

FRIEND AND FOE

The Author, Ex-Corporal J. E. Vaters, late Royal Newfoundland Regiment, was a prisoner of war for eighteen months in Germany, during which time the incidents recorded herein occurred.

IN prefacing this, my first contribution to THE VETERAN MAGAZINE, I desire to say that in writing the article I have been mindful that the incidents recorded herein are set down as they actually happened, and that if any inaccuracies occur my brother Comrades who were in captivity the same time as myself will bear with me.

After perusing the excellently told article on "Monchy" in the first issue, I have been prompted to write some of the happenings on the other side of the Line on that fateful day, April 14th, 1917. In doing so I am not forgetful of the gallant deeds performed on that day by our heroic dead, before they fell to the bullet of the Hun. Imagine, if you can, officers and men pushing forward in spite of their wounds until exhausted they fell, only to receive mortal wounds from the awful tornado of shell fire. They did their bit and encouraged others to follow on, such was the heroism displayed by the officers and men engaged in that battle.

It was my unfortunate lot to be amongst the number that pushed too far forward and after a hard resistance were surrounded and taken Prisoners of War. For seven and a half months we were working behind the German lines; but I do not propose to write anything in connection with this ordeal, as it would hardly make pleasant reading, so I shall step along to December 4th, 1917, when I arrived in Germany, having ridden four days on what I may call a fifth class train, made up specially for us by the railway people. Each box car was marked "reserved for prisoners of war only." The rear car was marked in large letters "PRISON TRAIN."

We were side-tracked at every siding between Denain and Sneidemuhl, Germany, and not a drop of warm tea was given us for the whole time. After spending three weeks in a well-fortified camp at Sneidemuhl, with very little to eat, we met some of the old English prisoners. However, we could not exchange any greetings as we were not allowed to mix with them, being in separate camps with heavy barbed wire entanglements around us. The Germans had also doubled up their sentries. Our boys felt that Fritz had the wind up very badly. "Yes, begorra," said someone, "he is afraid that the Caribou will get loose and make things lively." Here it was that a very uncomfortable incident happened.

While looking through the herring net or barbed wire, I saw an old German sentry with a wooden leg. I remembered having seen him once quite well and I felt sure that he recognized me. It happened on October 12th, 1916, when my mate and myself chased that old Boche out of a communication trench. My mate landed a Mills bomb right on him and turned him over. Luckily he did not remember us or I guess he would have tried to get quits. He must have, with the help of his brother Boches, got back to his hole and here he was, still helping his Fatherland, keeping guard over the boys who gave him his job. At this place we had very little to eat and no chance of getting in touch with the older prisoners in the hope of obtaining a tip where "Buckshee" was to be found. Perhaps the Boches thought that we would transmit the news to the older prisoners of the big army the Mother Country was gathering around her, because this would

probably invoke a cheer from the Englishers and cause a disturbance. I am sure that they would not have stood much cheering from us, but with such a rotten lot of old cripples, who looked as if they had been knocked about on the Somme, we were not afraid of the circumstances. Later on we were allowed to speak with the older prisoners who were captured in '14 and '15. They told us that the Germans were a bit more merciful then than in the early days, when Germany was feeling that she was winning the war and every day saw them singing their "Deutschland uber Alles." The majority of those prisoners were captured in Belgium and Mons, when that gallant little army, called "contemptible" by the Germans, fought so magnificently in the Retreat. They went on to tell us that they were days without food and so tired out from fatigue and wounds that they were forced to give up by the wayside and were trampled upon by the advancing German infantry. They were treated in the most brutal way, many being bayoneted or shot because they could not walk back to the German lines. One could hardly think that human flesh could stand it. Such hardships as we had gone through behind the German lines were bad enough, but our worst punishment was having nothing to eat with plenty of work to digest it with. The old hands had all this and were likely in addition to get a stomach full of cold lead at any time. None of my party was ever shot after we were counted and checked. We often were threatened but the old hands said that often more than half of their party were shot when out on a working party. The British prisoners had to wear Russian uniforms to disguise their identity and several Ruskies got killed because they wore British uniforms. The British seemed to have been the worst hated of the lot at that time. The Hun was then getting short of food and had, consequently, to suffer from hunger.

