

BLACKFRIARS

IN FRANCE

THERE is a story of a Catholic chaplain which more than once during the past fifteen years I have had a mind to tell. It is episodic, unrounded off, and in some ways unsatisfactory; but if it is to be told, it must be now, before all leaves are stripped from the forest of men's memory.

As a young Church student caught up in the enforced but voluntary ardours of war, I had a pathetic attachment to the priest wherever he might be found, making little allowance. I fear, for the preoccupation of the individual priest when he was found. It says much for the corporate charity of the clergy, whether military chaplain or French *cure*, that this childlike reliance on interest and sympathy was seldom shown to have been misplaced. On occasion, certainly, I had to crawl away and lick the sores of wounded self esteem. I can still quiver at the memory of the elderly Irish priest, a veteran among chaplains, who barked at me for calling him 'Father,' and told me I had to address an officer as 'Sir.' But it is not of him I write.

When the Germans broke through on March 21st, 1918, I was at a Casualty Clearing Station with a slight but disabling injury. The C.C.S. was somewhere on the road between Peronne and Bapaume, an important road for communications. This particular morning had been heralded in by hours of ceaseless gun-fire, and no ordinary man knew what was happening. The road outside the confines of the hospital was clogged with troops and guns. some going **up**, some coming down.

There were about twenty of us in a hut. passing the time for the most part in arguing or reading. I was squatting on folded blankets playing patience when the door was flung open and a sharp voice called out: 'Any R.C.'s here?' I went to the doorway and saw that the speaker was a chaplain. practically dead beat, unshaven, and very dirty. Hurriedly he asked: 'Do you want to go to Confession?' I said I did, but had made no immediate pre-

IN FRANCE

paration. 'Well, make your confession at once, and don't kneel down. Stay as you are.' Following the absolution there came a further jerky question, almost an affirmation : 'Now you can receive Communion. Don't kneel down. Hold my cap.' So, standing face to face, the cap in my hands supporting the pyx, I had what I knew might be my last Holy Communion. The chaplain banged the door as he went out, and I went back to fiddle about with the cards for a moment or so before going out myself to make my thanksgiving alone. No one in the hut seemed to be aware that anything but conversation had passed between us.

A little walk brought me to the bounds of the hospital and I stood on the edge of the road. Troops were still going up. Other troops were still coming down. Some wounded I noticed having precarious portorage on a crippled tank. Then I saw the priest once more. He was threading his way through the columns of troops going up, falling into step first with one file and then, running on, with another file, his ear bent to catch the secret words of a confession, his hand discreetly raised in absolution. And as I stood some little while, I saw him again, this time coming down the lines of outgoing troops doing the same thing again. The last I saw as I was summoned away was that he had turned and was threading the upgoing columns again. He seemed to be on spiritual sentry duty, and he certainly looked after his beat.

That same day the hospital was evacuated, and about thirty of us, masterless men, went about for five days seeking our battalions. Who the priest was I never discovered. But many men died within a few hours on that Peronne-Bapaume Road, and perhaps this Pastor Ignotus et valde Bonus was of their company.

Re that as it may, the Book of Wisdom has words to describe him in those days. *Fulgebunt justi et tamquam scintillae in arundinetis discurrent.* The just shall shine and shall run to and fro like sparks amid the reeds.

JOHN PREEDY.