, Father, if I had not had the idea of going to confession, what on earth would the section in the trenches have taken for its cold ? "

CHAPTER XV

A CHEERFUL SET

“ WHERE do you come from ? ”

“ From Perthes-les-Hurlus.”

“ Things are all right over there ? ”

Heads were raised, and also the head and shoulders of some of them, to look over the side of the stretcher.

“ How are things going ? ” said a great red-headed chap from the Pas-de-Calais ; “ well, we took three hundred yards in three days.”

We looked questioningly at him to see if he spoke seriously or in jest. No, he was not joking, and the others with their eyes reddened with night-watches in the man-hunt, confirmed by their testimony what their comrade had just announced.

Then, these wounded men with wide bandages, with enormous splints which revealed horrible fractures, began to tell us the last news of the war, in the midst of which they had been living for the last five months.

They had been travelling for two nights and a day. Their wounds were infected frightfully, dirty, even gangrened. Presently, in spite of being accustomed to such things, we should have a shiver of disgust, the natural feeling of horror, on uncovering their decomposed flesh. These valiant fellows, who ought to have been overcome by fatigue, had but one thought; to assure us of the truth and to proclaim the invincible vitality of our country, who awaits in the sublime serenity of her faith the certain hour of victory.

They kept on speaking even while we were carrying them off to the repose which their broken bodies were calling out for.

And when we undressed them—hacking their tunics into bits, and cutting away their vests, buried in their wounds—the desire for describing how things were going “là-bas” was stronger than their pain, and they kept on assuring us that all was well; that we had got them, this time, and the hour of deliverance was at hand.

It was not that they were feverishly elated, nor was it a mania with them to appear greater than nature. But in those hearts, never clouded over by discouragement, there was the obstinate will to believe, to hope, to reveal France just as she is.

“ No, they won't get any further, now ! ”

They wanted to sleep; they couldn't. So many memories possessed them and assailed them in their tumultuous rush. Many of them had had no news for months. Their dangerous life still had hold of them; they could not banish from their minds the thought of war and their hatred for the Boches.

Then the head doctor came into the ward. He was walking quickly.

His searching eyes soon perceived the new patients. He stooped over them, examined their wounds, took note of their state. He was gay, reassuring, paternal; he found the right word with which to comfort and to console. The authority which emanates from him, the assurance of his judgment, were a first dressing, so to say, and the best. One could hear through the wards the reassuring words which he spoke in his clear voice.

"Why, yes, my dear fellow, you'll get well. It'll take time, but we'll put your leg right. This broken arm? Hm! it's very well broken; it'll mend all by itself, nicely."

He scattered on his way, hope and confidence, and when he had gone, those who had been tormented by uncertainty and pain expressed aloud their happiness at being reassured.

"He's fine, the Major . . . He's like a Father."

It was a joy to see these good fellows laughing heartily, and tasting to the full the ecstasy of being alive, after having lived for months in the dreadful neighbourhood of death. To laugh, to swagger, to joke without any anxiety, was invariably their admirable state of mind. This war had made Frenchmen of them again. The blood of battle had awakened their vigour and had rejuvenated the race, as it had made their faith blossom forth anew. There was a zouave who had arrived with a dragging leg, caused by a bullet which had gone deep into the calf. He was suffering from the wound and its consequences, a partial paralysis, which made his foot waggle up and down "like an empty nose-bag."

What vexed him particularly was to think that he had a bit of German trash in his skin. "Boche steel, which is nothing else, perhaps, than cast-iron." He had never done feeling the muscles and fingering the place where the projectile was.

"It isn't because it hurts, but because it's humiliating to drag that muck about inside one."

It became a sort of obsession with him, which pursued him like a stupid nightmare. From the first day, he implored the doctor to take it out of him as quickly as possible, but there were others round about whose need to be operated on was more urgent. My zouave spent hours in prowling

about in the ward, where the wounds were dressed, or in the corridor on to which the Major's room opened. He would lie in wait for him, put himself in evidence when the doctor appeared, and would await the opportunity, so often missed, of having "two words with him, with regard to this affair."

At the end of a few days he grew impatient, then exasperated. When he would return to the ward, his head hanging, he would be greeted by a storm of ridiculous pleasantries.

He would hit himself on the leg, curse it with rage and make it responsible for his vexation.

"Why don't you spit it out, the filthy lump of stuff? Aren't you ashamed of keeping it in your hide?"

His rudely tried patience could hold out no longer. One guessed that he had got hold of an idea, and that an obstinate resolve had taken root in his brain.

"As it's like that, we'll see if we can't manage the job all alone."

That evening he went off to bed early, after having as usual sworn at his poor swollen leg, and admonished the German bullet as though it could hear him.

"I tell you that you shan't remain for long in my carcase; you've jolly well got to come out, or I'll know the reason why!"

I was on duty, and about eleven o'clock, when making the round, I saw my zouave gesticulating while the others were asleep and snoring. A moonbeam lit up his bed, on which, seated and preoccupied, the poor fellow was energetically probing his wound and seeming to make cabalistic signs over it.

Was he a sorcerer, and did he think that by these ridiculous signs he would weave a spell?

I went up to him, meaning to make him lie down, and to counsel him to leave his wound in peace as he risked poisoning it. But—what was this? It was not merely signs, which he was making with so much attention, that he did not see me approach the bed. In his hand, the queer fellow held his big pocket-knife, which had been through the campaign with him, and had opened innumerable tins of "singes." And the old notched blade, twisted and rusty, was digging away at his calf, and as I reached his bed, had just cut a lump out of the live flesh, from which the blood was streaming, soaking the sheets.

I saw the zouave dig his fingers into the widened opening, and hunt about wildly for the object which had caused him so many humiliations—the Boche bullet, which he had determined to get out at all costs.

Where were you, oh ye rigid principles of

aseptics! Severe lessons by which an infirmary's brains are haunted daily—terrifying theories of contaminated wounds, infected by the use of instruments imperfectly sterilised. "To touch a wound with fingers not sufficiently washed is to risk making it difficult of healing and perhaps impossible."

Well! well! an old blade which this very evening had cut a slice of meat, and fingers, sticky with blacking and grease, those were the sterilised instruments of my surgeon, who stoically extracted for himself a bullet which had entered to the depth of three centimetres into the thickness of his muscles.

I thought of stopping him—why? the operation was too advanced and the danger would not be lessened if he finished or put off his job. I was content to merely look at him, and without worrying myself further about the risk of infection, which threatened that healthy flesh, I observed my soldier's face. It was expressionless. There was not a trace of impatience or of suffering on it. The young devil, instead of making me uneasy, touched me. His energy was uncommonly like heroism. The keen pain of it didn't touch his heart. In that hospital ward, and in the strange and hidden deed which he was engaged in, the zouave was the brave being that he was "là-bas"

—the valiant fellow who endured pain without a murmur and could contemplate his blood flowing from a long open wound, made by his own hands, without frowning.

It was a touching sight. Indeed, no ! I would not stop him for anything. It is always so fine to see a man in the grip of pain who accepts and bears it with the fine disdain of quiet strength. Besides he is more than quiet, he is a madcap, and always a zouave. For the tenth time he thrust his thumb into the gaping wound and muttered :

“ Perhaps if I were to enlarge the button-hole . . . ”

At any rate it would not come out. The operator raised his head, and puffed a bit. The light from the moon shone on his forehead and showed the beads of sweat on it, which he wiped away with the cuff of his sleeve, as a workman does when he prepares to make a fresh start.

Never had he had a more willing energy in his French soul, even at the time of those furious charges, and terrible attacks where the entire manhood is occupied in the deadly onrush. With his left hand he grasped the mangled calf, with a pressure which one guessed must be terrific ; with his blood-stained fingers he hunted with rage for

the German fugitive, who seemed to be defending itself like a wild beast in the depths of its lair.

A few seconds longer, then a jerk of the whole body, and a radiant smile of triumph lit up the streaming face. Then with a gesture of triumph, he brandished a little red object, shapeless.

