

**BELL
FREDERICK
MCKELVEY**

THE FIRST CANADIANS IN
FRANCE

Frederick Bell

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F. McKelvey Bell
The First Canadians in France / The Chronicle
of a Military Hospital in the War Zone

PREFACE

In glancing through these pages, now that they are written, I realise that insufficient stress has been laid upon the heroism and self-sacrifice of the non-commissioned officers and men of the Army Medical Corps – the boys who, in the dull monotony of hospital life, denied the exhilaration and stimulus of the firing line, are, alas, too often forgotten. All honour to them that in spite of this handicap they give of their best, and give it whole-heartedly to their stricken comrades.

The pill of fact herein is but thinly coated with the sugar of fiction, but if the reader can get a picture, however indefinite, of military hospital life in France, these pages will not have been written altogether in vain.

F. McK B.

CHAPTER I

We were a heterogeneous lot – no one could deny that – all the way down from big Bill Barker, the heavyweight hostler, to little Huxford, the featherweight hustler.

No commanding officer, while sober, would have chosen us *en masse*. But we weren't chosen – we just arrived, piece by piece; and the Hammer of Time, with many a nasty knock, has welded us.

One by one, from the farthest corners of the Dominion, the magic magnet of the war drew us to the plains of Valcartier, and one by one it dropped us side by side. Why some came or why they are still here God knows! Man may merely conjecture.

Divers forces helped to speed us from our homes: love of adventure, loss of a sweetheart, family quarrels, the wander-spirit, and, among many other sentiments – patriotism. But only one force held us together: our Colonel! Without him, as an entity, we ceased to exist. His broad-minded generosity and liberal forbearance closed many an angry breach. His love of us finds its analogy only in the love of a father for his prodigal son.

Long after we reached France, when the dull monotony of daily routine had somewhat sobered us, one early morning the sweet but disturbing note of the bugle sounding the *reveille* brought me back from dreams of home. I lay drowsily listening to its insistent voice. The door of my room opened softly, and the orderly stole in.

He was a red-cheeked, full-lipped country lad, scarce seventeen years of age. He knelt down before the fireplace and meditatively raked the ashes from its recess. He was a slow lad; slow in speech, slower in action, and his big dreamy blue eyes belied his military bearing.

I turned over in bed to get a better view of him.

"What freak of fancy brought you so far from home, Wilson?" I queried.

"Dunno, zur," he drawled. "Not much fun hustlin' coals in the mornin' nur pullin' teeth in the afternoon." For Wilson, among his multitudinous duties, was dental orderly too.

"There's such an air of farm and field about you, Wilson, that sometimes, at short range, I imagine I get a whiff of new-mown hay."

He sat up on his haunches, balancing the shovel upon his outstretched hand. The pool of memory was stirred. A hazy thought was struggling to the surface. He looked dreamily toward me for a moment before he replied.

"I wuz born an' raised in the country, zur," he said. "When the war broke out I wuz pickin' apples on dad's farm. I didn't like my job. Gee! I wish't I'd stayed an' picked 'em now."

How we ever taught Wilson to say "Sir," or even his corruption of the word, must remain forever shrouded in mystery; but it was accomplished at last, just like many other great works of art.

The Canadian spirit of democracy resents any semblance of a confession of inferiority, and the sergeant-major's troubles were like unto those of Job. Military discipline commenced in earnest when the ship left the harbour at Quebec, and has hung over us like a brooding robin ever since.

It was an eventful morning to us (and to England) when our fleet of thirty ocean liners, with its freight of thirty-three thousand soldiers, steamed slowly into the harbour at Plymouth and dropped anchor.

For two glorious October weeks we had bedecked the Atlantic. His Majesty's fleet night and day had guarded us with an ever-increasing care. I can still look over the starboard rail and see the black smoke of the *Gloria* prowling along in the south, and, afar off in the north, the *Queen Mary* watching our hazardous course. The jaunty little *Charybdis* minced perkily ahead.

There were other battleships, too, which picked us up from time to time; and the *Monmouth*, on the last voyage she was destined to make, steamed through our lines one day. The brave fellows, who were so soon to meet a watery grave, lined up upon her deck, giving us three resounding cheers as she passed by, and we echoed them with a will.

Captain Reggy, our dapper mess secretary, was pacing the hurricane deck one day. From time to time his gaze turned wistfully across the waves to the other two lines of ships steaming peacefully along side by side. Something weighty was on his mind. Occasionally he glanced up to the military signalling officer on the bridge, and with inexplicable interest watched his movements with the flags.

"I say," Reggy called up to him, "can you get a message across to the *Franconia*?"

"She's third ship in the third line – a little difficult, I should say," the signaller replied.

"But it *can* be done, can't it?" Reggy coaxed.

"Yes, if it's very important."

"It's most important, I want to send a message to one of the nurses."

The signalling lieutenant leaned both elbows upon the rail and looked down in grinning amazement upon his intrepid interlocutor.

"What the d – !! I say, you're the sort of man we need at the front – one with plenty of nerve!"

"Be a sport and send it over!" Reggy coaxed.

"All right – I'll take a chance."

"Ask for Nursing Sister Marlow. Give her Captain Reggy's compliments and best wishes, and will she join him on board for dinner this evening, seven o'clock!"

There was a flutter of flags for several seconds, while the ridiculous message passed across from ship to ship. Reggy waited anxiously for a reply.

In less than ten minutes from across the deep came this very lucid answer: "Nursing Sister Marlow's compliments to Captain Reggy. Regrets must decline kind invitation to dinner. *Mal de mer* has rendered her *hors de combat*. Many thanks."

On the last day of our journey the speedy torpedo boat destroyers rushed out to meet us and whirled round and round us hour by hour as we entered the English Channel. Soon the welcome shores of England loomed through the haze, and the sight sent a thrill through all our hearts.

We had scarce dropped anchor when, from the training ship close by, a yawl pulled quickly toward us, "manned" by a dozen or more lads from a training ship. They rowed with the quick neat stroke of trained athletes, and as the boat came alongside ours they shipped their oars and raised their boyish voices in a welcoming cheer. We leaned over the side of our ship and returned their greeting with a stentorian heartiness that startled the sleeping town.

Showers of small coin and cigarettes were dropped into their boat, and the way in which they fought for position, scrambling over or under one another, upsetting this one or knocking down that, showed that these lads were quite capable of upholding all the old fighting traditions of the British Navy. A tug-boat soon steamed alongside, too, and down the accommodation-ladder scrambled those of us who were lucky enough to have permission to go ashore.

"Come along, Reggy," I shouted. But Reggy shook his head sorrowfully, and his handsome face was clouded.

"Just my rotten luck to be orderly officer on a day like this!" he replied. "To-day I guard the ship, but to-morrow – oh, to-morrow!" Reggy held out both hands in mock appeal to the shore: "Me for the red paint and city lights!"

Progress up the streets of Devonport was slow. Thousands of troops already landed were marching to the time of "The Maple Leaf Forever," and every foot of pavement or sidewalk was packed with struggling but enthusiastic humanity shouting itself hoarse in delirious welcome.

We were on the upper deck of a tram-car, leaning over the throng, and eagerly looking for the faces of friends in the ranks of a passing battalion. They swung along to the music of their band – a clean-cut, well-set-up, manly lot, who marched with the firm independent step of the free born. Suddenly our colonel discovered a familiar face among the khaki-clad below. There is no military precedent for what he did; years of training fell away on the instant. He leaned from the car and shouted:

"Hello, 'Foghorn'! What cheer?"

