

Our Soldiers' Letters

BEFORE me lies a big parcel of soldiers' letters, written by men, whose ages range from twenty to forty-five, little lads of the *classe 15* and gray-haired *territoriaux*. Before the war they were artisans or peasants, in the French provinces, and the strongly marked characteristics of their different races were clearly perceptible in these Bretons, Normans, Provençaux and Burgundians, when they were with us in the hospital. In their letters these characteristics are less visible. The French peasant is not a fluent writer; he takes up his pen with difficulty and expresses himself awkwardly. The letters come from the *dépôts* as from the front, the most poignant from the trenches where a German shell may any minute smash the writer's pencil,—all trench letters are written in pencil—and put an end to his life. They are all addressed to the *Infirmière Major* of a Red Cross hospital in a Paris suburb, a warm-hearted Sister, whose long experience among the sick poor has helped her, not only to nurse, but also to influence and understand our wounded fighting men.

The hospital over which she presides has a singularly kindly aspect. It stands in a garden with real country-looking trees, and was occupied before August, 1914, by the novices of a popular nursing Order. When the Germans approached Paris, the novices were sent to Toulouse and their old home became a hospital where, for the last twenty months, there has been a steady coming and going of wounded soldiers.

Mother Josephine Louise, our *Infirmière Major*, keeps in touch with her former patients as far as her many occupations will permit and this spring, in honor of the approaching Easter time, she sent them a circular letter, to which the missives before me are the ready answers. A discreet reminder of the duties that Easter implies was accompanied by affectionate inquiries for news and by an assurance of the faithfulness with which the friendly hospital of the *rue X*— keeps fresh the memory of its patients.

Surprise that any one should have taken the trouble to write to them, without any move on their part, is evidently the first impression of some timid natures. A young soldier from *les Landes*, slight and frail in appearance, reticent and shy, spoke so little that I remember wondering if my attempts to talk to him pleased him or not. This silent lad writes more willingly than he speaks. "Your letter touched me so much," he says, "that I seized my pen to answer you, to give you news of myself. I own that I never thought you would care to hear. I regret it now for I see that you have not forgotten me." He ends with grateful messages to everyone and particularly to the lady who "used to come every evening *m'adresser sa douce parole*." Another soldier, who was a clerk before the war, is more literary in the expression of his thanks. The mother's letter "sought me out in the darkness and brought me comfort," he says. Gratitude, heartfelt, if simply expressed, fills these crumpled pages. An elderly soldier from *les Charentes* writes that when at home "not a day passed without my speaking of your hospital with my family." "I shall never forget the hospital," writes a bright boy from Champagne; I shall eternally remember how I was nursed there." A "territorial" from Lyons says: I often speak of you with Corporal H—, who also was for some time with you, and I assure you that it does me good to remember the weeks that I spent in my other family, that is to say, in yours; that I can never forget." A peasant, who has evidently frequented the village school to some purpose, thanks the nuns for their "delicate" care of him. This grateful soldier is a prayerful Christian;

"*Le bon Dieu* has never forsaken me," he says, alluding to the hardships of life at the front.

Sometimes our soldiers' gratitude is sharpened by the contrast that exists between the friendly hospital where they are treated as children of the house, and the military hospitals where they are merely *cases*. "How often," writes one who had been sent from the Sisters' care to a military hospital, "have I missed the gentle words and the marks of kindness that I received from you. I prayed hard to be sent back to you, but alas, I am always among *ces féroces*." Let us hope that our soldier's regrets for his soft-spoken nurses made him exaggerate the "ferocity" of which he complains.