“ Ah, you filthy old thing ! I knew quite well that I'd have the last word ! ”

But he pronounced the triumphal words at the top of his voice, as one shouts a victory. His neighbours wakened with a start, raised their heads, and with blinking eyes demanded to know what these words meant, which the other kept repeating in his noisy joy.

“ I've got it, the jade ! ”

A wounded man towards the middle of the ward, muttered in a bad-tempered way : “ What have you got hold of, you fool ? ”

“ Why, my bullet, of course ; the German bullet which had buried itself in my paw.”

And it became then quite an event. He had spoken for such a time about his famous bullet, that it had become celebrated.

“ It's the truth, no humbug, you've got it out ? ”

“ I believe you, my boy, there it is—and not twisted—quite new, ready to serve again.”

The event was spread. Heavy sleepers opened

their eyes, and in their turn were informed of what had caused this nocturnal clamour.

“It’s the zouave. It appears that he has pulled out his bullet.”

An ugly fellow hopped out of bed. “Good for you, old chap. I must see it.”

Four or five surrounded the zouave-surgeon, who now was advertising himself loudly.

“With my knife, my good fellows—one needs some stomach! Look at it, it nearly got to the bone—it’s more than an incision, it’s a hole made by a ‘marmite.’”

Admiration filled them all. Amadou, the Senegalese, half sitting up, ended by understanding the importance of the event, and celebrated in his own way the exploit of his comrade.

“Thou have got bullet out with knife, thou not frighten—thou good for cut the throat of Boches.”

And he broke out into a loud, child’s laugh, one of those piercing laughs of a mirthful gamin. I had to threaten them, to make all those jolly lads cuddle themselves under their eider-down quilts again, because the zouave, who felt his popularity on the increase, kept on telling again and again the story of his adventure. For the twentieth time, he recommenced the story which the others listened to religiously.

“I said to myself, said I, since the doctors

don't want to take any notice of it, it's little me who must manage the business all alone. Then I took my knife and I rummaged about in the meat."

Needless to add, that my zouave didn't sleep, and that once the excitement of his glorification was appeased, he howled like a thief, on account of the gaping and bleeding wound, which would not let him rest.

When the doctor heard of it next day he was wild.

"But, you fool, you may have poisoned your wound horribly."

"Oh, well," said the zouave, "could I have anything more filthy than that horror which a Boche had touched with his paws?"

Moreover, he was perfectly and quickly healed, and his blood, stronger than the microbes, gave him new flesh in about a fortnight.

"And you see, in that way I got out of taking chloroform," he would say to those who came to make him recount his prowess.

You should see them, our wounded men, when one spoke of putting them off to sleep. The fear of the mask, and of that disgusting odour which suffocates one, made them prefer a double suffering to the heavy slumber, sometimes broken by painful awakenings, and the beginning of which is a sort of stifling anguish.

Meyer, a man from Saint-Dié, red as a live ember and as jolly as a man from Bordeaux, arrived four months ago, with a femoral artery in a pitiful state.

A great big note of interrogation was to be seen on the Major's face, when for the first time we stretched this bloodless body on the operating table. He was one of the dangerously wounded men, about whom one can ask oneself if they will see the morrow dawn. At three different times in the night, he greatly alarmed the doctor on duty.

“Another hæmorrhage, and then doubtless he'll die.’

And his comrades looked at him with involuntarily sad glances, which they give to those who are going to die.

In order to save that life, which depended on the thin tissues of the damaged artery, the doctor had put forth all his energy, aided by his science and stimulated by the desire of saving a human life. For the unknown man, who was dear to him, as a soldier, a victim, and father of a family, he called on all the magnificent reserves of a talent which possesses infinite resources. He held between his hands the fragile existence of this man, with his exhausted veins, and whose last drops of blood might flow from between his fingers, taking with

them the last hope of saving him. Once again, the master triumphed. Pallid, bloodless, weakened, thin as a skeleton, Meyer was put back into his bed with more chances of living than of dying.

Vital energy came back to him slowly, and at the end of a month, this ghost had gone out for the first time into the courtyard of the hospital, carried on a stretcher, still pale, without any strength, but definitely saved. Then, later, he could get about on crutches, the leg still shrivelled up, but not at all painful. And the happy lad, having recovered his gaiety, divided his leisure between two occupations—that of collecting views of his bombarded town, and in playing wildly on the harmonica.

One day the Major met him.

“My dear fellow, your leg ought not to be bent now; stretch out that paw for me! You’ll become anchylosed.”

The other declared that it was impossible. “I’d like to, if I could, Major. I ask nothing better, but it’s stuck.”

“What do you mean, ‘stuck’?”

And it was indeed as he said. In the accented bend formed by the joint of the hip-bone, the skin of the thigh and that of the abdomen had become welded together. A fine example

of human grafting, in which nature had only too well, and unfortunately, succeeded. Our infirm man was no longer one but by accident.

“ Well, my friend, we’ll soon unstick that, so that you may walk like every one else. Only, as there is a good deal to cut, we’ll have to put you off to sleep.”

“ Oh, no thanks, then! I don’t mind being cut, but to be chloroformed, I couldn’t stand it.”

The doctor looked at him gently, with that fatherly look which the wounded, threatened with an operation, know so well.

“ But, if, my dear lad, I assure you that it will make you suffer horribly? ”

All the evening Meyer was sad. He had the pip—he was like a bear with a sore ear. No accordion, no harmonica. One would have said he had the chloroform under his nose.

Next morning, at half-past eight, the call for the condemned came. An infirmarian came to invite him graciously.

“ Meyer for the billiard-table! ”

He got up, took his crutches, and went off bravely, saluted, followed by mocking exclamations from his neighbours.

“ A good journey, old chap, good appetite! ”

“ Don’t have any bad dreams! ”

“ You’ll give us a taste out of your mug! ”

“ And try not to suck in all the chloroform, so as to leave a little for us.”

The doctors and his assistants were there, all in white, looking like ancient Druids dressed for their human sacrifices. The head doctor was making his ablutions. The preparer was sterilising the last forceps in the blue flame of the alcohol. The head of the sterilisers was unrolling his compresses, and in the middle of this impressive sight, the victim bravely made his entry.

“ I’ve brought you my carcase ! ”

They undressed him. He had in his hand a cardboard box.

“ What are you doing with that, old fellow ! You don’t want any baggage here.”

“ Yes, I do. I want it.”

Then he looked at the indiarubber mask, and with a determined gesture, he said—

“ As to you, little one, don’t put yourself out for me ; I know you only too well, but you won’t shut my jaw to-day.”

The doctor, charged with giving chloroform to the patients, took hold of the mask and said jokingly :

“ Now, then, my lad, hurry up and let me stick this over your beak.”

Meyer resisted, and this time without laughing.
“ I tell you that I won’t have it ”

“My good lad,” interposed the head doctor, “I want you to have it.”

“But, Major, there’s no need for that machine to prevent me from crying out and kicking. I’ve got something better than that.”

“You’ve got something better?”

Then he caught hold of his little cardboard box, opened it, and waved his harmonica about, as though it were an unanswerable argument.

“My munis, Major. There’s nothing like it to keep me good. I only ask you to let me play it as much as I like, as loud as I feel inclined to. Instead of howling, I’ll put all my wind into this. If you hear a single cry, or if I make the least movement, you can stick the mask on, but at least let me have a chance of trying. And then, after all, it doesn’t often happen that you perform operations like that.’

“All right,” said the doctor, who was interested and touched by the affair. “Only, I warn you, that it will be painful.”

As the other climbed on to the table, he said—
“Oh, painful! nothing like as painful as a German ‘marmite.’”

A wide gash was made in his flesh. They had to tear, to readjust, to sew it up again. Meyer responded to the sharp pain by a redoubling of staccato notes, by a rain of choruses, vales,

polkas, melodies. For an entire half-hour, the ward was filled with tunes, with fantastic ritournelles, which sounded as though they were being played by a person possessed.

The blood flowed, the muscles quivered, the needle went in and out. The valiant fellow, without getting out of tune or time, thus defied during thirty minutes, the pain in his body, and laughed at pain.