"Foghorn" looked up. His right arm was somewhat hampered, from a military point of view, by reason of being about the waist of a pretty girl, who accommodately marched along with the battalion in general, and "Foghorn" in particular.

"Hello, Jack," he bellowed in a voice which easily accounted for his nickname. "Lots of cheer. Can't salute. One arm busy! Other is glass arm from saluting the brass hats. See you later. Good luck!"
And thus our cosmopolitan and ultra-democratic battalion passed on.

Some one has said that the Englishman is temperamentally cold. It can't be proved by Devonport or Plymouth. His temperature in both towns registered ninety-eight degrees in the shadiest and most secluded spots. And the women and children! Banish all thought of British frigidity! The Canadians in England never discovered it.

The passion of the Devonport children for souvenirs in the shape of pennies and buttons became so violent in a few hours that our small coin was likely to become extinct and our buttons merely things that used to be. Every time a soldier appeared upon the street he was instantly surrounded by a bevy of insistent and persistent mendicants.

Once we sought refuge in a cooling spot where glasses tinkle and the beer foams high – and children might not follow there. The pretty barmaid smiled. The second in command twirled his long moustache and fixed the maiden with his martial eye.

"What will you have, sir?" she inquired sweetly.

The senior major was always gallant to a pretty girl. He drew himself up to his full six feet, two, and saluted. A mellow line from "Omar Khayyám" dropped from his thirsty lips:

"A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou
Beside me singing in the wilderness."

How much further he might have gone one cannot say. The girl held up a reproving finger and exclaimed:

"Ah, I see it is black coffee the gentleman requires."

But the major's poetic spirit was aroused. "Avaunt coffee," he cried.

"Shall I distress my ruddy soul
With dusky dregs from coffee urn?
Far sweeter, sweet, to quench its fire
With wine for which the 'innards' yearn."

A glass of beer, please."

The adjutant leaned over toward me and hazarded, in a hoarse whisper:

"I presume they have no ice."

The barmaid's red cheeks dimpled and two straight rows of pearly teeth shone upon him, as she answered for me:

"Your presumption is ill-founded, young man. We have plenty of ice with which to temper the hot young blood of the Canadians."

The adjutant looked helplessly up, bereft of repartee; then apostrophised the ceiling:

"And these are the stupid Englishwomen we have been led to expect!"

Our education was going on apace.

A few moments later we emerged and discovered ourselves in a veritable whirlpool of young monetary gluttons.

"Penny, sir! penny! penny!" they shouted in staccato chorus. Our supply of pennies had long since been depleted. An idea struck me.

"See here," I said in serious tone. "We're only a lot of poor soldiers going to the war. We can't always be giving away pennies. We need pennies worse than you do."

A sudden hush fell upon the little circle. Some looked abashed, others curiously uncertain, a few sympathetic. The silence lasted a full minute. We all stood still looking at one another.

"Can any little boy or girl in this crowd give a poor soldier a penny to help him along to the war?" I asked quietly.

Again silence. Finally a little ragged tot of about eight years of age, carrying a baby in her arms, turned to her companions and said: "Here, hold the baby for me and I'll give the poor fellow a penny." She dived deep in the pocket of her frock, brought out a penny, ha'penny (her total wealth) and held it out to me.

Lieutenant Moe stepped forward. "Look here, major," he said sternly, "do you mean to say you'll take that money from a youngster?"

"I do," I replied, without a smile.

"I won't permit it," he cried.

Here was an embarrassing situation. I couldn't explain to him without confessing to the child as well. I wished to gauge how much patriotism beat in those little hearts, what sacrifice they were prepared to make for their country; and here was one measuring up to the highest ideals, I daren't either withdraw or explain.

"I must have the pennies, Moe, and I am going to take them," I replied firmly. "Stand aside, please!"

Military discipline came to the rescue. Moe saluted stiffly and stepped back. The little girl gravely handed over the pennies and took back her baby.

"Any others?" I asked.

Some of the children declared they had none; a few looked sheepish and hung their heads. I slipped a sixpence into the hand of the little lady.

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Moe. "Here's another penny for you," and he handed the bewildered child half a crown.

A shout of surprise and dismay went up from the other children, who realised too late that they had failed in the test.

"The drinks are certainly on me!" Moe cried. "About turn!"

Sometimes when I feel that the world is sordid and mean I go to my trunk and look at those two coins, and I know that somewhere, in a frail little body, beats a generous heart, and I feel that after all part of the world is worth while.

CHAPTER II

Reggy was on shore at last. He said he felt much better walking alone up street – more as if he owned the town!

It's a strange sensation stepping on solid ground after weeks on shipboard. There is a lack of harmony between oneself and the ground. You rock – the ground stands still; you stand still – the ground rocks, like an angry sergeant.

The senior major was on the corner, holding an animated conversation with a beautifully gowned young lady, to whom he bid a hasty adieu as Reggy hove in sight.

"Corking girl, that," said Reggy mischievously.

"Where?" demanded the major, looking about.

"The young lady to whom you just avoided introducing me."

"It's rather a remarkable coincidence," said the major, avoiding controversy, "that I should run across a relation in this far-away place!"

"Very!" Reggy replied drily. "Family's fond of travel, I take it."

A tall, well-knit young subaltern elbowed his way through the crowd and joined the pair. Reggy greeted him:

"Better come and have dinner with your brother and me, Tom. I feel he needs good company and a chaperon or two!"

The trio entered the rotunda of the *Royal*.

A distinguished looking gentleman and a prepossessing lady of middle age stood chatting together. Their voices were agitated, and the three officers could not avoid overhearing snatches of the conversation.

"He is on the *Cassandra*, and in this medley of ships no one seems to know where his is anchored," the man was saying.

"Dear me," sighed the lady. "To think that our boy should be so near and that we should not be able to see him! It's dreadful!"

"But we must find him," the man declared reassuringly. "Surely there is some way of reaching the ship?"

"They tell me no one is allowed on board; and when the battalion disembarks they will be marched away. What shall we do?" she cried in great distress.

Reggy's impulsive heart was touched. He approached them and respectfully saluted.

"A thousand pardons, sir," he said, "for breaking in upon a private conversation, but I couldn't help overhearing your words. Can I be of any assistance to you?"

"It is very kind of you, indeed," the man answered in a rich voice of unusual gentility. "Perhaps you can help us. My son is aboard the *Cassandra*. We haven't seen him since he went to Canada four years ago. He is only a Tommy, so cannot come ashore, and it seems impossible to get into communication with him."

"What luck!" Reggy exclaimed. "His ship and ours are anchored side by side; so close, in fact, that we have a connecting gang-way."

"Oh, do you think we could get out to him?" the mother asked anxiously. "We have no permit to visit the ships."

"If you can get authority to enter the dockyards, I'll see what I can do to get you aboard tomorrow noon," Reggy answered. "I'll meet you at the quay."

"God bless you!" exclaimed the lady, with tears in her eyes.

The following day, true to his word, Reggy, with a written permit in his pocket, ushered Mr. and Mrs. Hargreaves aboard the ship.

"You will stay and lunch with me," said Reggy. "I'll get your boy across, and we'll all lunch together."

"But I was under the impression that Tommies were not allowed to dine with officers," protested Mr. Hargreaves.

"The deuce! I'd forgotten all about that," Reggy exclaimed, as he scratched his head perplexedly. "Ah, I have it," he ejaculated a moment later; "he shall be an officer during the meal. I'll lend him a tunic. No one else on board will know."

"But I don't wish you to get yourself into trouble," Mr. Hargreaves remonstrated.

Reggy laughed.

