

News from No Man's Land

James Green

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

FOREWORD

I A QUIET NIGHT ON THE WESTERN FRONT

II NOTRE DAME DE DÉLIVRANCE

II NOTRE DAME DE DÉLIVRANCE

III NEWS FROM NO MAN'S LAND

III NEWS FROM NO MAN'S LAND

IV THE BOMBER

IV THE BOMBER

V ROMANCE AND REALITY

V ROMANCE AND REALITY.

VI THE GOD OF BATTLES

VI THE GOD OF BATTLES

VII THE CHIMNEY-POTS OF LONDON

VII THE CHIMNEY-POTS OF LONDON

VIII HORSEFERRY ROAD

VIII HORSEFERRY ROAD

NEWS FROM NO MAN'S LAND



"Now they begin to return."

INTRODUCTION

I am indebted to the Rev. James Green for the privilege of writing an introduction to his book, in which he gives a lucid and interesting description of the life of our gallant soldiers of the A.I.F. In his capacity as one of our Chaplains to the Force, all of whom have done such noble work during the war, he has been able to enjoy a close personal touch with our men—more particularly perhaps at Gallipoli; the record of his sympathetic observation and experience will, I am sure, be heartily welcomed by all who are interested in the welfare of the A.I.F.

Previous publications have, I know, chronicled the incidents of our campaign in Egypt and on the Gallipoli Peninsula—deeds in which the greatest courage, determination, and self-sacrifice have been displayed by our men from the Southern Seas, many of whom, alas! have made the supreme sacrifice in the cause of Justice and Freedom. Chaplain Green's work will, however, be an interesting sequel in that he describes what one may call our second phase of operations on the Western Front.

Here, in France, our Australian troops have continued to show that magnificent bravery and spirit which has enabled them to undergo cheerfully the severest hardships, and even to enhance their fine reputation as soldiers, which now stands second to none in this huge Army. No words of mine can adequately express my admiration and affection for them. I am proud to think that for nearly three years now I have been privileged to serve with them, during which period they have

made traditions which will live for all time in the history of Australia.

I wish all success to Chaplain Green in the publication of his book.

W. R. BIRDWOOD.

FRANCE, May 13, 1917.

FOREWORD

For reasons known to the men of the Australian Imperial Force, I am always interested in meeting others who wear the green badge on their arm. A good soldier is always as proud of the colours he wears on his shoulder as the colours he wears on his breast. He knows that each brigade and battalion possesses a soul of its own, and he is proud to belong to his battalion and to worthily wear its colours. For these reasons I ask the privilege of dedicating this book to the officers and men of the First and the Fourteenth Brigades. Sister brigades they are, from the Mother State; with them I campaigned, and for them I have a proud affection.

Heroes of many a fight,—for those two Brigades will stand out specially in Australian History, the story of the Landing at Anzac, the Battle of the Lone Pine, Pozières, Fromelles, Bapaume, and Bullecourt. Some of the men drafted from the First to the Fourteenth shared in the perils of Gallipoli, and all are associated with the fighting on the Western Front.

For them all, I wish that they may fight on to the certain and glorious victory, and have the luck to return to Australia, the land of sunshine and opportunity—there to help in building up the Commonwealth in harmony with the principles of freedom for which they are fighting.

In spite of necessary suppression, or vagueness of names of localities, my comrades of the Fifty-fifth Battalion, to which I was attached, will recognize many of the incidents described,

and I can only hope that reading what the padre has to say may cheer them in some lonely places, or help them to be happy though miserable in some indifferent billets.

JAMES GREEN.

I
A QUIET NIGHT ON THE WESTERN FRONT

We marched along, the sun was high;
We marched along—the halt was nigh;
We marched along, a little parched,
It seemed we marched—and marched—and
marched;
We sang a song, a little dry,
We sang a song, a halt was nigh.
The whistle blew, ah! welcomed cry--
'Halt!'--welcomed rest from wearied road,
With opened tunic, laid-down load;
Ah! welcomed rest with opened vest,
'Twere worth that strain to rest again!

H. H. V. CROSS,

London Rifle Brigade.
'A Route March in Northern France, 1916.'

