

A few rambling notes of experiences among
Belgians in Sheffield & district.

I have been asked to send in a contribution to this number of our Society Magazine. I was very much at a loss to know what to write about, and it was suggested to me that I should write of my experiences among our Belgian friends who have been with us in this district.

Having had a subject about which to write, found for me - my next difficulty was to know how to commence, for it is very difficult to discover anything likely to be of general interest among so much that is commonplace and ordinary.

There has been much that was humorous, and much that has been very pathetic, but on the whole one cannot help feeling that it has been much to one's advantage to be doing work - in however small a way - among our brave allies.

I suppose most of our readers remember that momentous evening - Thursday, the 14th of October

when twenty sadly maimed and very much travel-stained men arrived at Dore station.

What a day of expectation and excitement it had been for all concerned at the St John's Church Rooms! What wild rumours as to the time of arrival, & number of patients coming, were rife! Days before we heard they were to arrive on Tuesday at 10.30 a.m. As Tuesday came nearer, rumour changed the ~~date~~^{day} of arrival to Wednesday, & finally to Thursday morning. On Thursday morning people began to assemble to see the expected red cross train, but they soon got wind of the fact that—"there has been a delay in London & they won't arrive till 2.40 p.m." At 2.40 the crowd collected again and remained more or less the whole ~~rest~~^{part} of the rest of the day and evening. Finally about one o'clock news came that a telegram had been received at the hospital—as we must now call it—that the train would be at Dore at 11.30 p.m. What a thrill of excitement when the actual time was definitely known!

The crowd began to grow and grow in size—

The first arrivals being the schoolboys — wise fellows these — who knew well that if mother & father knew that the expected event would not take place till 11.30 or later — they would be forbidden to go — so that it behoved them to be missing before the news reached the parental ears. These youthful spirits whiled away the tedium of waiting by singing and whistling in a more or less musical fashion various patriotic airs — among which, "Tipperary" was easily prime favourite.

Then the older "young people" began to arrive — and it was strangely noticeable that whereas many of the came alone — few remained so — and it is possible that there are several of our young folks who remember with very pleasant feelings, the evening that they sat — or stood — in the dusky station yard, — how prosaic & unromantic it sounds —, on that evening when the full horrors of the terrible world-war — was brought home to us — in this peaceful little village — in such a forcible & unforgettable manner.

Last of all came the 'old' people. It was no mere idle curiosity which prompted

"Grandpa" to risk an attack of bronchitis by venturing out so near to midnight - No! - was it not rather an honest desire to be one of the crowd to give a real royal welcome to our Belgian friends, in order to show in some small way, our appreciation of their magnificent sacrifice - for us - at the cost of their own country.

After they had been a few days at the hospital a public visiting day was announced. What a rush there was on that first day! What a number of those early visitors did actually go out of curiosity only! & how noticeable was the falling off in the number of visitors in the later days. One day I had the privilege of accompanying two of the patients on a drive. We called at the Market Hall in Sheffield; - if each man had carried a sandwich board - "I am a wounded Belgian soldier" they would not have attracted more attention.

The crowd grew so thick that we were compelled to take refuge in a shop until the motor came to our rescue & bore us away. And let me say here that, whatever you

have done for them during their stay in Done - however much - or however little - it has been appreciated - aye - excessively so -.

Always, if you happen to meet one of our boys who has left the district & is living outside Done - if you ask him if he is comfortable & happy he will reply - perhaps a trifle wistfully - "Oui! - mais Vive la Done!"

Many of you know how one of the men, who had been a great favourite with everybody at the Hospital, was sent to London to get his discharge & how immediately on receiving the valuable "billet de réforme", he telegraphed to matron asking her to send a telegram at once so that he might get his coupon for the railway pass, to return to Done by the next train - as he feared he might be sent elsewhere. This was done & he returned the same day! and he is still living here & likely to remain here! He always says that Done is the same to him as his own village & he is as comfortable & happy here as in Belgium, his one regret being that he can hear no news of his mother.

I went shopping with him in Sheffield one

day recently, he wanted to buy himself a watch and chain & also before he goes back he wishes to buy one for his mother - "My dear dear mother - whom God grant that I may see alive again". He had his twenty-first birthday while at the hospital & was fortunate enough to receive many presents, I believe he had a really happy day. He was heard to remark in reply to the question if he was having a happy day for his birthday - "Yes - but there will be sad hearts in Belgium today for me, if they are still alive."

His great concern is to let his mother & father know that he is alive & well as he fears it may be worrying his mother.

Just one little story.

I was with him at the Cinema one day, & at the close of one picture the trademark of the film company was shown - the double hemisphere -

It chanced that over Europe a large black blotch appeared. Immediately my friend exclaimed - "Ah! voilà l'Allemagne" - (look at Germany)

For the moment I did not see what he meant & I asked him -

Needless to say it was the Black blotch that

he meant - as he put it - "The big black blotch on the map - Germany"

If you have borne with me thus far in my rambling remarks perhaps you can manage just one more anecdote.

The day before six of the men were to leave the Hospital for good & all - I was asked to accompany these six - & one other - the patient of whom I have already written, - to Sheffield to visit the Cinema & have tea, as a final treat. We went into a restaurant & ordered "Beans a toast". The wait boys puzzled & amused them - apparently they had not seen any before & they were much put about how to eat the beans - but when - partaking of buttered oatesake - they all solemnly dipped their pieces of oateake - oozing butter - into their coffee - & proceeded to do so until the oateake was all finished - leaving a thickness of a quarter inch of melted butter on the surface of the coffee - , & ended the meal by quietly stirring up all this butter into the coffee, & drinking off the lot - we wondered whether "Bile Beans" were ever used in Belgium, anyway they enjoyed it - & what matter?

C.G.