

Tommy Atkins, Fatalist

By A. CHAPLAIN

SUNDAY morning in the reserves in England—a bright, sunny, cheery morning of intoxicating fragrant harvest breezes, of clear blue skies and singing birds. Far out of sight a lark, working its way up the warm mellow sunshine, still treats our ears with its never-ceasing bursts of happy song. Before us rolling away to the sky-line in artistic patches of yellow wheat fields, green truck gardens, patches of deep green woods, little red-roofed hamlets, and white ribbons of road, lies Kent—"the garden of England," beautiful, tranquil, and, above all, peaceful. The pervading quiet soothes and comforts. It is rest.

Suddenly from above comes the hum and drone well known to every soldier, and in a few moments one of our battle-planes soars past at a height of a thousand feet. Then follows another, and another, and in no time the air seems alive with our gallant airmen, soaring, turning, diving and banking.

A trumpet blast, not a musical call, short, sharp, aggravating. A few sharp commands in the lines, and as the men get under cover there comes the hooting, wailing screech of the coast sirens.

Fritz is over again!

Maybe it's half an hour, maybe an hour, before the "All Clear" is signaled by the sirens, and the regular routine of Sunday morning, church parade, and kit inspection, proceeds. Meantime our sea-planes and battle-planes, assisted by the "archies" on the coast, have turned back the Hun raiders. Sunday morning is a favorite time for Fritz to pay a little visit.

An hour later, peace and quiet again. From a secluded open space down in the beautifully wooded valley rise the opening bars of the first hymn, and then the sweet inspiring notes of that old favorite, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past."

The singing isn't very lusty for a congregation of two thousand. Many a boy is silent because the familiar notes and verses carry him back to the customary Sunday morning at home—the sweet little mother in dainty gown, the stern and beloved dad in black frock coat, and maybe sisters and brothers standing in line in the old family pew. But here he stands in another line—a line of khaki and brass buttons. With a little toss of his head he sings the remaining verses as if his life depended on it. Then the padre carries on with his message—usually a short, pointed address with its helpful words in the plainest of plain English.

Is the average Tommy religious? Well, rather. While he curses, grouses, sometimes picks the good padre's sermon to pieces as "damned rot"; while he stumbles along, often slipping from the straight and narrow, he is, after all, one of the most religious types in the world. And he doesn't realize it.

He has no use for what he is pleased to call "wishy, washy pulpit talk." His religion is unique. It's a queer jumble into which he mixes his God, his home, his mother and sisters, his sweetheart or his wife and kiddies. Above all, the man in the ranks is a fatalist—the most fatal of fatalists. To his belief, every shell, bomb and bullet has a number on it, and when the one with his number comes over, it will get him no matter where he is. And maybe, he hopes, his number is on none of them.

In conversation with a Canadian who spent ten months in France, I was struck with his fatalistic views. Uncouth, ungrammatical, gruff and blunt, this one-time railway section hand, who in peace times used his intelligence in the fine art of swinging a sledge-hammer on a section of the C. P. R. in Ontario, expounded to a nicety his theory of fatalism.

For ten months he had witnessed the injuries and deaths of his pals when an occasional bouquet from Fritz found its way to their battery. His had been the lot of the cat with nine lives. Time and again he had barely left a spot when a shell burst, sending to Eternity the men with whom he had smoked and chatted a moment previous. He, a veteran of the South African

War, through which he had passed unscathed as a Grenadier Guardsman, saw the youth of twenty go to his death; he, the grizzled old soldier, scraped through.

In the cook house one morning he was one of four who whiled away part of a rest period by means of a friendly game of poker. With nerves relaxed by a chaser of issue rum—cooks have a wonderful knack of producing it from nowhere—they chatted and smoked, enjoying that clean sensation produced by a hot bath, clean clothing, and a spell of rest.

"See y'u!" grunted the cook after a few raises.

But that pot was never won—nor lost. A whiz! a crash! The ex-section hand came to lying between white, clean sheets in hospital, his left foot aching under the bandages, his face smarting, and ears still ringing from the explosion.

"Now, kin you tell me why that shell, straying miles away from the line, dropped in on our poker game, napooed them three fellows, and only gave me this?"