It did not take long to find out how the old prisoners got out of their camp and returned with potatoes, etc., and were not seen, and we had plenty of exciting

escapades trying to replenish our larder, evading the alert Fritz.

At last we were informed that we were going to shift out on a farm to work. After a few days we got the order to fall in with our togs and we did not take long to do this. We did not have any buttons to shine up or much kit to take along. Some of us had our tin cans as drinking and cooking utensils and I am sure that we did not look very presentable when we paraded with hands in our pockets. The food ration at our new place of rest was anything but encouraging. At seven in the morning the menu would read as follows:—Small loaf of bread between six men, dinner ladle of soup, called "sauerkraut," from its taste and smell. This "sauerkraut" was made up of three kinds of vegetables: carrots, turnips and cabbage and a portion of the very worst kind of yellow meal. Although this combination was bad it undoubtedly kept us going and, together with the bread, gave us an existence. As bad as was the bread it tasted to us just as a bit of nice dark cake would under ordinary circumstances; it would always taste more-ish when we had finished the issue. We would never keep any over for the next meal as our motto was: "Let to-morrow provide for itself." It was great fun to see the fellows running for their share of sauerkraut and bread as the first fellows would always get some "Buckshee" (extra), and if it was not their turn there would be a row.

Someone was always finding fault but an allowance should be made for us as we were children again, food being to us as candy is to them. Dividing the bread ration was the best of the fun. One way was to make tickets and number them, then cut the bread in slices. Each man would then draw a ticket and number five would draw five pieces of bread and so on. The funniest of all was "blind man's game." Each man of the party would be blinded in turn and he would name his piece. Food was the one topic of conversation with us and, as I said before, we were as children again. We were then expecting parcels from that wonderful

society of Red Cross workers and the thought kept many of us going. One chap in particular, who had been ill for some days, was always saying that when he got his first parcel there would be something doing, but alas! when he got it he did not enjoy it very much, as he died the next day and we buried him the following at Boshain. Quite a number of us had swollen legs, caused by weakness through hunger. Mine were swollen but the swellings were caused by potatoes. It happened like this. I was working on a wood cutting party near a farm. A field of potatoes was nearby. Each of us crept out in turns and got his supply of the "spuds" unknown to the Guard, as we were not allowed to take any kind of food into camp, and we had to make sure that we acted without being seen.

I wore a pair of old three-quarter boots which were given me by the Boches after my wooden clogs had worn out and I filled the legs of them up, and, hauling my trousers legs over them, felt quite safe. Alas, on my way into camp I discovered that in my haste I had put in some stones as well as spuds and they kept gnawing at my ankles. To have stopped and removed them would have given away the game, so I had to grin and bear it. Hence the swollen legs! Still it was better than going to prison. I, however, had to go to hospital with the ailment and had some of the German paper bandages applied to my legs.

On December 10th we arrived at Bud-sen, a little village about a hundred kilos from nowhere. Our guard, not knowing much about this part of the country, put us off at the wrong station and, as there was no train to follow, it meant a tramp of 25 kilos. After partaking of our rations we started out, but as small as they were we could outdo the old guard. Before we had gone 10 kilos one of the guards collapsed and the other guard got very cranky—proper old nibs, he would hardly let us talk and raked over his rifle in a dangerous way. Should we have started to sing "Tipperary" or "Rule Britannia" it would have been sad. When we arrived at our destination he did look a

bad sight and it would not have mattered if we did kick up a row.