All our soldiers are not heroes. They are magnificent under fire; this has been proved over and over again; but between whiles the remembrance of the wives and children, who are dependent on them, melts the hearts of these middle-aged fighting men. A middle-aged "territorial," whose helpfulness and good temper are remembered at the hospital, writes thus to Mother Josephine: "I must go back to the front as the war is not finished, *à la grâce de Dieu*; but I hope to get a good wound and to be sent back to the Sisters, who are so kind and so devoted to the poor soldiers." As a rule, however, our former guests are willing to return to the post of danger. At the hospital, the Sisters and their kindly chaplain do their best to fan the flame of patriotism in these ignorant, but sincere souls, and, by reviving their religious convictions, to strengthen and steady their patriotic feelings. A gentle-mannered vine-grower from *les Charentes*, the father of a family, writes that, being cured of his wound, he is now starting for the front, "but I go there as I did before, with courage and confidence." A Breton, who was so grievously wounded, that he still limps and cannot wear shoes on his maimed and swollen feet, regrets that he can neither fight nor work, but adds: "So many poor soldiers are mutilated, having lost their arms and legs or their eyes, they are far more to be pitied than I am!" Another, who came to the hospital in a critical condition, was nursed with such skill that he partially recovered; "I shall always feel grateful," he writes, "for the good you did me and for M. l'Abbé's good advice. He brought me back to the practice of my duties as a Catholic that I had unfortunately rather neglected." He goes on to say that, not being sufficiently recovered to fight, he is employed to prepare the wood that is used by the soldiers for their trenches; "We do the work with a great deal of zeal and we are happy to feel that we can thus help to save some human lives and make the lives of our brethren at the front less hard. Be sure that I shall fulfil my duty as a good Christian and a good soldier." A "territorial" from Lyons, whose sadness often struck us, touchingly expresses his child-like confidence in the Sisters' prayers: "I beseech you to pray for me, for my wife and children, they sorely need their father to bring them up. You who live so near to God cannot pray in vain."

The writer of another letter is a Breton, more sociable than his countrymen in general; his open countenance, gentleness, good temper and grateful recognition of the least kindness, made him particularly popular. From the sodden trenches, his thoughts go out to the big basilica that dominates Paris. He remembers how he and his comrades once went to "Mont Marthe," as he spells it, and how "proud" he felt to escort the Sisters on the occasion. "I never fail," he adds, "to say the prayer of the 'Association' in honor of the Sacred Heart."

Occasionally the soldiers' mothers take up their pen and between the lines, we read the pleasure with which they seize the opportunity of writing to the nuns, who nursed their boys back to health. A peasant woman touches a higher note and gives us incidentally, a side view of the

tragedy of war. Among the soldiers who left an excellent impression behind them at the hospital, was a certain Joseph —; who had evidently been brought up by devout parents; he was, moreover, docile, civil and eager to oblige. In Mother Josephine's letter, addressed to her boy, his mother answers that "Joseph has been missing since June 6, 1915"; three months later, in September, his younger brother, aged 21, also disappeared; another brother is at the front; the rest are young children, who cannot replace their brothers at home, where the old parents, deprived of the assistance of their big sons, are grappling painfully with adverse circumstances. The writer simply and briefly states the facts, in answer to Mother Josephine's cordial inquiries, but there is not a word of complaint in her letter. "They have shed their blood to defend France, our country; they are now in paradise with Jesus and Mary, where I hope we shall one day have the happiness of meeting them again. May God's holy will be done here below and not ours!" Thus writes the peasant mother, whose strong and simple faith keeps her spirit centered on the realities that alone give suffering a meaning and a solace.

B. DE COURSON.

COMMUNICATIONS

Letters, as a rule, should be limited to six hundred words

Woful Waste

To the Editor of AMERICA:

In his preface to "*Pange Lingua*," a book of Catholic hymns lately published by Burns & Oates, the Rev. Dr. Adrian Fortescue blames "the crushing blow which destroyed the beauty of all Breviary hymns" on four Jesuits,

who in that faithful obedience to the Holy See which is the glory of their Society, with a patient care that no one can help admiring, set to work to destroy every hymn in the Office. No one who knows anything about the subject now doubts that the revision of Urban VIII was a ghastly mistake for which there is not a word to be said.*

But an even lower depth was to be reached in our vernacular hymns, "the real badness of which surpasses anything that could otherwise be imagined."