"I love such trouble," he cried, "and the risk fascinates me. I'll be back in a moment." And he dashed off in his impetuous way.

In a short time he returned, bringing with him a handsome but much embarrassed youth, wearing a captain's uniform. But the sight which met his eyes banished all thought of clothes.

"Mother! Father!" he cried; and in a moment was clasped in his mother's arms, while tears of joy she didn't strive to hide rolled down her cheeks. The old gentleman turned his head aside to hide his own emotion, and Reggy, feeling *de trop*, slipped quietly away.

A few days later our ship was dragged slowly into dock by two small but powerful tug-boats. The boys who had been caged on board for a full week in sight of but unable to reach the land shouted and danced for joy. The noise of the donkey engine pulling our equipment out of the hold was to us the sweetest sound on land or sea.

We were almost the last ship to dock, and a thousand boys were impatiently awaiting their turn to step on English soil. Machine guns, boxes of rifles and ammunition, great cases of food and wagons came hurtling through the hatchway, vomited from the depths below. With great speed and regularity they were deposited on the quay, while heavy motor lorries, piled high with freight, creaked from dock to train.

From across the quay, and in awesome proximity, the great guns of the battle cruisers *Tiger* and *Benbow* yawned at us. As far as one might look heavily armoured men-of-war, ready to sail or in process of construction, met the eye, and the deafening crash of the trip-hammer stormed the ear. Britain may well be proud of her navy. Its size and might are far beyond our ken. Patiently, in peaceful harbour, or on sea, she lies in wait and longs for Germany's inevitable hour.

The hospitality of the citizens of Devonport and Plymouth will long remain a pleasant recollection. First impressions linger and our first impressions there still stir up delightful memories.

"Now, then, look sharp there! Stow them adoos an' get aboard!"

It was the raucous voice of Sergeant Honk which thus assailed his unwilling flock. The boys were bidding a lengthy farewell to the local beauties, who had patriotically followed them to the train.

The sergeant was hot and dusty, and beaded drops of sweat dripped from his unwashed chin. His hat was cocked over one eye, in very unmilitary style. The Tommies, under the stimulating influence of two or more draughts of "bitter" purchased at a nearby bar, were inclined to be jocose.

"'Ave *another* drink, 'Onk!" cried one, thrusting a grimy head from the train window and mimicking Honk's cockney accent. This subtle allusion to previous libations aroused the sergeant's ire.

"Oo said that?" he shouted wrathfully, as he turned quickly about. "Blimey if yer ain't got no more disc'pline than a 'erd uv Alberta steers! If I 'ears any more sauce like that some one 'ull be up for 'office' in th' mornin'!"

The culprit had withdrawn his head in time, and peace prevailed for moment.

"What's that baggage fatigue doin'?" he cried a moment later. "D'ye think y'er at a picnic – eatin' oranges? Load them tents!"

The orange-eating "fatigue," looking very hot and fatigued indeed, fell reluctantly to work.

Sergeant Honk was not beautiful to look upon – his best friends conceded this. His nose was bent and red. He had one fixed and one revolving eye, and when the former had transfixed you, the latter wandered aimlessly about, seeking I know not what. He was so knock-kneed that his feet could never meet. I think it was the sergeant-major in Punch who complained that "it was impossible to make him look 'smart,' for when his knees stood at attention his feet would stand at ease."

To see Honk salute with one stiff hand pointing heavenward and his unruly feet ten inches apart has been known to bring a wan sweet smile to the face of blasé generals; but subalterns, more prone to mirth, have sometimes laughed outright.

Some one had thrown a banana peel upon the station platform. Honk stepped backward upon its slippery face. He didn't fall, but his queer legs opened and shut with a scissor-like snap that wrenched his dignity in twain.

"Fruit's the curse of the army," he muttered.

Somehow we got aboard at last – officers, non-commissioned officers and men. The crowd cheered a lusty farewell, and amidst much waving of pocket handkerchiefs and hats, Plymouth faded away, and the second stage of our journey began.

It was midnight when we pulled into Lavington station. There is no village there – merely a tavern of doubtful mien. Rain was falling in a steady drizzle as we emerged upon the platform and stood shivering in the bleak east wind. The transport officer, who had been awaiting our arrival, approached the colonel and saluted.

"Rather a nasty night, sir," he observed courteously.

"Bad night for a march," the colonel replied. "My men are tired, too. Hope we haven't got far to go?"

"Not very, sir; a matter of eight or nine miles only."

The colonel glanced at him sharply, thinking the information was given in satirical vein; but the Englishman's face was inscrutable.

"Nine miles!" he exclaimed. "That may be an easy march for seasoned troops, but my men have been three weeks on shipboard."

"Sorry, sir, but that's the shortest route."

"Thanks; we'll camp right here." The colonel was emphatic.

"In the rain?" the Englishman inquired in some surprise.

"Yes. What of it?"

"Nothing, sir; but it seems unusual, that's all."

"We're unusual people," the colonel answered dryly. "Quartermaster, get out the rubber sheets and blankets. The station platform will be our bed."

The transport officer saluted and retired.

The adjutant was weary and sleepy. He had vainly tried a stimulating Scotch or two to rouse his lagging spirit.

"Fall in, men," he shouted. "Shun! Right dress. Quartermaster, issue the blankets, please."

The quartermaster was disposed to argue the point. The blankets would all be wet and muddy, and damaged with coal cinders; but he was finally overruled.

The adjutant turned to look at the men. Their line had wobbled and showed strange gyrations.

"*Will* you men stand in line?" he cried. "How do any of you ever expect to succeed in life if you can't learn to stand in a straight line?" With which unanswerable argument and much pleased with his midnight philosophy, he relapsed into his customary genial smile.

At last the blankets were distributed, and in an hour the station platform and bridge over the tracks looked like the deck of an emigrant steamer. Wherever the eye reached, the dimly-lighted platform showed rows of sleeping men, rolled up and looking very like sacks of potatoes lying together.

Five of us officers turned into the expressman's hut, and in the dark fell into whatever corner was available. Reggy and I occupied either side of an unlighted stove, and throughout the jumpy watches of the night bruised our shins against its inhospitable legs.

Dawn was breaking, and breaking darkly, too, as the dim shadow of the expressman came stumbling across the platform through rows of growling men. At last he reached his office, and, all unconscious of our presence, stepped within. He stepped upon the sleeping form of the adjutant, and the form emitted a mighty roar. The expressman staggered back in amazement, giving vent to this weird epigram:

"Every bloomin' 'ole a sleepin' 'ole!"

"You'll 'ave to get up," he cried indignantly when he had recovered from his astonishment. "This ain't a bloomin' boardin'-'ouse!"

"Could you return in half an hour?" Reggy queried in drowsy tones, but without opening his eyes.

"No. I couldn't return in 'alf an hour," he mocked peevishly.

"Run away like a good fellow, and bring some shaving water – have it hot!" Reggy commanded.

"Oh, I'll make it 'ot for you all right, if you don't let me into my office," he retorted angrily.

Might is not always right, so we reluctantly rose. We had had three hours of fitful sleep – not too much for our first night's soldiering. Hot coffee, cheese and biscuits were soon served by our cooks, and we prepared for our first march on English sod.

No one who made that march from Lavington to West Down North will ever forget it. Napoleon's march to Moscow was mere child's play compared with it. Reggy said both his corns were shrieking for Blue Jays and when Bill Barker removed his socks (skin and all) it marked an epoch in his life, for both his feet were clean.