We were directed to a billet in a shed with the windows fastened down with iron bars. There was a small stove in one end of the room, but, as there was no flat on it, we could not do any cooking at all. The smoke went up like a spin top, and we had to roast our potatoes instead of boiling them. As we had eaten all our rations on the day previous and as it was well past the time for breakfast, we began to show long faces, feeling that we were forgotten. It was indeed a bad place to starve in without any resistance. The climax came, when up spoke one of the party, a bushman from New South Wales, Australia, asking "Are we Coffers going to let this blooming affair go any further? Strike me pink, No! Those square heads have played their game with us long enough, and it's up to us to do things, no matter what the after-effects are." So we started to look around for a means of escape, when one of the party espied a weak place in the floor. All together! and bang! went the floor and our means of escape looked us in the face when the approach of the Old Blue, the guard, was heard in company with another square head who had come along to reinforce him. He was quickly asked if we were to have any food and if so when. He replied with a welcome "Ya! Ya!" and started to count us. There were only fourteen of us and it took him ten minutes to do so. We fell in outside and marched away to breakfast, feeling very hungry. After going about a hundred yards we were told to sit around a table on empty barrels and our sauerkraut was to be dished out. Old Blue did the sharing as the old Frau would not condescend to do it for enemies. Old Blue was not so bad after all, as he always saw that we got a fair share and I hope that he is doing very well now that the War is over. After breakfast we were fitted out with saws and axes and made ready for the bush. One of our chaps always took the lead up the trail and once he started to pave the way it was no use for the Guard trying to stop him, unless he pointed the muzzle of the rifle at him.

Then he would turn around and say: "God strike me, man, what's wrong? Are you afraid I am going to skip out?"

On our return one evening I saw my Coffey friend looking at something by the wayside. "What is it, Bill?" I said. Bill picked it up in his hands and passed it along to me, saying it was a crow. I asked him if he thought it would do for supper. "Sure thing," he said, "bring it along," and he fetched it back to camp. "How long has it been dead, Bill?" "Oh, about a week or more," he reported, "and it will be all the better for cooking." Blue wanted us to fire it away but you must remember that it was a delicacy for us, so we started back to camp with our prize. "Well here goes, Blue Boy, what doesn't kill will cure," I said, as we started cleaning the beast. To get his coat of feathers off was not much of a job but it was so thin that we decided to leave some of them on and cook it as it was. My Australian friend said that it beat anything that he ever saw and that it would make a good story to tell the folks when we got back home again. After it had been put in the pot we discovered we had forgotten to wash it but as we were not going to drink the gravy it did not matter. After a long time cooking it was served up and I assure you that it was a delightful relish after sauerkraut.

After a long stay there we entrained for Sneidemuhl. The first night back we did not worry much as we knew that some parcels from the Red Cross had arrived for us. Eagerly we looked forward to a good old Blighly smoke and every one felt happy. Next morning we received what parcels there were for us. I got two and my buttie got three and we were as rich as lords, whereas only a few days back we were as poor as beggars. I must say that those parcels were the means of saving our lives over and over again and we can never thank the Red Cross enough for their goodness. Very soon we had good cans of cocoa going hot, strong and sweet, and I must say that we drank the health of the Red Cross and poor old Crow. After staying here for a week we got in

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readiness for a trip on the land again. The order came early in the morning and it is unnecessary to say there was none of the folding of blankets or the cleaning of billets.

The order was as usual "Marching order, kit bag on the slope." "Say, you fellows, keep up there!" "Ah! heaven strike me!" and other funny sayings. Soon we were off on a train for the East of Germany. We were well away this time, being allowed to ride on third class coaches. As we went along we were distributed at the different stations until I was the last Britisher left with five Ruskies when we arrived at Trip-Toe Station. My predicament was not very pleasant as I could just speak a few words of German and no Russian at all. And the Ruskies were gabbling away to themselves and looking very hard at the few English parcels I had with me. I knew they were asking if it would be any use trying to take them away from me. I tried to convey to the Ruskies that they would come off second best if they tried any dirty work with me—and they didn't. They had all gone out by now and the Guard appeared. The Ruskie saluted and the Guard looked towards me for some kind of compliment but there was nothing in that line from me. The old chap felt annoyed at this insolence; however, he did not do anything. He was one of the older men who saw that the farmers gave their right share of the crop to the Government and that the prisoners did their share of work. The old chap started talking to me all the way along the road to Farben and I kept saying "Ya, Ya," and Nein, Nein." I did not understand much German, it being my policy to pretend not to understand that language. We were not long on this trip, arriving in Farben at six in the evening, and were taken to Herr Bregres' farm. He was the man who was to be my boss. The old guard rang the door bell and one of the daughters of the house appeared. The guard said "Gretchen, Abend, Fraubine, ich habe ein Engländer." She replied that he might enter with the Engländer and into the kitchen we went, the guard shaking hands with Herr Bregres—a

