

The Religion for the Soldier

I. The Soldiers' Religion or Irreligion

Much has been said and written about the religious life of our soldiers in this war. Almost all of these accounts may be assigned to one or other of two classes, the very optimistic, and the very pessimistic. Comparatively few could be entered in a less romantic, but more accurate, category which forms the mean between these two extremes.

Good people at home have thought that the men who daily face death, who daily see it strike down their comrades by their sides, and know that their own chances of surviving are daily growing less and less, must of necessity have their minds solemnized by the terrible experiences through which they pass. They think that these men must surely repent of their sins, and make very evident preparation for death and another life. Distinguished strangers, bishops and other church dignitaries, who visit the camps on a Sunday, see the men drawn up in hollow squares at compulsory church parades, reverent and attentive, hear them reading the responses, joining in the prayers and hymns with a zeal and power of voice which would put home congregations to shame, give most favourable reports of the state of mind of the men in khaki towards things spiritual.

On the other hand not a few combatant officers who have looked upon the men and dealt with them simply as units in a fighting force, who have heard their language, been worried by their slackness, had to settle their disputes and listen to their complaints, who have had to enforce discipline, and keep them out of trouble with the inhabitants, whether in England or France or Flanders, will tell you that religion does not count over there. One such officer, just returned after more than two years in the trenches, said to me recently:—"That's one thing the men don't take much stock in at the front, religion." The medical officer, compelled to know the inner history of quite a few men of his unit, is apt to think and say that they are all alike, all given to the sins of the flesh. Some of the war-correspondents describe the British soldiers as equally hard-fighting and hard-swearing, and attribute to the Canadians more than average distinction in both. The stock stories which are fast becoming heirlooms of several generations of soldiers, nearly all picture the Canadian as a fluent swearer.