Every fifteen minutes it rained. At first we thought this mere playfulness on the part of the weather; but when it kept right on for weeks on end, we knew it to be distemper. By day it was a steady drizzle, but at night the weather did its proudest feats. Sometimes it was a cloudburst; anon an ordinary shower that splashed in angry little squirts through the canvas, and fell upon our beds.

And the mud! We stood in mud. We walked in mud. We slept in mud. The sky looked muddy, too. Once, and only once, the moon peeped out – it had splashes of mud on its face!

Reggy loved sleep. It was his one passion. Not the sweet beauty sleep of youth, but the deep snoring slumber of the full-blown man. But, oh, those cruel "Orderly Officer" days, when one must rise at dawn! Reggy thought so, too.

Six a.m. The bugle blew "Parade." Reggy arose. I opened one eye in time to see a bedraggled figure in blue pyjamas stagger across the sloppy floor. His eyes were heavy with sleep, and his wetted forelock fell in a Napoleonic curve. The murky dawn was breaking.

Outside the tent we could hear the sergeant-major's rubber boots flop, flop, across the muddy road.

"Fall in, men! Fall in!" His tones, diluted with the rain, came filtering through the tent. It was inspection hour.

Reggy fumbled at the flap of the tent, untied the cord, and through the hole thus made thrust his sleep-laden head.

"Parade, 'shun!" shouted the sergeant-major (a sly bit of satire on his part). The warning wasn't needed. The sight of Reggy's dishevelled countenance was enough; Bill Barker himself "shunned." Somewhere from the depths of Reggy's head a sleepy muffled voice emitted this succinct command:

"Serg'nt-major; dish-mish th' parade."

"Right turn! Dis-miss!" With a shout of joy the boys scampered off to their tents.

A moment later Reggy tumbled into bed again, and soon was fast asleep. And within two hours, at breakfast, he was saying, with virtuous resignation: "How I envied you lucky devils sleeping-in this

morning! I was up at six o'clock inspecting the parade." And the halo of near-truth hovered gently about his head.

Thus passed three weeks of rain and mud. In spite of ourselves we had begun to look like soldiers. How we ever developed into the finest hospital unit in the forces none of us to this day knows – and none but ourselves suspects it yet. We had, and have still, one outstanding feature – a sort of native modesty. Whatever in this chronicle savours of egotism is merely the love of truth which cannot be suppressed.

And then, one eventful day, the surgeon-general came to inspect us. He seemed pleased with us. Presently he passed into the colonel's tent, and they had a long and secret conference together. Finally the pair emerged again.

"What about your horses?" the general queried.

The horses had been our greatest worry. They came on a different boat, and the two best were missing or stolen. Once Sergeant Honk discovered them in the lines of another unit, but was indiscreet enough to proclaim his belief to the sergeant-major of that unit. When we hurried down to get them they were gone. No one there had ever heard of a horse of the colour or design which we described. We were discouraged, and in our despair turned to the senior major, who was a great horseman and knew the tricks of the soldier horse-thief.

"Don't get excited," he said reassuringly. "They've only hidden away the horses in a tent, after you chumps recognised them. To-morrow, when they are not suspicious, I'll go down and get them."

And on the morrow *mirabile dictu* he secured them both.

So the colonel answered: "The horses are here, and ready, sir."

Ready for what? There was a tenseness in the air – a sense of mystery that could not be explained. We listened again, but could only catch scraps of the conversation, such as "Transport officer," "Nine a.m." "Don't take the mess tent or any tents but hospital marquees."

Something was brewing and brewing very fast. At length the colonel saluted, and the general left.

"What news, Colonel?", we cried breathlessly, as soon as discretion allowed. And he let fall these magic words:

"We are under orders to move. We shall be the first Canadians in France!"

CHAPTER III

It was exactly 10 p.m. as Bill Barker and Huxford, with the heavy team and wagon, drove up to the colonel's tent.

"Do you think you can find your way to Southampton in the dark?" the colonel asked Barker somewhat anxiously.

"Yes, sir. I've never been lost in my life – sober." The afterthought was delivered with a reminiscent grin.

"Remember, no 'booze' until the horses are safely in the town; and a glass of beer will be quite enough even then," the colonel admonished him.

"Never fear, sir," Bill replied, as he saluted. With a last long look at the camp he said: "Good-night, sir," and the horses started down the muddy road.

Why we should still have any affection for that camp in which none of us ever wore a dry stitch of clothes or knew a moment's comfort, is merely another illustration of the perversity of human nature. Like Bill Sikes' dog, our love is stronger than our common sense. For a moment we stood watching the team pass down through the lines toward the unknown south, and then we turned in to sleep.

At 3 a.m. our camp was all astir, and the dull yellow glow of candles and lanterns shining through the tents dotted the plain. Here and there brighter lights flitted to and fro, as the men proceeded rapidly with the work of packing up.

And what a medley of goods there was! Blankets and rubber sheets were folded neatly into their canvas covers; stoves and pots and pans were crated; boxes of cheese, jam and bully-beef, together with bags of bread were carried out of the tents into the open. At one side stood large boxes of medicines, beds, mattresses, portable folding tables and chairs, and a hundred other varieties of hospital necessities, all packed and ready for transport.

By 9 a.m. the motor lorries commenced to arrive. How the boys worked that morning! The pile of forty tons of goods which represented our home, and soon would be the home of many others, sick and wounded, melted away before their united effort.

We had come to Salisbury Plain in the rain; it was but fitting that we should leave in a similar downpour. We did!

The soldier is a strange creature; a migratory animal whose chief delight in life is moving. Put him in one place for months, be it ever so cheery and comfortable – he frets like a restless steed; but give him the rein, permit him to go, he cares not whither – he is happy. It may be from sunshine to shadow; it may be from château to trench; it may be from heaven to hell – he cares not if he but moves, and, moving, he will whistle or sing his delight.

The road was lined with envious Tommies who came to see us start.

"Yer colonel muster had *some* pull with Kitch'ner t' git ye away so soon," said one of the envious to Tim, the colonel's batman.

Tim was quite the most unique of all our motley tribe. He was born in Ireland, educated (or rather remained uneducated) in the Southern States, and for the past ten years had lived in Canada. He was a faithful servant, true to his master and to all his friends. Like many another "original," he was permitted to take liberties which shocked all sense of military discipline, as well as every other sense; but he amused us and was forgiven. He was a prize fighter, too, of no mean ability, and carried the scars of many a hard-fought battle. No other being in the world used a dialect like Tim's. It was a language all his own, and negroid in character.

"Pull wit' Kitch'ner!" he replied disdainfully. "Wit George hisself, ye means. D'ye s'pose my kernel hobnobs wit' anyt'ing lessen royalty? De king sent fer him, an' he goed to Lunnon a' purpose."

"'Wot is yer Majesty's command?' sez de kernel.

"'Kernel,' sez he, 'when I seed yer men on p'rade las' Sunday, I turned to Lord Kitch'ner an' sez: "Kitch'ner, it ain't right t' keep men as good as dat in England; dere place is at de front!'"

"You was sure needed there," Tim's vis-à-vis interjected sarcastically; "good thick-headed fellers t' stop a bullet."

Tim ignored the remark, and continued:

"So he sez, 'Kernel, yer unit 'ull be de first t' leave fer France, an' good luck t' ye!' Wit dat de kernel comed back, an' now we're goin' to see de Pea-jammers."

"Wot's them?" the other growlingly inquired.

"Don't ye know wot Pea-jammers is yet? Ye muster bin eddicated in night school. Pea-jammers is Frenchmen."

By what process of exclusion Tim had arrived at this strange decision with reference to the French, none but himself knew; and he never by any chance alluded to them otherwise.