Those who were passing at the time, outside the operating theatre, stopped at the door, and, rather astonished at hearing such weird music, began to laugh, saying—

“ Oh, well, they're not having such a bad time of it in there.”

They were not having such a bad time of it, but they were suffering as our modern musketeers know how to suffer, with the pride of Gallic valour and the heroic beauty of glory tinged with blood.

CHAPTER XVI

NUMBER 127

HE had a family, a fiancée, above all a mother, who had said to him when leaving, with that heroism of women that tears do not diminish :

“Do your duty ; I offer you to God, who will protect you ; and to France, who calls you.”

He came to us in one of those convoys which make women weep, and men tremble with pity.

He belonged to the 43rd regiment of Infantry, which had fought so magnificently in the trenches at Perthes, and deserved from the Commander-in-Chief these words of praise, which should be engraven on marble : “ You have surpassed the soldiers of Napoleon.”

He had come from Beauséjour, a name full of light and grace, and one which will recall in history the memory of so savage and frightful a war, that a shudder will pass over the souls of those who learn about its bloody episodes.

His first words, when he stretched himself out on the bed of agony, was to excuse himself for

needing so much attention. "I'm going to give you so much trouble."

And when a Red Cross infirmarian began to dress his wound, this musketeer of twenty-two years of age, whose soul was superbly French, said to him, smiling: "I'm not clean; you must excuse me; I can't touch my wound without fainting."

We had seen so many of these mangled bodies, pierced through and mutilated by all the caprices of shells, that one might have thought that we should feel no emotion at the sight of flesh in rags and crushed bones.

And yet, when we uncovered his wound, there was a movement of repulsion and horror among us. All the lower part of the vertebral column was broken to pieces, mangled . . . there was a gaping wound in the loins, a gangrenous spreading which blackened the right side of this poor, hideous body and made it look like a decomposed corpse.

And, by contrast, there was his fine face with its proud energetic features, and black eyes with their youthful expression, joining the grace of a child to the virility of a man, who knows how to will and command. A pale forehead, over-shadowed by dark hair. Candour, grace and strength were stamped on his countenance. There

was a man of whom a mother might well be proud and for whom life was beginning, full of great hopes and lovely dreams. He smiled, victorious over pain, and despising the ironical caress of death which lightly brushed his heart with its slower beats. When the doctors tried to reassure him, with that false certainty, which no conviction could render eloquent, he had a resigned expression which seemed to say: "I know quite well that you are doing your best to reassure me, but it is useless. I feel the pangs of death, and my breath going."

He answered simply, so as to express his gratitude for the solicitude with which they surrounded him.

"Yes, I hope to get better soon, since you give me hope."

But on his part it was an heroic lie, a way of thanking them, a delicate manner of sharing an illusion, which he did not believe in, so that the others might be tranquillised.

When quiet had been restored in the ward, he unburdened his heart to the infirmarian, watching by his bedside. Then, he confided to her his last wishes, the last recommendations of one who wishes to wrest from the oblivion of the grave messages, which will later on be the greatest treasure of the beloved ones.

His mother, he spoke gently of her to the infirmarian, seated by his side.

“ You will write to her after my death, and when my invaded town is delivered.”

For this terrible sorrow was added to the sadness of seeing himself die. The vandals had occupied his town for five months, and many weeks would pass by before his mother and his sweetheart could weep for his death.

Never had I heard anything more touching or more comforting, than the last recommendations of this young martyr of the war, who was dying obscurely beneath our eyes.

Thousands like him have disappeared from this world, as valiant, as greatly heroic, in their sacrifice, as our young trooper, whose death awakened in us fresh emotions. But for us, he resumed, in the smile which brightened his last hours, all the energy, all the serene pride of our soldiers who had already fallen in order to form the insuperable barrier against which the invader is exhausted and broken.

He spoke to us of his sanguine faith, of his hope in another life, of supernatural thoughts, which came from the depths of his soul to his lips.

“ I shall die for France, and the sacrifice of our lives will give her back her youth and glōry.”

Then the remembrance of his sweetheart flamed up in his heart.

“She is there in my little notebook. I give it to you, madame, you will keep it, and if some day, you are able to write to her, you will tell her that I died like a Christian.”

It was the same story of young love cut short, always the same, and which makes one always weep.

Only to hear that dying voice evoke the thought of the friend chosen amongst all others ; only to think of what the announcement of her shattered dreams will be to her, moved us almost to tears. He did not weep. But beneath those closed eyelids, a whole panorama extended itself—the horizon of his countryside, doubly loved, the home of his family, and that other which would never be created. A young girl appeared at her window, and looked down into the street in which the Prussians were passing by. Those are they who are killing the soldiers of France, fathers and fiancés. Where was hers ? Where could her thoughts follow him on that immense battle-front, where thousands of men were falling each day ? Was he alive, a prisoner, or buried in a hole where no one will ever recognise him again ? And the young girl looked at the assassins who were passing, at the plunderers of quiet houses,

at the murderers of the wounded, at those who shoot at field-hospitals. "Where is he? and if only I might find his body so as to weep over it."

It was doubtless this sorrow, seen in a dream, which awakened him from his nightmare. His eyes opened and rested on the white apron of the infirmarian, marked with a little Red Cross. She had never left him. This unknown sufferer had become dear to her motherly heart. He guessed that he could count on her sympathy.

"Tell me, madame, since I am going to die, will they keep my body so as to give it to my people, when the war is over?"

When he had been assured that it would be done, he still smiled. Then his soldier's heart turned again to the thoughts which most pre-occupied his mind.

"What news have you of the war? Tell me if we have advanced still more. Don't you think that soon there will be the final victory? How fine it is to fight for France."

There was a moment's silence, then he said: "You will console my mother, you will tell her that I died without regret, with the joy of knowing that I was useful and brave, right up to the end—now please call the chaplain."

An hour later, in the silent ward, in the midst of all the wounded, who were for the most part

touched and recollected, he of whom the whole hospital thought sorrowfully, since he was going to die, received the Blessed Sacrament.

He was only a soldier, young, unknown, one of the innumerable victims of the bloody hecatomb, the wounded man from Beauséjour, yesterday ignored, forgotten to-morrow. And yet, to see him brave death so courageously, with a smile on his lips, to know him to be a soldier who had kept his faith intact up to the end, as he had kept his country's orders—to see him gather together his remaining strength in order to greet his Master, was for all of us a magnificent lesson in courage and a comforting example.

Others in the ward had died of the same thing, killed by wounds not less cruel, victims too of that war, so full of painful surprises and poignant emotions.

They had died after a vainly attempted operation or in a swoon, which prostrates one and takes away, before death, the feeling of the terrifying chasm and the terrors of drawing the last breath. This lad was dying in full consciousness, his eyes fixed with confidence on the near future. He saw his end approaching, and at the age of twenty-six, he behaved as one of those brave old warriors accustomed to fighting, who defied with their ironical and proud aspect, the most terrible

reality which is given to man to catch a glimpse of here below. It was five o'clock, and I had spent long hours beside him. A slight rattling in the throat half-opened his bloodless lips and his heavy eyelids closed themselves to the last rays of the setting sun, which bathed his bed in its warm, living light. I spoke to him of the things which are not of this world, and I felt that my words sank into the depths of his soul.

“ Yes, you will pray for me to-morrow—for me, whether alive or dead, it is my last desire.”

Then to the infirmarian who stood there in silence, at the foot of the bed with the calm of a mother, who feels more than we do the sorrow of separation, and knows the ideal way of suffering for and with others—

“ Madame, you will stay beside me until the end ? ”

Night came on, and his weakness increased. Not a cry, not a sound was to be heard in the ward. The wounded who had, they too, been so near to death, understood its majesty, its sadness. There were ten or twelve of us assembled round his bed, touching with respect his cold hands which Extreme Unction had sanctified. An impressive solemnness, a consoling serenity surrounded the last moments of this soldier, who seemed to us to be the summary of all the sacrifices and of all

the similar deaths with which the days of this war were saddened.