custom they always follow. I helped myself to a seat on a three cornered chair in the corner of the kitchen. "Now here, you Engländer, this is your boss, Herr Bregres." Knowing that they did not understand much English I replied that I supposed that the old man would not mind if I made love to his daughters. "Nay, Nay," said Herr. "Do you festand spracken the Deutsh." "Just a very little Herr." He told one of the girls to get some food for me. It did not take them long to get the table in readiness as they filled up a large sauce-pan with potatoes with their jackets on and told me to go right to it. No tools were supplied to eat the variety with, so I used a pocket knife. After I was feeling very refreshed with the frugal meal, the Guard came to me to say that he was taking me over to the lager with my Comrades. The old farmer told me to leave my parcels at his house and we could fix up in the morning. I was in a fix and I did not know what to do. If I took them over to the lager the Ruskies would pinch everything. I was between two fires, so I consented to leave my parcels with the old man. Arriving at the lager, a little place built on to a barn, 11 feet x 15 feet, I found that in this place seventeen Ruskies and myself had to live. The room was a litter of filth with rotten straw all over the floor. It contained one small window and there were many iron bars across it. The old Guard showed me the bed I was to occupy. It was devoid of any covering as the Ruskies had pinched it all for themselves. After the Guard had got his rifle in the loading position, the Ruskies gave back the extra bed clothing.

I asked why the window was barred up and no air in the place. They said it was "Verboten." "Very well," I replied; "wait and see." On the following day I picked out one of them that I wanted as a pal and I managed to make him understand that it would be better to have the window open so that we could have some fresh air. He was the most superior amongst them, being the only one that could read and write and he very willingly became my pal. After that it did not take long to have that window open—

ed, much to the disgust of the other Ruskies. One morning, while working in a field, a German soldier approached me and says "Now, Tommy, will you do as you are told?" I replied that I would do as I pleased as I was to take no orders from any one else but the Guard, and added "for the love of Hindenburg don't annoy me." He said he wanted to know what N.F.L.D. stood for. I told him that it meant "Never Found Lying Down." While on this farm I got very friendly with the farmers' daughters, in fact with all the girls in the village, notwithstanding that they had their sweethearts killed in the war, and life was not so unbearable as before.

In concluding I would say that half of the hardships of the prisoners of war will never be told, but now that we who returned to our native land are safe let us not forget those of our less fortunate comrades who were left behind in Germany. May it ever be the prayer of our hearts that they rest in peace. They did their duty bravely so that

others may live. What greater joy can man have than to lay down his life for his friends!

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"Finerty, I have a terrible toothache; it has me that crazy I don't know whether I'm a steam pump or a jumping-jack."

"Why don't you do what I do when I have toothache?"

"What's that?"

"I go home to my wife. She puts her arms around my neck, kisses and hugs me, smooths my forehead, and I forget all about it. Why don't you try it?"

"I will, Finerty. Is your wife at home now?"

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By the side of a sluggish-flowing river sat a humble disciple of Izaak Walton. In spite of the scorching sun and the insufferable heat he kept his eyes riveted on his motionless float.

"'Ad a bite yet?" called out a passer-by.

The fisherman glared at his interrogator.

"Yes," he snapped.

"What was it?"

"A bite in the neck wi' a bloomin' buzz fly," he rapped out.

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