"All in, men!" shouted the sergeant-major, and each man scrambled to his allotted place.

To look at the rough exterior of our men one would not suppose that music lurked within their breasts – nothing more unlikely seemed probable; and yet, listen to the vibrant harmony of their chorus as they sit upon their bags and boxes! It rolls in melodious waves over the camp, and crowds of soldiers come running toward the road to listen. Oh, you may be sure they had their good points, those lads of ours – so many good points, too!

The lorries started, and the boys lifted their voices to the strains of "Good-bye, Dolly, I Must Leave You." The little crowd which lined the road on either side raised their caps and gave three cheers in kindly token of farewell. As we looked back upon those stalwart soldier-boys, many a wistful glance was cast toward us, and many a longing eye followed the trail of our caravan.

Night had fallen before our train puffed noisily into the railway sheds at Southampton. How hungry we were! And the sight of the crowded buffet and its odour of steaming coffee gave us a thrill of expectant delight.

There are times in life when it takes so little to please or interest one. In the ornate grandeur of a metropolitan hotel such coffee and cake as we received that night would have called forth a clamour of protest; but in the rough interior of a dockyard shed no palatial surroundings mar the simple pleasures of the soul. What delicious cheese our quartermaster produced out of a mud-covered box, and how splendidly crisp the hard-tack, as we crunched it with hungry teeth! Seated on our bags and boxes, we feasted as none but hungry soldiers can, and the murky coffee turned into nectar as it touched our lips.

Through the big doorway, too, the eye could feast on the towering side of the ship which was so soon to take us to our great adventure, as she lay snuggled against the quay. But as we rested there, another train pulled into the sheds and stopped. The doors were opened from within, and we were surprised to see hundreds of great horses step quietly and solemnly out upon the platform. There was a marvellous dignity about those tall, magnificent animals, with their arched necks and glossy coats. They drew up upon the platform in long rows like soldiers. There was no neighing, no kicking or baulkiness. They seemed to be impressed with the seriousness of the mission upon which they were sent. A little later, as they passed up the ship's gangway, and were marched aboard, no regiment ever stepped upon the deck with finer show of discipline.

Our saddle horses were already aboard; but what had become of Barker and the team?

"Where's Barker?" the colonel suddenly demanded. No one present knew; but, as if in answer to his question, little Huxford came running down the platform. By the look of distress upon his face we knew something serious had happened.

"What is it, Huxford?" cried the colonel, as Huxford approached.

"Barker's been arrested, sir, by the military police, and the team are in the detention camp, four miles from here," he gasped.

"Drunk, I suppose?" the colonel queried angrily.

"Well, sir, he *had* had a drink or two, but not till after we got to town," Huxford answered reluctantly.

"I might have guessed as much," said the colonel with some bitterness. "It's useless to depend upon a man who drinks. Here, Fraser," he called to Captain Fraser, "take a taxi and make the camp as quickly as possible. The boat sails in two hours. Don't fail to bring both Barker and the horses – although, Lord knows, Barker would be no great loss."

It was characteristic of the colonel that no matter what scrapes we got into, no matter what trouble or humiliation we caused him, he never forsook us. More than once in the days that were to follow he saved some reckless youth from being taken out at early dawn and shot; not because he did not feel that the punishment was deserved but because his big, kindly heart enwrapped every one of his wayward soldier-boys with a father's love.

An English regiment was embarking upon the same ship with us. The donkey engine was busy again hauling their accoutrement and ours aboard. Great cases swung aloft in monotonous yet wonderful array. Sometimes a wagon was hoisted into the air; again a motor truck was lifted with apparent ease, swayed to and fro for a moment high above our heads, and then descended to the depths below. By midnight the ship was loaded, but Barker and the team with Huxford and Captain Fraser had not returned.

The transport officer addressed the senior major.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I can't hold the ship more than ten minutes longer. If your men don't arrive by that time they'll have to remain behind."

The colonel had gone to meet the train on which the nursing sisters were to arrive. They were coming from London to join us, and were to cross upon the same boat. But the colonel returned alone.

He was a tall, well-built, handsome man, and his winning smile was most contagious. It took a great deal to ruffle his genial good nature, and his blue-grey eyes were seldom darkened by a frown, but this was a night of unusual worry.

He called out to Captain Burnham:

"Have your luggage brought ashore, Burnham. You and I will remain behind to chaperon the nurses. They can't possibly make the boat."

"What's the trouble, sir?" Burnham inquired, as he descended upon the quay. "Was their train late?"

The colonel laughed a trifle impatiently.

"No; the train was quite on time, but I have been having a new experience. I under-estimated the baggage of thirty-five women, that's all. It's astounding! I don't know how many trunks each nurse has, but the *tout ensemble* makes Barnum's circus train look foolish. I ventured to remark that we were only going to the war, not touring Europe, but this precipitated such a shower of reproach upon my innocent head that I made no further protest. I was never able to oust one woman in an argument. Imagine, then, where I stood with thirty-five! The trunks, every one of them, will cross with us tomorrow, and if they wish to bring Peter Robinson's whole shop, you won't hear a murmur from me!"

At this moment the sound of horses' hoofs coming at the gallop broke upon our ears; and Captain Fraser, himself driving the team, with Barker and Huxford clinging to the seat for support, dashed upon the quay. As the horses pulled up, Barker descended and stood sheepishly awaiting the inevitable.

"Barker, I'm ashamed of you," the colonel said in a tone of stern reproach. "You have been the first to bring disgrace upon our unit, and I hope you will be the last. In future Huxford will have charge of the team. I shall have something further to say when we reach France. Get aboard!"

Barker dropped his eyes during this speech.

"I'm sorry, sir, I – I didn't mean to disgrace you, sir!" With these words he saluted and shuffled humbly and contritely aboard.

It was many a long day before Barker tasted liquor again. The colonel's words burned with a dull glow in his heart, and kindled a spark of manhood there.

Crossing the Channel in those days was not as comparatively safe as it is to-day. Under the water, always prowling about, lurked the German submarines. Every day reports of their dastardly deeds came to hand. Being torpedoed was not the sort of end which one might wish. There was no honour or glory in such a death, and besides, the water looked dreary and cold. In spite of oneself the thought of being blown suddenly into the air recurred occasionally to mind. It was not that we had any real fear, for any form of death was part of the game of hazard on which we had embarked. But we stood for some time upon the deck and peered inquisitively into the darkness as we steamed rapidly out into the Channel.

What was the dull glow at some distance ahead? Perhaps a ship – it was impossible to say. We looked astern, and there in the darkness we could just discern a ghostly shape which followed in our wake, and, hour by hour, ahead or behind, these two mysterious phantoms followed or led our every turn.

Dawn was breaking; the hazy shapes became more real. Slowly the daylight pierced the mist, and there revealed to our astonished gaze, were two sturdy little torpedo boat destroyers. It was a part of that marvellous British navy which never sleeps by night or day.

What a sense of security those two destroyers gave us! The mist closed round us again, and hid them from our view, but ever and anon the roar of our siren broke the silence and presently, close by, a sharp answering blast told us that our guardians were near. By and by the fog closed round about us so densely that further progress was unsafe, and so the engines were stopped, and for another day and night we remained at sea.

CHAPTER IV

During the day and a half that we stood out in the Channel fog, wondering whether we should ever reach land, or whether a stray German submarine would send us to a higher sphere, we had plenty of time to look about the ship. She was an India liner which had been pressed into service as a troop ship; and the Hindu stewards looked after our many wants as only the Oriental can.