The next morning we found him still alive. There was not a tremor in his half-decomposed body ; life remained in it only by the exertion of sheer will power.

He still smiled and spoke. His eyes sought mine, and he recognised me.

“ Ah ! ” he said, “ you have just been praying for me.”

Yes, we had been praying for him. All the priests had recommended to God this expiring life.

By his side was she who had adopted him so tenderly, and who was taking the place of his mother, so far away, who could ignore for many a long day that her son had paid, like so many others, the glorious ransom for their country. She murmured to him—

“ Offer your life up for France.”

His features lit up and his lips pronounced with a great effort—

“ Yes, for France.”

And he died quietly, far from the terrible music of the cannons, in this peaceful ward, where the mindful wounded crept about on tip-toe, so as to respect the last moments of the unknown one, in whom each one recognised the



Photo : Topical.]

BLESSING THE TOMB OF A SOLDIER IN A CEMETERY AT
THE FRONT.

features of a companion fallen in the same cause as they had themselves.

They carried him to the mortuary, and from thence to the military hospital for the post-mortem and interment.

Many ignore his name. To his comrades, he was and remained Number 127, one who arrived in the evening, and died forty-eight hours after. His end did not receive the homage of tears shed by sorrowing eyes. Soldiers don't cry for one another, and their manly regrets don't show themselves by external demonstrations.

But the memory of this passer-by, who stopped beside them on his last painful halt, remained in their hearts and touched them sincerely. The next day, I met six of them, their arms in a sling, with limping legs, all wounded—who were following the strongest among them, laden with a heavy wreath.

The kind fellows had collected thirty francs, in order to offer to their fallen comrade this touching token of their loyal thoughts. And they were on their way to place it on the coffin, to beflower the grave, so that the cross which marked the place might be embellished with the symbol of love.

I met them as I was going out of the park.

“We are going to follow our comrade,” said one of them.

Another said simply, "We must love one another."

The youngest remarked with a melancholy air—

"Him to-day, and perhaps us to-morrow."

One day soon, his mother and his sweetheart will hear of his death and of the kindness with which it was surrounded. They will be told that it was peaceful, and that the coffin of their loved one was borne and accompanied by our proud young infantrymen. Then, surely, joy will penetrate their immense sorrow, and one of those thoughts which flash through the sadness of our hearts will come to them. "A priest blessed him, friends loved him ; a mother consoled him."

CHAPTER XVII

A MASS FOR THE ENEMY

I'VE had no letters from Duroy for a long time, and I guessed that his state was grave, graver than his letters had made me aware of. All the same, although I was uneasy, I did not despair of him. He himself in giving me news, penned by another hand, reassured me, and was himself convinced that he would get better.

He still joked, and I could read between the lines of his determination to live and to conquer his ills. I also read, with emotion, of his persistent desire to keep his promise to me of sending me news from "là-bas!" And he continued collecting for me episodes in which heroism rivalled moral greatness. On this occasion, it was an infirmarian, now his secretary, who recounted to me on his behalf the strange and moving story which a wounded priest, who was in the same hospital being treated, had told him.

It was in the Argonne, in that forest line, where each tree becomes a rampart, and each mound of earth, a bastion.

There, as elsewhere, the curé-soldiers spent themselves valiantly, and gave to their comrades, with the example of an untiring courage, the comfort of an apostolate, which made God radiate on the clear horizon of our already victorious country.

The abbé, who was put out of action by a bullet through his left leg, had lived for months that life in which a man loses all other ideas than that of facing danger, and, above all, of serving the cause which alone occupies the energies of his soul and absorbs his life. One day he went off by himself to revictual an advanced post, which they thought had been separated from the regiment by the intense firing which was raking the lines of communication. He accomplished this act of boldness for the sake of one of the company, for one of those blind sectarians who remain in this war, like a dead tree in the midst of the verdure of a living forest. He harboured an intense hatred of priests in his heart, a hatred sown in his heart, as a child, by some wretched sower of evil seeds. When the others prayed or went to Communion, revictualled with hope, by the chaplain, who had gone down into the trench, he would stand up and smoke his pipe.

One morning the lieutenant came down into the rat-hole, with a sad look on his face—

“ My lads, the four men whom I posted last night near the charcoal burner’s hut are separated from us by the falling ‘ marmites ’ and by shells which are sweeping the track. They are admirable, those fellows. I have just been looking at them from the top of the oak-tree. They are holding on tight, and all four of them are shooting at the Boches as though they were a whole company. Only, if it goes on, they’ll die of hunger. And you know that one can’t do the work when one has an empty belly.”

The “ poilus ” looked at one another. They understood the indirect invitation to bring a very problematic succour to the men. Many of them thought: “ For the colours—to take a trench—for the honour of carrying out an order, yes, one would go ahead; but for this, for those fellows who are risking their skins a trifle more than we are—Oh, well . . . what’s it matter? to bust up to-day or to-morrow? ”

And they remained silent. The priest-hater risked a remark.

“ I’d rather have my carcass staved in in an attack and die defending myself, thanks.”

The others agreed with this, and added—“ If we were in their place, we’d tighten our waist-belts, and wait.”

The abbé said nothing. He did not smile like

the others, but he was not sad like those who deplore useless deaths.

But a beautiful light shone in his eyes. He had seen what the others had not seen, and had felt what his companions had never felt ; brave fellows who are suffering and whose lives may be prolonged by a superhuman action.

“ Will you allow me to try and take them something to eat, sir ? ”

A discharge of grape-shot from the enemy guns which swept the glade and felled the trees, gave these words an impressive meaning. The officer raised his hand to the parapet where the shells were bursting and his gesture said all that his lips did not say. The men, at the first signal of the squall, had taken cover in the dug-out, their haversacks over their heads. The priest had remained standing, and was smiling, this time, for the offer which he had just made proved that death, far or near, did not count to him. He finished what he was saying with the absolute calm of a man from whose soul all fear is banished.

“ They have as much right to live as we have, since they are fighting and are our brothers in danger.”

A murmur from the men greeted these words of simple bravery, and the abbé interrupted it by this explanation, which looked almost like an

excuse for the initiative by which his comrades might have been humbled.

“ I have no one belonging to me, so that if I fall . . . ”

And he looked at that one among them who had least love for his fellows, having less faith and hope. He looked at him, and his eyes said gently to him—

“ My words have not been eloquent enough to convince you. I will try by my actions.”

Half an hour later, he went off, his haversack laden with bread and jam for the four isolated men—food and cartridges, for their bravery may have made them forget their hunger.

He crept through the grass ; he crawled along weighed down with his heavy load ; he felt the winds of death blow across his face a hundred times. And then when he got there, he took the place of a comrade with a hole through the chest, who said to him—

“ Ah ! I knew that my medal would bring me luck. Hear my confession, old chap, and prepare me for the last halting-place.”

Under fire, in the atrocious hell of shells ploughing up the ground around them, he made the fourth, and the others, elated by his courage, recommenced, alongside him, to kill off the servers of the German battery.

When night came on, the men in the trench saw four shadows coming down towards them, dragging quietly after them, in the narrow passage, the corpse of their comrade, who had died while the priest, who had brought him more than bread, had given him absolution. When they had taken their places in their dark retreat, the abbé felt a hand on his shoulder, and a face approach his. And he heard a voice which he recognised almost before hearing it speak.

“ I understood your lesson, comrade, and to-morrow, if I’m still here, I want you to make a Christian of me.”

To-morrow ! Three hours after, the unbeliever, struck down by a bit of shell which had broken his spine, died blessing God and the priest who had won his heart in showing him what human bravery, made divine by faith, can do. He died with the flame of hope in his eyes, the reflection of the Beatific Vision, in the sight of which the glorious martyrs to a holy cause, rejoice.

It was this priest who had come to the hospital where Duroy was still nursing his wound, with untiring patience.

Like my friend, this brave undaunted priest had defied death a hundred times. Like him, and without seeking it, he had acquired the renown of a hero, uniting in himself a strong

Christian virtue to the beauty of French bravery. Both of them had taken as their motto and had inscribed in their hearts those proud words which Duroy had had inscribed on the colours of the Society of Catholic Youths, "Toujours combattus—parfois battus—jamais abattus."