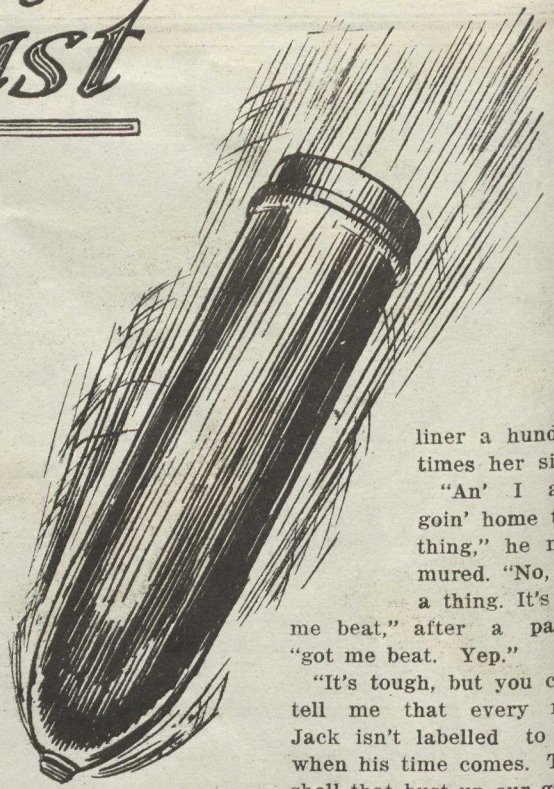
TOYING with his crutch, he touched the injured foot and gazed pensively across the Channel, where a flotilla of hospital ships and their destroyer-escorts made the only break in the sparkling, dancing blue waters, stretching away to where the shores of France rose in a soft creamy yellow and brown and green bank against the pale blue of a summer sky. He was up and about again as a convalescent, and had hobbled down to a seat on the sea wall, looking out across the Channel.

"Funny thing how it gets them," he continued, puffing thoughtfully every now and again through a black stub of a pipe.

"There was them three boys, all good boys, too, all had wives and kids, and homes to go to when Fritz blows. And yet that shell napooed 'em all and left me. Why, I ain't anything but an old soldier. Nobody cares much whether I go back or not, except maybe some of the boys u'd say, 'There comes that old son of a gun back home again, like as not drunk.' That's me, not worth a damn; but I'm alive and I'll be going back home soon."

"C3 they marked me when the M. O. had me boarded, and now they're sending me home."

He gazed wistfully at the flotilla, ever drawing nearer, and his deep sunk grey eyes followed the zig-zag course of the ships, or the circuitous rush of the saucy, impudent little destroyers, each bellowing forth enough smoke and making smell enough for a



liner a hundred times her size.

"An' I ain't goin' home to a thing," he murmured. "No, not a thing. It's got

me beat," after a pause, "got me beat. Yep."

"It's tough, but you can't tell me that every man Jack isn't labelled to go when his time comes. That shell that bust up our game

and napooed them three, and give me this, was labelled for them, sure as sure. Them three was billed to go, and I wasn't. That's all there is to it.

"I can't see through it. Nobody can. I never was much on church-going and the like, but I guess if a man's labelled to go, why he's napooed, no matter where he is or what he's doing. You can't get away from it. You just get it when your time comes, or else you skin through like me, and come out."

"Maybe there's something behind all this. Maybe there's something I'm goin' home for. I guess 'is, but I don't know what He'd use on old stage. me for!"

And so he went on.

It was but a glimpse of the scarred, hardened soul of the man who had done his bit in both Africa and France, and had paid the price—a veritable human wreck, and yet in that wreck was a human soul that expressed itself in soft, loving, tender words as he spoke of his brother's widow and her babies.

"Guess perhaps they need me. Maybe that's why I'm goin' home, and, I tell you, man, if I can work for them I'll do it, and glad to."

A few days later when the much-desired Canadian mail had arrived with its letters and boxes of eats from home, the grizzled old warrior displayed with boyish pride a crumpled letter—the first he had received in months.

"What'd I tell you? What'd I tell you? Here's the brother's missus wantin' me to come and live with them, and Bill's old boss has a job for me. I know'd there was some reason or other for my coming round well again, instead of being napooed with the boys."

HE rambled on in almost pitifully happy words. There was no thought of giving the army surgeons and nurses any credit for their splendid service. His wound had required the most delicate surgery and attention. In his mind the M. O. and sisters were all right, but God meant him to go back, and take care of his brother's widow and kiddies, and the M. O. had nothing to do with it.

He left for Canada recently, an exultant man, finer and cleaner in spirit than he had ever been. And before him was an objective in life. God had brought him out of France and God had given him a task. Fatalist he was, but deep-rooted in his soul was the grandest religion a man can have—a simple belief and fear and trust.

Like a bomb in a secluded dug-out dropped the words of one of our best-known padres, as he delivered his anniversary sermon on Sunday, August Sixth.

"As this Sabbath marks the beginning of the

(Concluded on page 24.)



"I knowed there was some reason or other—"