What a far-reaching cosmopolitanism emanates from that little land of Britain! Here were English officers giving orders to the Hindus in their own mysterious tongue; and the deference with which these men obeyed helped us to realise Britain's greatness. To conquer a country, tame it, civilise it – sometimes by force – and still retain the love and respect of its inhabitants, is a power given to but few peoples; yet Britons possess it to the full.

On Sunday morning – a bright warm day in early November – our ship steamed slowly into the port of Le Havre. We lingered a few minutes near a high stone quay. Close beside us was a Belgian hospital ship, its white and green paint and big red crosses contrasting strangely with our own dull grey. We could see the nurses and medical officers on board ministering to their patients with tender care and solicitude.

We were steaming slowly through a narrow channel between block after block of wharves, where ships unnumbered piled their ocean freight. Finally we emerged into a great basin filled with craft, both large and small, some of which were dismantled. Across the bay a splendid ocean liner reared her four smokeless funnels toward the sky; she was one of that great fleet of passenger ships, so recently the pride of France, now thrust aside by the stern demands of ruthless war.

At length we docked, and as we stood leaning over the rail, some little children came running down the quay to greet us.

"*Messieurs! Messieurs! Bon jour!*" they cried; and then for the first time we realised that we were in a foreign land.

France, la belle France! How often have we dreamed of you in better days! Bright, vivacious France, whose wit and laughter sparkled like champagne, whose joy was ever rampant! How soon your smiles and tears were to intermingle with our own!

But the soldiers on board had not yet learned to speak in French, and they responded in our own dull tongue: "Good-day, little girls. Hello, little boys," and they dropped silver coins and pennies on the quay.

The French children had already learned a word or two of English, and they had also discovered that the Tommy understood two very useful French words. Not to be outdone in courtesy, they flung them up to us in piping chorus: "Good-night, cigarette, souvenir!"

How many thousand times we have since heard this same greeting! It has become the children's formula, and as a gracious concession to our ignorance of French has met its just reward – in pennies.

Dusk fell before we had completed the unloading of our equipment and had it all stowed away in the *hangar*. Then we formed up and, with a French boy-scout as guide, started our march toward camp.

The senior major, on his splendid black horse, led the van; the men, contrary to military custom, carrying a Union Jack, followed, and Captain Reggy and I, mounted, brought up the rear.

The first half-mile of our march was uneventful, as there were few people in the streets of the *basse ville*; but as we passed farther up into the city the sidewalks became crowded with spectators. At first the French mistook us for English soldiers on the march, the sight of whom, while an almost hourly occurrence, was still a matter of keen interest. But as the crowd, becoming larger and larger, and pushing one another off the sidewalks into the road, caught a glimpse of our shoulder badges marked "Canada," the word was passed from mouth to mouth with lightning-like rapidity, and the excitement became intense.

They broke forth into the wildest cheering and shouted again and again, "*Les Canadiens! Vive le Canada!*" until the clamour was deafening. Men, women and children surrounded us in thousands, laughing, singing and talking, shaking the soldiers by the hand, embracing and even kissing them in the excess of their welcome.

That the boys weren't always kissed on account of their irresistible beauty may be gathered from this little conversation which took place *en passant*:

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed one of the girls to her nearest neighbour, "why did you kiss that ugly face?"

"Because," was the reply, "he looked so lonely – he seemed to need it most."

They marched up the street with us, arm in arm, all who could get near enough, and threw a thousand questions at us in one unintelligible clatter of French. It was a welcome to stir the blood of the coldest, and from that moment we took France to our hearts, as she had taken us, and held her fast.

What did the landing of a mere handful of Canadians mean to France? There weren't enough of us to be of much importance, compared with the thousands of other British troops which landed daily. But the French, with their keen sense of appreciation, recognised at once that the advent of this little Canadian band had a broad significance; it meant that in her great struggle for the cause of liberty and humanity France was to be supported not only by Britain but by the far-flung elements of the Empire. It meant encouragement; it meant success!

And as they shouted "*Vive le Canada*" we echoed with a will, "*Vive la France*." We sang, too, "God Save the King," and "*La Marseillaise*." A few who knew English joined in the first, but "*La Marseillaise*" starting by courtesy with us, swelled in a moment into a mighty anthem which swept the city like a storm. Later, when we followed with "The Maple Leaf," a respectful silence fell upon the throng. With quick intuition they knew it was a song of home, with which they sympathised, but which they could not understand. And as the melody concluded we could hear them whispering one to another: "*Quelle est cette chanson?*" And we answered in our broken French, "It is a song of our native land, far, far from here."

It was my good fortune during this strange march to ride upon the side close to the curb, while Reggy, in comparative obscurity, rode opposite. Frequently, too, it was my privilege to return the greetings of the dainty French girls who lined the walk and waved their handkerchiefs high above the heads of the crowd in the road.

At last Reggy, trotting along in the shadow, could contain himself no longer. He burst out:

"Hang it all, major! Just my bally luck again; you're always closer to the girls than I."

"But not closer to their hearts, Reggy dear," I interjected soothingly.

"Small consolation, that, in the present situation," Reggy was grumbling, when he was suddenly interrupted by a pretty black-eyed girl who, running alongside his horse, caught him by the hand and forthwith begged a kiss. I believe – or, rather, I hope – Reggy blushed. I should always like to think that at that precise moment Reggy's sense of modesty came to his rescue. If it did, however, it vanished again with alarming rapidity.

"Here's an embarrassing situation," he cried dolefully.

"Very trying, indeed, to have a pretty girl demand a kiss," I laughed.

"Confound it!" he returned. "That's not the trouble; but I'm not horseman enough to lean over and get it."

There, you see, Reggy in one fell moment had destroyed all my illusions about him. Here was I worrying over his distress and presumed embarrassment, while he, hopeless young scamp that he was, showed actual regret because he couldn't fall from grace.

"I would suggest that you dismount," I answered, in a spirit of sarcasm.

For a moment I believe this insane thought obsessed him, and then his latent sense of military discipline and dignity saved him. He turned regretfully to the young lady, and pressing her hand warmly – very warmly, I thought – broke forth in schoolboy French:

"*Merci, cherie! Mille fois, mille fois.* Another time will have to do."

"*Est-ce-que vous parlez Français, monsieur?*" she demanded sweetly.

"Rather rough on your French, Reggy," I teased, "asking you, after that brilliant *sortie*, if you really speak the language."

Reggy appeared hurt.

"Look at you," he cried, "riding along like a bloated monarch, scooping in the obeisance of the whole kingdom, and because I command the attention – and, I trust, respect – of only one of your subjects, you're jealous. Out upon you – for shame!"

All good things come to an end at last. For half an hour we had been princes or kings, drinking in the nectar of adulation in mighty gulps. It turned our heads and made us dizzy, and this feeling of elation lasted long after we had left the crowd behind, and the faint cry of *Vive les Canadiens* followed us into the darker streets. We toiled slowly over the cobble stones, up the steep hill, and finally into camp.

The camp commandant came to meet us a few minutes after we arrived. He was a fine-looking specimen of British officer – tall, athletic, with iron-grey hair and keen blue eyes. He smiled as he greeted us.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said, as the senior major approached and saluted. "Where have you all come from?"

"Originally from Canada, sir," the major replied, "but recently from Salisbury Plains."

"How interesting," he cried in a tone of delighted surprise. "I had no idea the Canadians were coming to France so soon."

"Weren't you expecting us, sir?" the major ventured.

The commandant laughed good-humouredly. We seemed to amuse him.

"Well, not exactly," he replied; "but you are quite welcome. Take those three rows of tents, draw your rations and make yourselves at home. One of these days orders will come along for you."