"Always fighting—sometimes beaten—never cast down."

And now the chances of war, and of Providence, had brought together to fraternise in a common desire of sacrifice and glory, these two priests. The new friend described to the stretcher-bearer, more badly wounded than he, fine, rash actions, superhuman actions, simply accomplished. And Duroy, listening to his stories, thought that they deserved to live and to help to increase the pride of Catholics in the indomitable phalanxes which the Christian priesthood forms in this terrible war.

The Abbé Marny was a sergeant in a line regiment. Since then he has become a second lieutenant, but that is a detail which has nothing whatever to do with his story, he says :

His section was on the outposts and watched the left bank of the river, which separated them from the enemy. It was the darkness of night there, with a bar of light where the rapidly flowing water reflected the light, diffused over the

surrounding country. One kept on the alert in silence. One's eyes, bothered by the moving shadows, kept themselves fixed on the slope and on the trees, which seemed to move.

Death was there, in front of them unforeseen, mysterious. In all the thickets in front of them, invisible guns were pointed towards their breasts, and the anguish of uncertainty was sinister and cruel, the unnerving expectation of bullets, which will make a hole in one, without it being possible to foresee from which corner of the thicket they will burst forth.

One waited, and each one knew that it was a tragic hour. A painful atmosphere hovered in the tranquil air. Our troopers, whom nothing moved so much as these dark night-watches, mumbled in low tones, and clutched their cartridge-boxes nervously.

"If only one could know what is happening on the other side!"

Behind them, three kilometres away, the 75's were stretched out on their gun-carriages, ready to let loose the terrible hurricane of their deadly fire.

There was confidence in their souls, in spite of all, and when they would begin to sing their song of destruction, our soldiers would feel the protection of these big friends, with their bronze

hearts. Then there would be fighting ; the onrush which urges a man on towards the defensive, the letting loose of all their manly strength in endeavour. That would be fighting like Frenchmen, the onrush, the movement, the action in which the entire being vibrates and throws into the fight the entirety of its multiplied forces. One dream alone was in their minds, to fight, to strike, to crush. But for the moment, the orders were to wait, with one's feet in the mud, to be on the *qui vive*, to master one's quivering nerves, and one's protesting courage.

An hour passed, and still silence reigned. Hardly could those ears, trained for so many weeks to perceive the most imperceptible sounds, distinguish, like a vague murmur, the underground digging, the cunning work, which the Germans accomplish in the innermost recesses of our land of France.

What were they doing, and what bad business were they preparing, in their trenches, those indefatigable wild beasts ? What surprise had they in store for the enemy who keeps them back, and whose hold they seek wildly to slacken ?

We had to know, to find out their plan, to discover their hypocritical manœuvres, which might cost the life of the entire regiment. We had to see the dark business, to discover the mystery

But how? The Captain asked himself *who* could cross the deadly line—the strip of ground and the moving barrier, so perilous, of the river, whose precipitous waves struck the opposite bank. The Abbé Marny went up to him and the following heroic dialogue took place between the sergeant and his officer.

“ Captain, you want some one . . . ”

“ Yes, but a man who is worth two or even ten.”

The priest remained modest in his desire for new bravery.

“ If you think that I . . . ”

The officer was touched, but he understood with the fears of those who know the price of a life, that such an act of generosity cannot be accepted like an ordinary offer.

“ My poor friend, it is an extremely dangerous undertaking.”

“ I like danger.”

“ There is the river to cross.”

“ I know how to swim.”

“ It requires prudence and tried patience.”

“ I will know how to wait.”

The Captain then guessed that he had found his man, a man worth ten.

“ And there is a good chance of remaining in it . . . ”

Then, seeing that the Captain feared for his

life, Marny relieved him of his last fear, which kept the "yes" on the tip of his tongue, and he said proudly with a smile which made his sacrifice still more fine—

"I am ready to die."

A few seconds passed, during which the Captain sought to read in the sergeant's eyes the decision which does away with doubt.

"Then, you may go, Father, and may God guard you . . ."

His adventure was one which all heroes accomplish simply, naïvely, sublimely. The embankment was crossed, the river too, in spite of its treacherous current, the enemy's territory right up to the edge of his trenches . . . But, there commenced the tragic part of the story and the poignant drama with which the priest's soul trembled with horror.

Ten paces away, the enemy's sentinel was standing, facing the bank held by the French. The man had heard and seen nothing. Fifty yards behind him, a slight rustling noise revealed the work which was being prepared, the terraces raised in haste to shelter the mitrailleuses. Marny had marked that. He might retire now and regain the French lines, from whence it would be possible to telephone to the battery of artillery, which would be able to smash the new redoubt

to atoms and allow our soldiers to advance two kilometres—an enormous success, a victory over which France might rejoice and triumph, in two days' time.

But what of that man who was over there . . . watching . . . he had seen and heard nothing . . . what if he hears and sees? A branch of dead wood which might snap, and the alarm would be given, the troops at arms, he himself a marked man, the business spoilt, the fine effort rendered useless.

Hidden in the shadows, riveted to the ground, he thought of these things. It is so horrible to kill in cold blood, to kill that man who was not on his guard, and who was doing his duty too, the painful duty which war imposed on him . . .

Doubtless, it was equitable and just. Besides they had no scruples, the barbarians, who massacre defenceless beings. And then too, two enemies who might meet in those hours when one's country demands one to defend it, ought to hurl themselves on one another and try to destroy one another. All the worse for the one who was the least forewarned or armed.

It was not the mere fact of killing that moved him so. He had often killed his man from the trench, or in encounters or attacks. But it was

the thought of killing this particular man before him, who was enjoying in his own way, the pleasantness of the peaceful hour, and the joy of being alive.

But it is not the heart nor pity that speaks at such a time. It is France which implores, beseeches, and commands. It is also the voice of fraternity, which orders us "to strike those who wish to strike us." His brothers were waiting down there for the safety which he ought to bring, the news which would permit them to take a little more of that ground of ours which *they* have profaned and violated. He must be something more than a man—a soldier! the gun which fires and the bullet which kills.

And even the hand which strangles, if one had to make use of these means, so that the night-watchman may speak no more and may be for ever incapable of harm.

That was why the Abbé Marny went nearer to the impassive man, who did not hear the bold prowler approach him, bringing with him so silently, death.

There was a bound from the grass—two hands clasped the throat of the German sentinel—bones cracked, a stifled rattle in the throat, the quivering corpse pressed down into the grass, a bayonet which pierced his breast and passed through his

heart, so that never again should this witness awaken.

It was over. His hands had shed the blood of this man, calmly. But in his soul, the voice of his conscience, proud of the soldier who had saved his company, was singing . . . Half an hour later, our cannons had swept away the bandits' den, had opened the way for the charge of our infantry, who wrote that night, with the sharp point of their "fourchette," a glorious and immortal page. We had gained a strategic point, had hurled back the invading hordes, had delivered a piece of ground, and had proclaimed once again that the French army does not know how to retire.

That was what the Abbé Marny described to Duroy, who listened to him with the tears in his eyes, without another thought of his terrible wound, which exasperated and tortured him day in day out. He had forgotten to suffer for an hour, or rather, the fine feat of arms of his new comrade had quieted the violent pains of his wound. It is thanks to his delicate foresight, that I have been able to relate this new deed, with which to grace our pages.

But this act of heroism had its epilogue. And it was he who wished to underline its grandeur. At the end of the letter, written for him, he wished to add the following in his own handwriting

“ Yesterday, in spite of his bad leg, Marny got up at six o'clock, and I saw him drag himself out of the ward. I asked him the reason of this imprudence. He simply said : ‘ I'm going to pray.’ On his return, he was joyous with that deep joy which does not prevent one's face showing physical pain. He was suffering, but he was happy. It is a state of soul that I have known for a long time. There are some kinds of happiness which German projectiles, even those that kill, can never destroy in us.