Solomon, wanting to build the Temple, and knowing he had not competent workmen among his own subjects, did not hesitate to go where he could find them, which shows how he would set the people to "sing wisely." But the prevailing temper among us has been that, for Catholics' use, only Catholics may furnish tunes, or translations even of hymns by Saints and Church-Fathers. Taboo and bootless to us those literary marvels, Neale's devout and almost literal translations of the ancient liturgical hymns, in the original meters, and in choice and in admirable English verse. Likewise, for the same reason, namely, that he is not of the unity of the Church, Mr. Alan G. McDougall's translations in *Pange Lingua*, which, says *Catholic Book Notes*, "equal Neale's at his best." Only by an Episcopalian, the devout and Catholic-minded Samuel G. Baldwin, has Cardinal Newman's unique "Queen of the Seasons" been set to music or reprinted in a hymn-book.

This wanton waste of good things accounts for a large part of our choirs' ineffectiveness for teaching doctrine or arousing devotion. What choir of ours ever sends out "a verse to catch him whom the sermon flies," or any such influence as that claimed for

that rhythmic word of Goethe, that little snatch of music, which has already sung itself in dark hours and in bright through many a heart, joyfully finding much in it, and joyfully missing so much in it, finding it wholly veritable and creditable, full of piety yet free of cant?

From our choirs might come, but do not,

Thoughts in attitudes imperious,
Voices soft and deep and serious,
Words that whisper, songs that haunt us.

But this concession to folly cannot always, nor very much longer, stand. Against it, besides such spirits as Dom Columba, O.S.B., in the *Caldey Pax*, and Dr. Fortescue, is the restless, indefatigable James Britten, in his little *Book Notes* and elsewhere; and the foremost of his great and continuous services to Catholic truth may well be to have brought about, in the words of Dr. Fortescue, "an end of the present odd anomaly that, whereas our liturgical hymns are the finest in the world, our popular ones are easily the worst." It is devoutly to be hoped that the much needed reform will speedily be forthcoming.

Mendota, Minn.

MARTIN MALONY.

Catholic Physicians and Reading

To the Editor of AMERICA:

The article in AMERICA of August 5, on "Catholic Physicians and Reading," by Edward Kelly Hanlon, interested me greatly. Everything he said in regard to the subject is true. But while laying bare conditions as they exist, he did not suggest any specific remedy for the difficulty. From a fairly large acquaintance with Catholic physicians, and a knowledge of the contents of their book-shelves, I feel I am in a position to offer a few remarks and make a few suggestions that may perhaps be of very practical value.

In many physicians' libraries, in addition to strictly technical books of the profession, may be found sets of the standard authors, so called. These will include Dickens, Thackeray, Tennyson, Scott, and so on. As for these, well and good. But there will also be found sets of Balzac, Dumas, and others of their ilk, with perhaps Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." All of these in bindings more or less splendid, according to the taste and purse of the owner. If one should offer the information that these last-mentioned works are on the "Index," and should not be read, the retort will likely be, "What is the Index and who knows anything about it?" For it is a fact that, not only among Catholic professional men, but among the Catholic reading laity in general, as little is known about the "Index" as about the "Oxyrynchus Papyri," or the "Annals of the Four Masters." For those who believe that *legis ignorantia neminem excusat*, the "Roman Index of Forbidden Books," by Reverend F. S. Betten, S.J., will furnish all necessary information. This small volume may be obtained at any Catholic bookstore for a very modest price.

Many of our Catholic physicians are graduates of non-Catholic schools and colleges, and consequently have not had the advantage of a course in Catholic philosophy. For such, the possession of a good, working collection of books on Christian ethics is a matter of supreme importance. For it is well known that in many non-Catholic medical schools principles are taught that are widely at variance with Catholic teaching. To my mind the following books should be found in the library of every Catholic physician: "Essays in Pastoral Medicine," by Walsh and O'Malley; "Pastoral Medicine," by Alex. Sanford, M.D.; "The Right to Life of the Unborn Child"; "Death, Real and Apparent," by Rev. J. B. Ferreres, S.J.; "The Crux of Pastoral Medicine," by Rev. Andrew Klarmann, A.M.; "Moral Principles and Medical Practice," by Rev. Charles Coppens, S.J. These all first-class hand-books of medical ethics, written from the Catholic standpoint. A knowledge of their contents would be of inestimable value to all Catholic physicians. Ignorance of such matters is something of a disgrace, for the *doctor* should be *doctus* not only in medicine but in Christian ethics.

Boston.

E. J. CALLANAN.

