

THE PENSIONERS

BY JOHN LAVENDER

IT was China Macdonald who told me about *The Pensioners*. China is known in the official correspondence of the army as Maj. the Rev. John Macdonald, M.C., Senior Chaplain of the *n*th Canadian Division; but in the daily language of the Canadian Corps he is known as China. He is a tremendous person. It is difficult to realize that before the war he was merely a struggling curate in a small Ontario town; for he is famous now as the fighting padre of that Canadian infantry battalion which enjoys the pleasant nick-name of the "White Ghurkas".

Everyone agrees that he should have been a combatant officer. He had an unusual passion for going over the top with the first wave of the attack; and there are rumours—but whisper it not in Gath—that on more than one occasion he picked up a rifle and waged a war against the Hun on his own account. But I am concerned here, not in telling stories about China, but in telling a story China told me.

I was surprised when he asked me if I had read *The Pensioners*, for I had never suspected him of an interest in the new novels. I knew that the book had been very successful, for I had seen the advertisements announcing that it had reached ten editions. He urged me to read it, said that he felt a responsibility for it, that he was in fact a sort of sponsor or foster-parent to it.

China, as a patron of literature, rather amused me, and I am afraid

I indulged in some gentle ridicule.

Then he told me the story.

After the first battle of the Somme China was sent back to Canada on three months' leave. He went back to the town of St. Kitts, where he had been curate, and stayed with the old rector for part of the time. The old man, China said, was a veritable Jeremiah. He was very pessimistic about the effect the war was having on religion and morals.

"The war," he said one afternoon over the tea-cups, "is bringing in its train not only physical and mental tribulations, but moral tribulations as well. I am repeatedly impressed by the weakening, the deterioration, of the moral fibre of the country since the war began."

In the old days China would have hesitated to disagree with the rector on any matter touching faith and morals. Even now he dissented only with great diffidence.

"Of course, sir," he said deferentially, "you know conditions in Canada better than I do. At the Front we get out of touch with things over here. But I do not feel alarmed about the morality of the country; in fact, I feel rather encouraged about it. There may be less attention paid to the ordinances of the Church; there may be less outward and formal piety. But there is a great deal more unselfishness, more brotherly kindness, more of the spirit of Christ himself. And my experience in France has taught me that the spirit of Christ is sometimes present where the outward appearance of Christianity is conspicuously absent."