“ The abbé sat down near my bed, with his leg stretched out.

“ ‘ My dear fellow, I've just been praying for a dead man ! ’

“ ‘ For only one ? ’

“ ‘ Yes! for the one I strangled in Argonne. His death did not weigh on my conscience. I'm a soldier, he was the enemy. I killed him, it was my duty, but when my hands held him by the throat, I felt the horror of sending thus brutally a soul into the next world, and I asked God for him, forgiveness and heaven, where men no longer know how to detest nor how to curse. And this morning I went off to fulfil my vow. He has had his Mass, poor fellow, and now I am content ; I have paid my debt.’

“ Marny smiled. His heart was no longer heavy.

And I, looking at him, did not know which to admire the more in him, his soldierly courage or his priestly virtue, which, even in those hours when vengeance impetuously urges us on, knew how to pray with the grace of former knights, for his executioners."

CHAPTER XVIII

“ I AM BRINGING YOU THE BLESSED SACRAMENT ”

IN the convoy of wounded that we had received that day, was a young adjutant, who had at once attracted our attention and awakened our sympathy. He had come from a field hospital at the front, and on getting out of the train we had learned in a short conversation that his company had been in the hands of the Germans, for some days.

The following day he had any number of visitors. He was gay, in spite of his wound—a bullet had passed through his calf—full of high spirits, after his four months of war. He was surrounded. He was able to give us real news, for which all Frenchmen, in those tragic hours, hungered. He had lived a lively life in the medical service; had passed nights and days in the trenches; had organised first aid parties, and had seen the war in its frightful, yet sublime, horrors.

Many times in that campaign, which he meant to go back to, once his wound was healed, this

young doctor had penetrated to the depths of the soldier's soul, and had known the fine sentiments which had awakened in the hearts of our "poilus," so patient in their magnificent calm.

In listening to him we felt how good it was to learn from the mouth of an eye-witness the prowess of our defenders. It enabled us to keep alive the admiration which becomes weakened in those who are not at the front after a long period of waiting. Often, in the course of conversation, he would describe the tragic and painful business with which the medical service was occupied at the front. He described the devoted undertakings, the heroic deeds done by stretcher-bearers, and doctors, as much exposed to the firing as the combatants. He stated precisely the part which priests had played in the heroic work, and the stories of this witness were a more definite acknowledgment of their proud self-sacrifice, and of the grandeur of their apostolate.

Among so many memories, there was one which I remember more especially for its impressive bravery and its Gallic swagger, which ranks it among the best in the interminable list of fine deeds done.

"It was a Sunday, in one of the trenches in the north. For a fortnight, our soldiers had been splashing about in the muddy water of the trench

—stuck there by order, condemned to that immobility which is a hundred times worse than any dangerous attack, such as an onrush towards certain death, but which one braves in the light of day.

“Every morning,” said the adjutant, “when I went down into these holes for my daily visit, having risked being shot by the Germans in front of us, I lost the idea of danger in pitying these poor interred devils. The thought of the danger I had run, was drowned in pity. Ah! What a vile business they make us go through with, those disgusting knaves, those soldiers of darkness to whom the light of day is as insupportable as it is to the birds of night. We, who like to meet our enemy face to face, who love fine, heroic charges, which excite the courage, and which makes a French soldier so fine, even when he falls and dies, we are obliged to crawl on our bellies, and to double on the enemy like foxes, so as to hunt him down—we have to lie down on our ground so as to defend it, to protect it with our breasts, with our limbs, with our whole body, so as to keep each clod of earth inviolate.”

The little doctor was fine when he described the strange forms of the new warlike heroism—the war of moles! But how soon his disdain of this grovelling form of war disappeared in his

enthusiasm for the astonishing, magnificent patience of our indomitable "poilus," who accepted the humiliating life in the trenches, so as to prepare a victory which would astonish the world.

And he would laugh heartily, suddenly become proud of the fabulous feats of valour of which he had been a witness. His face was lit up with the reflection of French glory, when he recounted the following story, in which a picturesque and joyous swagger is united to the grandeur of heroic thoughts.

"On that particular Sunday, an undermining sadness overshadowed the dreary horizon, and clouded our souls. It was cold, and the frozen greyness of the sky seemed to bind our hearts—to render them incapable of harbouring a cheerful thought. We couldn't laugh. Too many corpses lay beside us—too many of our comrades had been cut down the evening before in a murderous attack, which we had repulsed, but at what a cost! We had had to bury them in the side of the trenches, so that when we fired, our chests were leaning against their tombs in a lugubrious embrace. They were speaking too loud, our poor dead comrades, on that dreary morning, and we, as though listening to them, kept that involuntary silence which mourning imposes.

“Sunday, and nothing to buck us up, nor to make us forget the bloody ground on which we stood ; no one to awaken in us the echo of great hopes, which stimulate dejected courage.

“Occasionally, a joke rose to unsmiling lips and died there, like a flame blown out by the wind.

“The officers looked at one another, and asked themselves mutely what could be done to cheer us up. Suddenly a joyful salutation made all heads turn together to the slope behind. A soldier cried out—

“ ‘ Good Lord, he’ll get a hole through him, if he’s not careful.’

“Arms were stretched out towards the newcomer, who had braved death. Arms, held out with gestures which betrayed the immense danger to which the traveller in this deadly zone had been exposed.

“He, standing up, serving as a target to the German guns, smiled at us with a fine friendly smile. Then we heard these words. ‘ Good day, children. I have brought you the Blessed Sacrament ! ’ He had his two hands crossed over his breast, and the shower of bullets made the skirts of his cassock float about, as a big wind would have done.

“He was so fine that chaplain, bearing the Blessed Eucharist, that the fear of seeing him

fall left us in the admiration with which we were filled for him.

“Slowly he came down to us. A splendid calm transfigured his features. He brought to us that which men cannot give: the Presence of Christ and the consolation of His all-powerful protection. That is why, when he had set foot in the trench, all, even those who thought themselves unbelievers, bowed themselves before God, who had come through him to visit us abandoned ones. But the majority had knelt down because the Real Presence had touched their souls, and had awakened the fulness of their faith, which had been veiled so long.

“Silently, the priest went towards a little table, made of a few rough planks. He spread out a corporal and placed the ciborium on it. Then he turned to us.

“‘My friends, I have brought you Holy Communion, because some of you asked me to. The Master has come to visit you, the Invincible Chief, He who loves France, protects her soldiers, and gives victory. He is the safeguard and the Life, so powerful that death, caressing a thousand times my body, becomes His altar; death, which roars, reaps and kills, has not even breathed on it. Come, my dear friends, and welcome God, who comes to you, the God of our country who

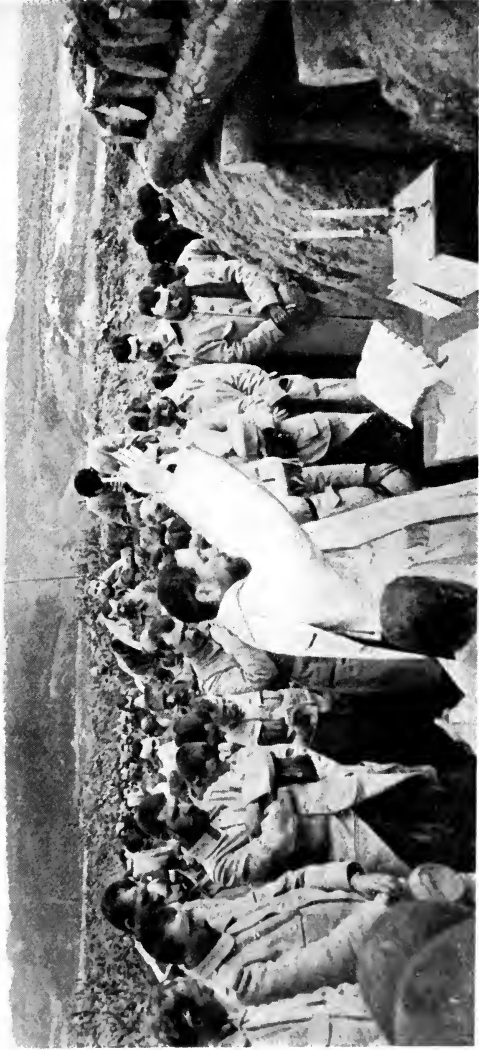


Photo: Topical.]