One of these days! Well, well! Was he actually addressing us in that careless and flippant manner, we who had just taken France by storm? Alas! we were not so important after all. For a full hour we had looked upon ourselves as the whole war, and the rest of the British army as a mere background to our glory. And now we were told that "one of these days!" It was really too bad. But still, he was kindly and courteous, and behind those smiling eyes lurked a great sympathy, I am sure, for our little band.

We looked about us and then we understood. There were miles of tents. Regiments of soldiers were marching in and regiments were marching out – the Highland "kilties" with their sporrans swaying to and fro in stirring unison. We heaved a sigh. It was all too true. We were only one small cog in the great machine!

But the senior major was elated with a strange and inexplicable emotion. After the commandant had bidden us good-night, he paced back and forth, with his hands behind his back and his head in the air. He raised his feet high as he walked, and clicked his spurs with the firmness of his tread. Something was effervescing in his mind, and soon would blow his mental cork out. What was it? He twirled his moustaches from time to time and smiled a crafty smile. At last it popped:

"Gentlemen," he said, "that's one thing which no one can ever take from me!"

"What?" we cried breathlessly.

"That *I* was the first officer who ever led a Canadian unit into France!"

Oh, the supreme egotism and self-love of old bachelorhood! We turned away without a word, in time to hear little Huxford's piping voice in ungrammatical query.

"Did ye had a good time to-night, Bill?"

And Bill's reply echoed the sentiments of all our hearts.

"Did I?" he cried exultantly. "*Some class!*"

CHAPTER V

How it stormed that night! Thunder, lightning, rain and wind combined in one uproarious elemental war. It seemed as if no tent on earth could stand the strain. Once I peeped outside, and in the flashes saw vistas of tents rolling like great white-crested waves on an operatic sea. From time to time the cracking of poles and the dull swish of canvas, blending with the smothered oaths of men beneath, told us that some tent had fallen.

Reggy slept as peacefully as a new-born babe. Tucked into his canvas sleeping-bag and with a woollen toque pulled well down over his ears, he was oblivious to the storm, and in the faint glimmer of our candle-lantern looked like an Eskimo at rest.

Peg after peg jerked out of the ground, and our tent commenced to rock to and fro in a drunken frenzy. Would the guard never come to tighten the guys? They seemed to have forgotten us. Warmly ensconced in my blankets and half asleep in spite of the noise, I lay and from time to time idly wondered how much longer the tent would stand.

Sometimes I dozed and dreamed of getting up to fix it, and saw myself crawling about in wet pyjamas in the wind and rain. The thought awoke me; the tent was flapping still. Reggy, as the junior, was in duty bound to right it; but if the storm couldn't wake him, what could mere man do? I dozed again and awoke just in time to see the canvas give one last wild gyration. Then it crashed down upon us.

"Hi! What the d – l are you doing now?"

It was the sleep-saturated voice of Reggy in angry, smothered tones beneath the wreck. For answer to his question, a gust of wind lifted the canvas from his face, and a spurt of rain, with the force of a garden hose, struck him.

"O Lord!" he howled. "The bally tent's blown down!" Reggy's perspicacity, while sluggish, was accurate.

"Get up, you lazy blighter, and lend a hand!" I shouted between blasts of wind and rain which soaked me through and through.

"Ugh! You wouldn't ask a chap to get up in a storm like this," he cried appealingly.

I didn't. I merely took the lower end of his sleeping-bag and emptied it, as one would a sack of potatoes, onto the floor. Reggy emerged like a rumped blue-bird.

"Rotten trick, I call that," he grumbled, as he scrambled to his feet.

Luckily by this time the guard arrived to help us, and after a long tussle with the ropes, the tent was pitched once more, and we crawled back to bed.

The morning sun rose clear and bright and smiled as if it had no memories of the night before. Wherever one might look tents lay in heaps upon the ground, but not a breath of wind stirred the fresh cool air. Fainter and more faint from the distance came the weird strain of the bagpipes – a Highland regiment was passing down the hill, starting on that long journey whence all might not return.

Our men had breakfasted and were already at work raising the fallen tents. The adjutant emerged from his abode wearing a weary smile – he hadn't slept much.

"What of the night?" he cried. "The storm has given me an appetite. Where's breakfast? I'm as hungry as an R.M.C. cadet."

Where indeed was breakfast? As yet we had no "mess"; our goods were still unpacked.

"There's a soldiers' buffet managed by ladies in the cottage yonder," said Fraser, pointing to a brick house on the crest of the hill. Trust Fraser to know where grub abounds! "Perhaps I can persuade the little lady of the place..."

"You'll need help," Reggy interpolated hastily. "Some one with persuasive powers. I'll go along."

Reggy's eagerness to go suggested other distractions than foraging. We said we would accompany him – lest he forget. We entered a long room at the rear of the house, which had been a carpenter's shop before the war. It was furnished with two long tables, benches, and a large number of kitchen chairs. The carpenter's tools hung unused upon the wall. At the farther end of the room several young women and one of maturer years were rapidly cutting up bread and meat for sandwiches, buttering appetising French rolls and placing them all in large baskets. It looked enough to feed a multitude.

We approached the table. One young woman looked up, apparently more from courtesy than with any special interest in our arrival, and said: "Good morning!"

It was true then; they *were* English-women. They were as cool – and refreshing – as the air outside. Reggy saluted gravely.

"May we have something to eat, please?" he inquired hesitatingly.

The young woman looked up again, with a surprised smile. "But you are not Tommies," she replied.

"No; merely officers, and very hungry ones at that."

She looked a trifle perplexed. "We don't serve officers here," she asserted. "You see, this buffet is meant for Tommies only."

Bless their hearts! Here at least was one place where the officer was discounted, and Tommy was king. We had been *fêted* and pampered to such an extent that we had lost sight of the true proportion of things. Here were women who realised that Tommy is quite as important as his officer, that he is a man and as such has rights. We honoured the young women who could thus devote themselves to the men who really needed their help most. But this elevating thought did not appease our hunger in the least. We still wanted something to eat, and the dainty food before us failed to modify our internal cravings.

"Couldn't we have just one bun?" Reggy coaxed.

The young woman smilingly shook her head. "It's against our rules," she replied.

Reggy looked distressed. We imitated his look with such success that another young woman, who seemed to be the one in authority, came forward and volunteered:

"If you will step into the house, gentlemen, I shall see what the *conciierge* can do for you there."

That we didn't fall upon her neck in sheer thankfulness speaks well for our self-control. We kept sufficient restraint upon ourselves, however, to merely murmur our gratitude in becoming words. We explained that we had just arrived, and that our mess was not yet open.

"Well, well," she laughed. "Of course, we can't let you starve, but you really mustn't eat in here."

If the angels in heaven look anything like that sweet young woman as she appeared to us at that moment – well, it's a great incentive to lead a good life, that's all.

We were ushered into a quaint French dining-room, furnished with hand-carved mahogany. That a carpenter should have such exquisite taste surprised us. We were yet to learn that the artistic sense is a keynote of French character. The owner of the cottage was away at the war; he was one of the *poilus* who were then, and are still, upholding the martial traditions of a noble fighting race. His wife spread a dainty table for us, and we breakfasted for the first time in France.

Our menu consisted of small mackerel, rolls and coffee! How prosaic it sounds in English! We shall always remember that *petit déjeuner* in French: *Petits maqueraux, petits pains et café-au-lait*. What music there is in such a language! The food itself loses its identity and is transformed into the sustenance of the gods!

