

Section 167-04

Caring for the Wounded

Individual Stories - Lt Col Hanbury Sparrow

Lt Col Alan Hanbury-Sparrow went out in August 1914 with the 1st Battalion, was wounded in November 1914, returned to France as 2ic the 2nd Battalion, was wounded again at Pallas Trench in March 1917, invalided to England and returned, eventually to command the 2nd Battalion and was severely gassed at Third Ypres in November 1917. He eventually recovered and commanded the 4th Wiltshires. He recounted his experiences in his book *'The Landlocked Lake'*

Episode 1 - November 1914

[continued from section 189]

It was the 24th October 1914 at Frenzenburg that Lt Sparrow was injured:-

Flash! Crack! Flash! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Thwack! And again a sledge-hammer blow - thwack! The incredible has happened. You're wounded.

Dying - for the last one got you in the stomach!

Lie still - it's your only chance. Lie still!

The air's mad with bullets. The men will never hold the ground. And you'll be left a prisoner - the shame of it! - and torture, the old fear of torture - you'd never stand it!

The sergeant has bandaged your hand. You rise to your feet. He offers to go with you. "No, you're too valuable," you reply. "Send a private." You know you're doing wrong to take a fighting man, but prison - torture! Away, away, away, with him to guide you!

What's happened? He's fallen over. Clumsy blighter! "Come on!" you cry impatiently. He's groaning. He's hit in the stomach.

For a second you pause irresolute. There's nothing you can do. Away! Away! Leave him to die.

The platoon you abandoned never gave way an inch, and the R.A.M.C. robbed you of everything except your pipe.

There's a hospital train being loaded up. Stretcher-case after stretcher-case is transferred to the bunks. Officer after officer, Indian Army and British Army, an endless stream of mangled men silently enduring torture they are shifted ever so gently to the bunks. There's a boy with a shattered leg; there's a major of the 15th Sikhs with a smashed thigh. It hurts to see the agony caused by the transfer from stretcher to bunk. They are comfortable at last. Then the boy gazes down the crowded coach and speaks to the major. "Poor thin red line," he says. [TX00151Z]

He was taken away to a Hospital in Boulogne. While he was there he met a German officer, considerably older than himself:-

It was at this time too, that you saw the first German officer

since the one who had lain in your ward at Boulogne. That gentleman, a reserve lieutenant of some sixty years of age, who had already had his son killed in the war, who had himself lost one leg and had the other none too sound, and who could only read with the aid of a magnifying glass, wanted two things, beer and to hold the nurse's hand. The first he got, though he didn't like it, called it chemical and compared it unfavourably with the beer of Prague. As to his second desire, he and the nurse had rather a row about it. That was the first specimen.

The second was limping along with his arm round a captured private's neck and was certainly no Romeo, being bearded, narrow-shouldered, and weak eyed. Altogether a harmless-looking creature and last person to make love, you'd have thought. But one never could tell.

For the third you met somewhat later at least to be strictly correct you didn't, for both of you were lying down cases and he was at one end of the ward and you the other - was no doubt a "sad dog" in his own eyes. You heard this conversation. Nurse: "Drink it up, it will do you good." German: "All right; Seestaire, if it is good for me, Seestaire, I will drink it, Seestaire and, Seestaire, a kees for me, Seestaire." To be technically correct, the cad was only an officer aspirant. But it says much for the German military machine that with such material - even supposing none of the three was in any way typical - it was able to put up such a resistance. [TX00790G]

He returned to England for convalescence and leave and was later posted to a Service Battalion. At last he was able to return to France as a Captain in Corps HQ. Eventually he managed a transfer to the 2nd Battalion which is where he was posted in March - He eventually joined the 2nd on the 25th May 1915

[continued in section 192]

Episode 2 - March 1917

He first recounts his wounding:-

You were on the very point of ordering the charge when a burning pain pinched your right shoulder and the revolver fell out of your grasp. You were disarmed, for the original wound had incapacitated the other hand. That settled it. No, you wouldn't charge. Deeming you had been hit by a rifle grenade that had burst in the rear, and fearful of being captured, you ordered the men back to the trench, and walked away. You hadn't gone far before you began to wonder if you had been hit by anything except a clod of earth. Meeting an officer of the support company you bade him look. He bent forward and inspected. "There's blood all down your back," said he. At his words your short-lived resolve to return to your post vanished.