MASS IN A TRENCH.

will bless your black holes, and make of them, if you die, tombs of resurrection and glory.'

"He turned to the Blessed Sacrament, and with his two hands on the trench altar adored in silence. All those behind knelt. Alone, the sentinel on the embankment remained standing, but his proud gesture, his hand clutching the steel, told eloquently that he too carried arms and was in the presence of God who had gone down into the shadows to bless and reassure hearts, in the grip of anguish. Ten men, officers, non-coms., and soldiers, received Communion in this new catacomb. Round them the others thought of divine things and prayed. Above, thundered unceasingly the lugubrious knell, the crash of our heavy artillery, and the laughing voice of our 75's.

"And the chaplain, having turned round again, said these words which brought confidence back to us and hope so lately vanishing: 'The bells of war are ringing for the blessing.'

"He raised the ciborium. The great sign of the cross traced in the darkness seemed to scatter light in the obscure grotto and the faces of the fighting men were transfigured.

"Some smiled; others were radiant with the serene joy which had just dawned in their hearts. The melancholy and dark thoughts of the

preceding hour had been dispersed, annihilated in the fire of bravery which the Host had lighted in their generous souls.

“The unceasing refrain of battle which, a short time before, had filled them with the sad idea of a death without beauty, sang now the song which carries one away, which generates victory.

“‘Now they may come!’ exclaimed a soldier from the South. No one laughed at him. He expressed the feelings of them all, and in proclaiming the imperious strength of refound courage seemed to continue and finish the prayer of thanksgiving.

“Another rose, his arms stretched towards the light.

“‘When we go to meet the Boches——’

“He did not finish. A cry from the sentinel made them raise their heads and pick up their guns.

“‘They are coming!’

“On the slope of the trench the crackling of the mitrailleuse tore through the air, and sounded the passionate and hurried note of war to the knife. There was a rush to their posts, but without disorder. Each one climbed up the parapet and took his dangerous position, with the disconcerting calm which is one of the first virtues in war. As they passed each received the blessing of the priest, who raised the ciborium above them

and spoke words as they rushed to death, which reassure believers and inflame martyrs.

“ ‘Benedictio Dei Omnipotentis——’

“Then, when the last of them had sprung up the parapet, the chaplain laid down the Blessed Sacrament and awaited in prayer the end of the battle. Thunderbolts were being hurled above his head. The horrible fight brought to him the echoes of the butchery. The bullets, in striking the slope in front, threw up around the Host, a shower of earth, of water and of blood.

“And the priest prayed to God. ‘My God! You have promised victory to those who fight for justice’s sake. Give to their arms sovereign power, and receive into your Paradise those who, at the present moment, fall and die for the cause of eternal equity, and for the violation of blessed liberty.’

“It lasted for thirty minutes. Little by little the volleys of grape shot went further away, the firing became more desultory. Voices could be heard near the trenches, confused murmurs, in which the words of those who had been spared by the enemy bullets were mingled with the complaints of the wounded.

“A sergeant appeared on the scene the first. ‘Father, we’ve given them a good dosing this time.’

“The chaplain looked up and saw the bleeding bodies which they were bringing down. He went to them quickly to bring help to the souls ready to leave the failing body, but the sergeant stopped him.

“ ‘ No, not here. It’s too dangerous.’

“They carried the dying, the victims, the living youth of an hour back, down into the dug-outs. There they were; limbs broken, mouths bleeding, breasts gaping.

“In the midst of this horrible display of slashed bodies, the ciborium shone still, the God of Calvary remained there to accept the voluntary offering of the expiatory sacrifices. And one saw a spectacle of superhuman beauty in that trench. Wounded men, their heads hanging, their sight veiled, who suddenly opened their eyes and turned them towards the Blessed Sacrament. Dying men were there who gathered up all that remained to them of life, to salute at the moment of their last sigh, the Master who had excited their courage and wished to brighten their end by the ideal dawn of a supreme victory.”

CHAPTER XIX

THE LAST BLESSING

“MY DEAR FRIEND,—I have just been taken to the hospital at R——. It is far from the front, outside the danger-zone, in a little village. I don't suppose that I shall get to know its views or its steeples very soon. I am tired and sad—almost discouraged. My wound, which seemed for some days to be better, has now become worse and painful. You know what such wounds are like, because you have tended similar ones—fractures of the hip. The surgeons are not easy in their minds about it, as they are when it's an arm or a leg. If needs be, infected limbs can be cut off. One is incomplete, but one can still live. As to me, it's another matter. I am suffering, of course, but much more from inaction than from pain. And for the first time, solitude has hollowed out around my heart an immense empty space, which makes my head swim . . . It is not the joy of possessing my military medal that will fill it. There remains to me, in my long

days and my sleepless nights, the supreme joy of knowing that I have done a little good, that I have done my duty, and that I can still give good example by my resignation. I force myself to remain visibly a priest, to show forth the grandeur of the priesthood in my suffering. And yet, no! I lied just now, in telling you I was discouraged; all those who are discouraged are unhappy, and I can't be that. I feel in my soul the reflection of all the acts of heroism of my brethren. I listen to the concert of admiration which proclaims the magnificent devotion, the courage, the proud valour of the twenty thousand priests, occupied in fortifying souls, by fighting for the future greatness of immortal France.

“And I gather up around me, among my companions in suffering, tokens of gratitude which rise from their hearts towards the priest, whose untiring charity has succoured them. ‘Our lieutenant, a curé, gave us Holy Communion.’ ‘It was my sergeant who gave me absolution.’ ‘Without the Mass, which our chaplain said for us, I should have kicked the bucket.’ ‘The corporal made us say the Rosary before the attack.’

“They were always there, the good fellows, to arouse their energy and revive their diminished bravery.

“When I received the Holy Viaticum, yesterday,

the whole ward kept silence, and nearly all made the sign of the cross. Some of them prayed. The greater number imagined themselves back again in their childhood, when they were choir-boys, and the Host seemed to them to be beautiful and adorable as in those days.

“When the priest had gone away, my neighbour, an old territorial, who has three bullets in his stomach, made me this remark, touching in its roughness: ‘So, then, there’s only some for you. The others are not dogs, all the same.’

“He, too, this ‘poilu’ of forty, wanted God, and he was jealous and vexed that He had passed by him without stopping.

“I must leave you, dear old friend. The thought of you, and of all those whom I love, softens my sad hours. Nurse your wounded men with tenderness. To sow sweet charity in their hearts is to prepare a harvest of faith. We have never been such apostles, such teachers of the gospel. And, going about as you are, or lying down as I am, living or dead, the priest in this war dominates the soldier, as religion dominates the country. But has not Providence given us some splendid hours?

“Don’t believe in the sadness of which I spoke. I am joyful . . . I love my lot. I owe all that I know about the war—its perils, its pains—to it.

It would be far finer to die of one's wounds than to die stupidly in one's bed, carried off by fever or pneumonia. Adieu, my good friend. Write to me soon, if you can, I have serious reasons for wishing your answer to reach me quickly.

"Your old friend,
"DUROY."

I had hardly understood and felt all the emotion and anguish of this letter, when I received a stunning telegram which did away with my doubts and confirmed my fears: "Abbé Duroy died in hospital R——."

That "serious reason," which he had for my reply, was because my poor friend felt himself dying when he wrote those last dear lines. Tears rose from the depths of my heart to my eyes, as I read the fatal news—sorrowful tears, jealous almost.

His death did not call up to my mind the sad end of a life which had been beautiful, courageous and fruitful; nor even that bitter regret which presses on you before a hardly closed grave. "Another apostle gone—a source of energy which has dried up—a beautiful light which illumined the way which has gone out."