Days passed by, but there was no word from our colonel, and no orders came for us to move. Had they all forgotten us? Had we by mischance taken the wrong boat and landed in the wrong part of France? What had become of our colonel and the rest of our unit? These thoughts perplexed and worried us. But one day, as we were lunching, a messenger suddenly appeared at the tent door and asked for the senior major.

"Telegram for you, sir," he said.

The major slowly unfolded it, read it as slowly, refolded it and placed it in his pocket without a word. Could it be from the colonel? If so, where was he? The major continued his meal. At last Fraser could bear the suspense no longer.

"Was that a message from the colonel?" he inquired anxiously.

"It was," the major replied.

One might have heard the proverbial pin drop – the strain was so intense. Would he never go on? Were we to hear nothing further?

Fraser ventured again: "What does he say?"

The senior major got up and left the tent without a word.

Even after all these months it pains me to record the bitter disappointment of that moment. All men have their peculiarities – Some are afflicted more than others. We may forgive, but we cannot always forget. And yet he had his good points, too; he wasn't quite all bad. Perhaps Fraser's question was injudicious; perhaps he hadn't been deferential enough to his senior officer. At any rate it was two days later when we first heard the news. The adjutant, who had been taken into the major's confidence, whispered the message to us:

"The colonel is at Boulogne, and orders will be sent us in a few days to join him. I have been told not to tell you, but I must relieve your anxiety. Keep it secret!"

How we loved him for his thoughtfulness! The tension was broken. We were once more happy and content.

Three days later the order came to move. We were to entrain at midnight, and all day long we were busy packing. By nine everything was ready. The motor lorries were loaded, and we started our march toward the train. It was a pitch-black night and rain swept the streets in chilling torrents.

One of the horses of our team had a chafed back and could not be harnessed, so that my horse was selected to take his place. The wagon was piled high with the kit-bags of the men, and from this elevation one of the orderlies held the halter of the sick horse, which followed behind. We started down the steep hill from the camp, horses and men alike slipping upon the wet and greasy cobblestones.

Suddenly a slight explosion startled the led horse. He reared upon his hind legs, jerked the halter from the hand of the orderly and bolted down the hill into the darkness. Who would dare follow him? To ride down that incline at any rate faster than a walk was sheer recklessness. Surely no horse or man who attempted to do so would return alive. But Huxford, putting spurs to his horse, plunged down the hill at breakneck speed, a shower of sparks flying out on either side as the horse's steel shoes struck the stones.

"Good God!" cried Barker; "he'll never come back – he's a dead man!"

"Why didn't he let the horse go?" cried the senior major anxiously. "Now we've lost two horses and a man. He doesn't know the city or where we are going, and even if he gets through alive, he'll never find us again."

"How could he expect to overtake a run-away horse in a strange city on a night like this? It's madness!" exclaimed the adjutant.

"He was a fine lad," said the quartermaster sadly, as though Huxford were already dead. "Seems such a pity to lose him. I didn't think he had the courage to do it."

But war shatters preconceived ideas. No one can tell which men are brave until the crisis comes. Those who seem strongest fail; those who seem weakest succeed.

A gloom had been cast over us all. We despaired of seeing Huxford again – except perhaps to find his mangled body somewhere at the foot of that long hill. When we reached the bottom he wasn't there, and we went on despondently for a mile or more, knowing the hopelessness of trying to find him; when suddenly, as we turned a corner, he appeared, still on horseback and leading the runaway. A cheer from the boys greeted him.

"Well done, Huxford!" cried the senior major. "We never expected to see you again!"

"I couldn't let him go, sir, 'cause th' colonel giv' th' horses into my charge, an' he *had* to be caught."

May we all fulfil our duty as faithfully as this lad!

The queer little French train, with its cars marked eight *chevaux*—forty *hommes* (8 horses – 40 men) was waiting at the station when we arrived. The transport officer had told the senior major not to leave until he had received his papers, but to get the men and horses aboard.

Shortly before midnight all were entrained. The equipment and horses were loaded, but there was no sign of either engine or conductor. We unrolled our sleeping-bags, placed them upon the seats in the compartment coach and fell asleep. At four a.m. we were awakened by an angry discussion taking place on the train platform. One voice was French, evidently that of the train conductor; the other was unmistakably that of the senior major. He was talking very loudly:

"I tell you, you can't move this train one inch until I get my papers."

The reply was in French:

"*Comprend pas, monsieur!*" Evidently he was about to signal the engineer to start.

"Stop! I command you to stop!" shouted the major again.

The Frenchman understood the action, if he failed to understand the words. "*Il faut partir tout de suite, monsieur,*" he replied with respectful firmness, and then, placing the bugle to his lips, he blew a signal to the engineer and the train started.

The major sprang from the platform just in time to catch his coach. He had not received the papers, and had had an unintelligible wordy duel in which he had been vanquished. He was boiling with rage.

"If I had my way," he stormed, "there would be only *one* language in the world!"

We were off once more. We had but a faint idea of where we were going, but we were on our way.

CHAPTER VI

When we awoke the sun was high in the heavens, and through the train windows we could see the steep banks of the Seine as we wound along that picturesque river toward Rouen. From time to time we passed small villages, the red tile of their roofs contrasting prettily with the snow-white of the walls. Some houses were decorated with bright blue or green, and as they swept by the window in kaleidoscopic array, the scene was one of manifold variety.

The French love a dash of colour; it is manifest everywhere – in their clothes, their houses and their military uniforms. In the larger cities where civilisation is over-developed, and humanity is more effete, the bright colours have given place to pale and delicate shades – an indication of that transformation of life which we call art. But in these little country villages, a thousand years or more behind the times, Dame Nature still holds sway, and the primary colours riot in their rugged strength. Centuries from now these rural hamlets, grown to greater size, losing their primitive audacity, will fade as well; and looking back will marvel at the boldness of their youth.

Every quarter-mile along the track a lone sentinel, in sky-blue coat and scarlet cap, guarded our path. With fixed *baionette* he stood hour by hour, watchful and keen. He had a little thatched sentry-box into which he might retire when it rained, and through the small round windows watch on either side.

As we pulled into the railway station at Rouen, we could see resourceful "Tommy" cooking his breakfast on a little charcoal stove. "Tommy" is always at home, no matter where we find him – whether it be on the battlefields of France or Belgium, or on the rock-bound shores of Gallipoli.

Our men descended from their coaches, lugged out their bags of bread, their cheese and jam and "bully-beef." The sergeant-cook meted out each share, and they soon were at their morning meal.

A few hours later Reggy and I were seated at luncheon in the *Hotel de la Poste*. The *salle a manger* was filled with English, French and Belgian officers, and their wives or friends, and to the casual observer the place was as gay as in times of peace. But in spite of the bright colours of the uniforms, in spite of the "chic" Parisian hats and pretty faces of the ladies, one felt over all an atmosphere subdued and serious.

It is true wine sparkled upon almost every table, but in France this doesn't necessarily mean gaiety. Every Frenchman drinks wine, but it is very rare indeed to see one drunk. Wine, like water at home, is used as a beverage – not as an intoxicant.

Imbued with the spirit of the time and place, Reggy and I called for a bottle of old *Chambertin*, and under its mellowing influence, care and the war were soon forgotten.

Of course we visited the Cathedral, and listened to the old sexton pouring incomprehensible data into our stupid ears for half an hour while we examined the rare stained windows and the carved oak door. When we returned to the train, the senior major and the transport officer were deep in conversation: "But where are your papers?" the R.T.O. was asking.

"We haven't any," the major replied. "That French conductor wouldn't hold the train until they arrived. Can't we go on without them?"

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