One way to the aid post lay by a black valley. This you took, for the communication trenches were being heavily shelled. But you soon realised that the way you were taking was equally dangerous, for it was full of hidden batteries that fired at uncertain intervals. At any moment you might have had your head blown off by an unexpected discharge. But some angel guided you past these perils, and your strength just lasted as far as the aid post. Only there did you discover that the wound had been caused by a rifle bullet that had gone right through you. [TX00792A]

He encountered the sister whom he had met when he was injured in 1914 and found his mind dwelling on sex rather than analysing all aspects of the war:-

It was your habit to chew the cud of reflection over the least of its incidents and even as the sun-dew flower passes its life attracting and absorbing flies, so your mind was always open to attract any information about the war. For the past couple of years such had been its staple diet and favourite food. For you firmly believed that hidden in the war lay the answer to the riddle of the Universe. Therefore you never wearied of contemplating its manifold problems and manifestation of the sweetness of patriotism and the pain of grudging reluctance. Like Marlowe's Tamburlaine you held, "Our Souls. ..will us to wear ourselves and never rest." The war must be forced to yield its secrets. It was your destiny to ferret them out. But now you found yourself throwing off the war as lightly as the gayest. A new force was surging upwards, pushing all else into the background, and permeating your whole being.

It was sex. Even as Nature adorns the unconscious bird with its mating plumage, so, willy-nilly, you suddenly found yourself possessed of a wit, a gaiety, and a merriness that were quite foreign to your real nature. It was your sex plumage and you ruffled it bravely in the ward. It wasn't that you were in love with anybody in particular; it was simply that you took a quite especial delight in female society, and without really meaning to, you yet did all in your power to attract them. The presence of women stimulated you; without them, even, say, for the two quiet hours of the afternoon, you languished. As the moon draws the tides, so women drew up sex, and when they left the ward you were distinctly aware of the tide ebbing. Emerson somewhere or other compares man to a tube through which outer forces are drawn and whence they emerge. In a dim way you were conscious of this at the time, that is to say, you recognised that this sex plumage was not really you at all. But on the other hand you didn't want to be yourself; you were very happy as you were, bandying jokes, exchanging repartees, and thoroughly enjoying a new and stimulating life. Therefore you groaned on being called back to the other reality by the bathetic popularity of Tennessee.

Fate had initiated this period with a strange reencounter. When you had been wounded in 1914 you had been tended at Boulogne for three critical days by a very good-looking Sister. This was the same girl that had had the bit of trouble with the amatory but ancient Boche officer of which I have told. Now Fate arranged it that she should look after you on the ambulance train. What her name was you never found out, for she was extremely deaf when you asked. She, however, had recognised you by the original wound and had remembered the name. All of which left you extremely flattered, for in the two and a half years she had lost none of her looks.

The impression she left however, was temporarily effaced by a fair chatterbox who escorted you and another stretcher case in the darkness of an ambulance van from Victoria to Queen Anne Street. Her talk was mainly of military matters and quite captured your heart, it was so gay and indiscreet. She revealed a comprehensive knowledge of our forthcoming Arras offensive which the authorities firmly believed to be a dead secret, whilst her knowledge of Nivelle's projected breakthrough was, if not quite so complete, sufficient to have given that general and the doomed Colonel Alencon a nasty shock if they had overheard. Altogether you were much in love with her by the time the ambulance drew up at the door of the hospital, and it was a great grief to you that good manners forbade asking her name. Thus politeness cut short a friendship that had opened in a most propitious fashion.

On the train journey up from Southampton you had endeavoured to wangle a comfortable hospital, and lying there in bed you realised you had succeeded. For the next two months you were

destined to live under as pleasant a regime as the heart of a wounded man could desire.

This was in itself a great achievement on the part of the hospital staff, for the conduct of the officers themselves had compelled the authorities to institute a very much stricter regime than formerly. Whereas in 1914 it was simply a question of living under the normal hospital rules, now rules were in great part framed to keep the officers themselves in order and to stop them either by negligence or design from ruining by dissipation their cure, or by their conduct impairing the discipline of the Army. In 1914 you had been packed off home after a month or so in hospital to complete your treatment there. Now such freedom was prohibited. After leaving hospital an officer was sent to a convalescent home, and there he remained under discipline until he was fit for duty.