Now the sorrow which I felt for my friend,

killed in the war, disappeared in the passionate admiration with which this hero of thirty inspired me. He had died as he had wished, in full strength, in full activity, killed by the enemy, more than a soldier, a sublime worker of charity, almost a martyr.

France had given him the kiss of glory and had just paid him its debt. But another glory, greater and more lasting, rose from the soil near the frontiers, impregnated with his blood. The priest had seen his fine dream more gloriously fulfilled than he had dared to hope for. For it is the supreme grace for heroes to see that Heaven accepts their sacrifice completely, and their voluntary immolation.

Then the memory of the first days came back to me, of that meeting, when, both of us still soldiers, we exchanged words which expressed the highest thoughts of our thrilled souls. The words were engraven in my mind. I re-read them, I heard them, and his voice sounded in my ears and gave me the almost physical impression of a will dictated by one who is about to die.

I had asked him, "When shall we meet again?" He had replied, smiling, "Shall we ever meet again?" Then, with a start of pride which frees a heart of preoccupations, unworthy of its courage,

with, above all, the ardour of great souls who aspire to give themselves without counting, he had added :

“ To die like that, and only thirty—I am afraid of not deserving such a grace.”

His career had finished in the full realisation of his cherished idea. His agony and his last breath had been the crowning desire of his life. In praying for him, I did not know if to say the *De Profundis* or to intone the *Magnificat*.

I regretted his life, and rejoiced in his death.

For his blood, mixed with that of other victims, was destined to the necessary work, to the expiation demanded by Providence and surely already accepted, for the new baptism of Catholic France. I asked for the details of his death and of his last hours. It was in the morning, in the middle of the tumult which makes a hospital noisy at the time for waking up.

His neighbour, who had learnt to love him, seeing him motionless, said, “ Are you still asleep, Duroy ? ”

He did not answer, but tried to raise his white hand, which fell back inert on the quilt.

Then, among all those sufferers, in the midst of pain in which each one, preoccupied with his own, remains almost indifferent to that of others,

stupor spread. Some few before him had died before their eyes, without provoking on their part anything but an indifferent regret, a word of pity, in which one guessed the fear of a similar fate.

But before the agony of the priest, whom they had loved, understanding that for each one of them it was the loss of a friend, there was through the whole ward, a moving silence.

Some of them raised themselves painfully on their bed of misery to see him for the last time, to speak to him with their eloquent glances, to thank him for having consoled them in their sorrows. The house surgeon, informed by the infirmarian, hurried to his side, examined his wound. When he raised his head again, his expression revealed the sad truth.

A sudden hæmorrhage had reopened the horrible wound, and a pool of blood flooded the sheets and reddened half the bed. The doctor wanted to try to staunch it, but Duroy shook his head slightly. His face grew paler and one could see the life ebbing from his features.

The whole ward was palpitating. Wet eyes watched for the coming of death, and followed with their anguished glances the melancholy phases of that end, for which brotherly hearts were already weeping. An injection of caffeine gave him back the use of his muscles, for an

instant, and the priest, wishing to use this last scrap of his waning strength, raised himself and asked the doctor to support him. The doctor obeyed, understanding the grandeur of his last desire. Then the dying man raised his right hand, stained with the blood which had gushed from his veins, and slowly traced the sign of blessing over his brothers in sacrifice. Then, having done his duty to the end, and crowned his mission on this earth by this divine farewell, he fell back dead.

In the neighbouring wards one could hear the sound of voices. Clamour joined to moans and to the laughing of those to whom a little strength had given back hope, the noise of footsteps, filled the hospital.

In the midst of indifferent passers-by, who hardly uncovered as the corpse was carried along, Duroy was borne by four infirmarians to the mortuary.

And whilst they took off the sheets, soaked with blood, and removed the last traces of the dead man, the wounded continued to regret the death of the "little curé," who had given his life for them. For several among them had been picked up by him in the battle in which the priest, greater than death, had received to save them the wound which had killed him.

A wooden cross marks the place where my friend lies. His family, who mourn deeply for him, has respected the last desire of the sublime priest who wished to remain a soldier unto Eternity.

After the war we shall claim his coffin from the cemetery, and in a pilgrimage of sorrowful memories, we shall bear it to a little hill in the Argonne, cut up by the huge holes made by the shells.

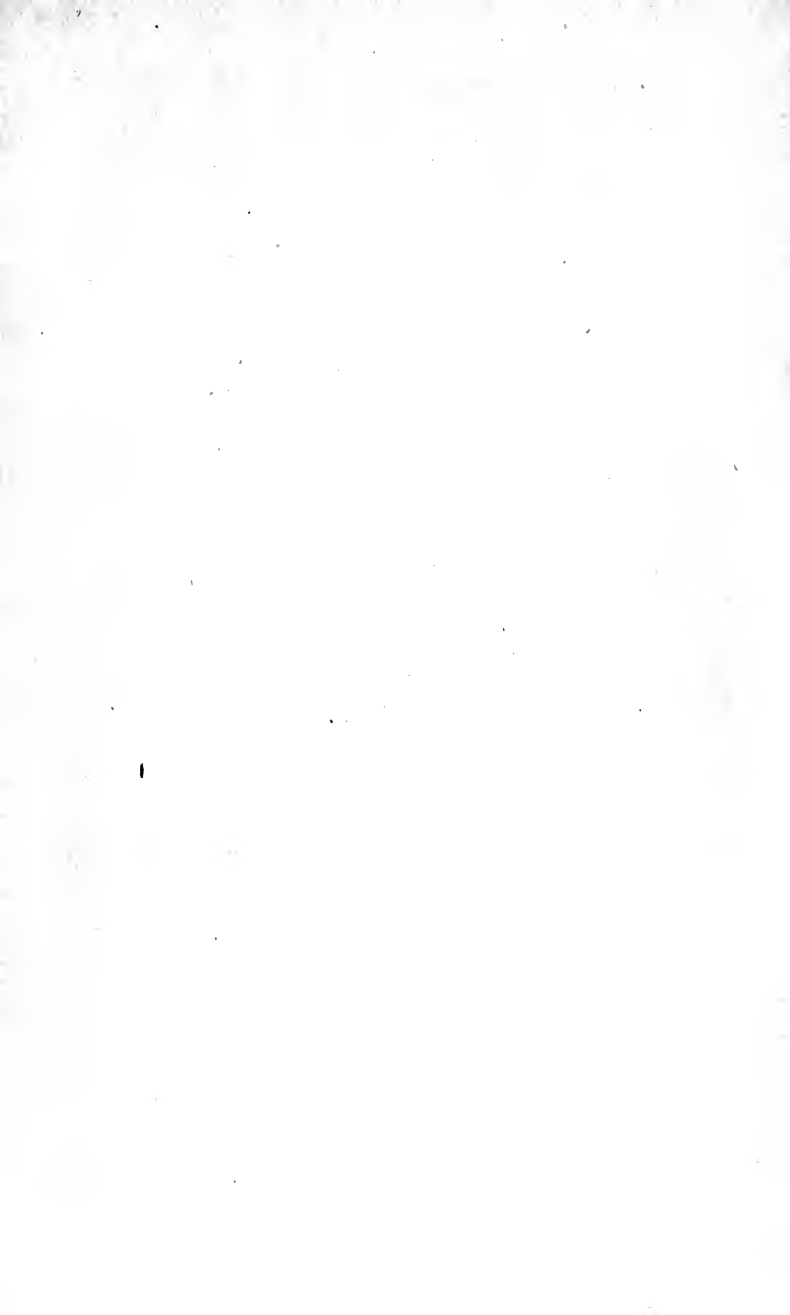
Guided by one of his wounded, we shall find the furrow where the three bullets struck the priest, sower of life and of love. And there in that place, more ours than ever, we shall place him with pride, with respect and tenderness.

It is his sacred wish : " I wish my body to be at the front, so that it may become an almost living portion of the soil of our frontiers."

It was a sublime idea, and it resumed in a sentence, which comes from the depths of eternity, the mission which the heroic and saintly little curés of France have undertaken :

" To love our country, for God's sake, even beyond death."

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