

THE PADRE

(By PATRICK MACGILL.)

They came down the road towards the village, four men and a pony. All the men were soldiers coming back from days of hard battle at Bullecourt, and all bore traces of the rough and tumble of the fighting line. The man sitting in the saddle, with a bandage round his forehead, his mouth hanging open, and his fingers fumbling aimlessly with the reins, had received his wound the night before. It was quite a light one, but on the march it had become painful, and the boy (his age was not twenty) was glad enough to get a lift on the way. Two of the other men, hanging on the stirrups, were suffering from sore feet, and even now, helped though they were by the willing pony, the men grunted a little as they neared the billets where they were going to rest for a week or two. The fourth, a tall lank officer, was a soldier in the double sense of the word, for his rules of conduct had been laid down by the Higher Command of the British Army as well as by the High Command of his Church. He was Father Quinn, Catholic Chaplain to the British Expeditionary Force. As usual he was engaged in helping the lame dogs back from battle, and the job was one after his own heart.

Father Quinn is loved by the soldiers. He shares their dangers and their hardships. Wherever they go he is with them. Many not belonging to his faith come to listen to his sermons, which are always short and to the point.

Once he said, speaking from a makeshift altar in a barn that was pitted with shell-holes: "Love God with your whole heart and soul, and your neighbor as much as you can. Remember that every man, even a German, is your neighbor. To forget this in ordinary life is a mortal sin: but it is scarcely a venial sin to forget it in a bayonet charge."

On another occasion he said: "A man who refuses a tot of rum on a cold morning in the trenches is more fool than teetotaler."

Remarks like these greatly please the soldiers and do a lot to secure Father Quinn admission to all minds. He has the gift of saying the grandest things in the most common idiom. His sermons are full of trench slang, drill-book phrases, and soldiers' catch-words, and because he speaks like this he enters all hearts. But in war it is actions and not words that make a man, and this good priest who is loved for his humorous and kindly words of counsel, is admired for the perfect fearlessness he shows when visiting the firing line. He is a man after the soldier's heart.

He is always on hand when an attack comes off. One time the Brigadier remonstrated with him.

"But some of the boys may want to confess their sins if they are lying out there wounded," said Father Quinn.

"Then why not get them to confess before they cross the top?" said the Brigadier.

"Dying men get more consolation from confession than a healthy man," said Father Quinn.

One morning when he was in the trenches a wounded German was seen lying out in No Man's Land. This man had been wounded when on a listening patrol the night before. Without telling anyone of his intention, Father Quinn crossed the parapet in broad daylight, went out to the man, and carried him in. The German, who was a Catholic, died two hours later.

The C.O. complimented the Padre on his work, saying: "Some valuable papers have been found on the man, and they'll be very useful."

"That may be," said Father Quinn: "but the thing to be thankful about is this—the dying man has received absolution for his sins."

A strange incident happened not long ago. The regiment to which the Padre was attached was ordered to attack one morning, and the priest was in the trench

waiting for the command to advance. The enemy was shelling the position with heavy stuff, and the casualties were severe. When the whistle was blown, Father Quinn gripped a sandbag preparatory to the spring over into No Man's Land. Then he heard his name called by a wounded soldier lying on the floor of the trench.

"Well, what can I do for you?" asked the Padre, coming back. He recognised the wounded boy as a soldier who had won some notoriety as an unbeliever—in fact, the men dubbed him an atheist, and the boy took great delight in being called this.

"I want to make my confession," said the atheist.

"Your what, my boy?" asked Father Quinn.

"My confession."

"You've changed your mode of thought, surely!" said the Padre.

"I have," said the boy. "I was born a Catholic, and now I want to die one."

Father Quinn heard the soldier's confession, and was on the point of crossing the bags when another man called him back, a Jew. He also wanted to make his peace. The good padre was dumfounded. It would be a long job if all the casualties took it into their heads to become converts. He heard the Jew's confession: then a third man wanted to confess. This soldier belonged to the Church of England. It was then that light broke on the Padre's mind.

"I could forgive you for changing your religion when you think fit, boys," he said. "Everyone of us must work out our salvation as he thinks best. But I can't let your becoming Catholics rob me of my jaunt into No Man's Land, where other of my own lads are waiting for me."

So saying, he gave each man a cigarette and crossed the top. But by now the enemy's fire had decreased in volume, and that night Father Quinn came back to safety.

All the soldiers in his Brigade love him, and they tell tales of long nights when they have seen him out from dusk to dawn in "No Man's Land," digging graves for the dead; of weary marches back from battle, when tired men hung on to the stirrups and tail of the Padre's pony, while the Padre himself marched by their side carrying their equipment. And men who are resting in a quiet village to the rear of the firing line can tell tales of his giving the French children rides on his pony through the village streets. These latter tales, however, are best told by the good French matrons when they exchange confidences over the village pump.

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