For scarcely one really wanted to get back to France. Who could blame them when they had the daily dressing of their wounds to remind them of what shell-fire was like? Nevertheless it was sad and depressing to know that that was so. Many thought that song, "I don't want to get well," funny, but it was too near the truth for you ever to find it anything but painful.

That private hospitals, such as the one you were in, could be so pleasant was simply because each patient knew that if he gave trouble he would be at once sent to Millbank or some other more strictly disciplined place. This vague menace was quite sufficient to keep order for people knew when they were well off. But the crowning virtue of these private hospitals was, for the inmates, the escape from military monasticism. For, contrary to what is generally supposed, the officers of decent units were not continually dashing off to Amiens. Certainly the battalion core of which I have previously spoken were clean living. Such must have been the case, for they otherwise could not possibly have stood the racking nerve strain.

The result, however, was a very deep longing for female society. Millbank and the other regular hospitals were dreaded because they represented a continuation of this monasticism of the trenches. Sex could find no expression in the long sanitary wards, early rousings, and formal regulations of such establishments. Hence those who knew the ropes at once applied on the train journey to be sent elsewhere, and if you were a regular officer, or looked as though you could be trusted to behave, and had not too complicated a wound you, like as not, got your request.

But at the back of this sexual urge there lay quite undoubtedly the instinctive longing for continuity. Death was ceasing to be an adventure. Instead it represented extinction. Continuity lay alone in the physical germ plasm. The child represented the continuation of yourself. Many a bachelor cried in the watches of the night, "How easy death would be to face if only I had a son in whom I might live!" Such were the forces that urged and surged in the hearts of the wounded, for the ego was revolting against the continual sacrifice of itself on the altars of patriotism. How great were the forces operating in the subconscious! How little and how confused was what emerged on to the surface! In spite of Dora and the strict regimentation of the outer world of London, the inner reality was in a welter of confusion. It stood bewildered in a world of verboten and ration cards.

Into this world you stepped as soon as you were fit to leave your bed. [TX00792B]

One thing he was grateful for - nobody snored:-

There was one other fact that added to your contentment of mind, nobody snored. Although in the two months you were in the ward the occupants of the fourteen beds were constantly changing, yet never was a single night made ugly by that repulsive sound.. That was a very great and remarkable blessing. [TX00792C]

He went on to describe wartime London (see section 390)

Episode 3 - November 1917

The battalion were at Ridge Camp having been relieved in the front lines trenches at Passchendaele. They were however still within reach of German artillery. The valley they were sheltering in was being continually subjected to gas shells with the gas being trapped in the valley.

About midnight a whizz-bang crashed and burst against the forward face of the pill box. Instantly a screaming yell of terror arose. Four men sheltering in the forward trench had been wounded. The stretcher-bearers had left with the earlier cases. There were none to get these men away. We sent runner after runner to the aid post. Either they wouldn't or they couldn't go through the gas-filled valley with its geysers of shells, or the stretcher-bearers wouldn't or couldn't face it. Probably couldn't, for, on the whole, stretcher-bearers did their duty well.

"Stretcher-bearers! Stretcher-bearers!" "Won't some-one go for stretcher-bearers?" Continually through the dragging hours the cry came from the agonised men round whom the devils of fear, released by the wounds, were dancing. It tore the unwilling listeners to pieces. It was indescribably harrowing. Only were they quiet when gas compelled us to clap masks on their faces. Then indeed you were thankful. You hated these men for tearing so remorselessly at your own fragile guard. The gas masks stopped their cries.

Otherwise there was no escape from their suffering. Apart altogether from your own funks and fears, the front had so livened up that you decided you would not in any case be justified in going round the companies - -and there was nowhere else to go. Indeed, you were beginning to wonder if the Boche were not going to have a go at Passchendaele within the next few hours, and that was why they were filling the valley with gas to stop reinforcements getting through. It was just sheer un-adulterated strain.

At last the second-in-command, reliable Allardyce, suggested going himself to the aid post. He got through and got back with stretcher-bearers, but by this time the men were dead. They had died like Falstaff, getting colder and colder from the feet upwards, and though their mates had given them all their blankets in answer to their complaints, yet it was all no good. One by one they died peacefully.

By dawn we were all gassed. I had to send the rest of the H.Q. officers down, and face another night of it alone. As a result, I was rather bad. Passchendaele broke me. When I got out again in April, I only lasted three months, as I simply couldn't stand it any longer. [TX00796A]

Sources

The Land Locked Lake