I
A QUIET NIGHT ON THE WESTERN FRONT

We are getting near IT at last. We have started our march through the quaint Flemish villages, past canals where long strings of barges, painted grey, and bearing the marks of the

wonderful Army Service Corps of the British Army, are being towed steadily forward.

Occasionally, we march through good French towns, with their fine churches and cathedrals. We hate the pavé. It is hard for marching; but we recognize that it is a great advantage to possess such hard roads to bear the enormous War traffic of great guns and heavy motor-lorries, proceeding constantly to the front. Our band cheers us up. We are proud of it. The tunes we like best are, 'Advance, Australia Fair,' 'Australia will be There,' and 'Bonnie Dundee.'

The women and children and a few old men come out to cheer and clap, and, occasionally, we see some woman in black turn aside to weep. Is she thinking of some brave husband or son who marched to the front just as gaily as we are doing, and who did not come back?

But what rouses the enthusiasm of those stricken people is the 'Marseillaise.' When our band strikes up the martial strains of that most wonderful melody, the old men square their shoulders and the boys march bravely alongside us, and the whole roadside seems to be vibrant with the fighting spirit.

I remember one little fellow with a crutch who, though a confirmed cripple, hobbled in front of our band for miles. It was a sight which made us forget that we were footsore and hungry. Away, behind us, are the memories of the long train journey from Ismailia to Alexandria. Only a vague recollection remains of our small fleet of transports sailing the beautiful waters of the Mediterranean. We do sometimes think of the reception we got as we steamed into Marseilles, with its statue

of Notre Dame guarding the seas from her eminence on the hill above. Then the long troop trains and longer journey across La Belle France. A beautiful country, 'worth fighting for,' is the verdict of many a stalwart Australian from 'out back,' and from perhaps some little Bush township, with but a church, a blacksmith's shop, and an hotel. Further out, of course, there was a race-course, and divided by miles there were the stations and farms, but it was a land of magnificent distances. Here, however, there is intensive cultivation, and towns close to each other. A pleasant land of beautiful trees and rivers, and grass of greenness new to us. But we are getting closer to the desolation of war, closer to the valley of decision.

By and by we rest in a small village, and it is Sunday. The church bells are ringing, and as I have made elaborate arrangements for church parades, I am looking forward to a good padre's day.

The brigadier, however, cancels everything. 'Sorry, padre, the men are going to be "gassed" this morning, but not by you.' They are, and they look very uncanny manœuvring there in the fields with gas-helmets on. No one is harmed by the gas, and they learn that it is possible to live and move under gas. But I am sure they would have preferred my gas for once.

I am billeted with a very nice family here; and as the daughter is quite charming, I have many visits from the younger officers. I did not know I was so popular with them. Mademoiselle has learnt to speak English quite well.

'Don't you like Australians best of all?' said Lieutenant Gallant, with a languishing look to mademoiselle.

'We have many good soldiers here; English (they do not say much); Scotch—very good men; they speak more, and ask if there is any place where they can buy whisky. I like them all, and I do like Australians best.' The gallant lieutenant beams with joy; but she continues archly, 'Because I always like those best who come last.'

Now the battalion is formed up to march. My batman says to mademoiselle:

'You are very sorry we are going, aren't you?'

'But, yes,' and one could see it was real sorrow.

'I know why,' I ventured to say. 'It is Sunday, and to-day you would have worn your beautiful dress.'

'Ah, *oui*,' she says sadly, 'you are very wise, and it is true. Come'; and she leads us into the house again, opens the wardrobe, and behold the costume from Paris, *très chic*, the lovely hat—a creation; the high-heeled boots, they are all there. Quite innocently she tells us that, had we stayed, she, with many another fair one, would have 'made promenade.'

Oh, what we have missed! and what greater pleasure they have missed who would have 'made promenade' to the big church and along the quaint streets of that beautiful village. We have seen them working in the fields, on the railway, in the signal-boxes; but the brave women of this village would have liked us to see another side of their life when in their Parisian costumes they promenaded the streets with the grace which seems natural to every Frenchwoman.

We have had the deep sound of the big guns in our ears for days now, and we are getting so near that we have seen fights in the air. Our band instruments have been packed away, and we are in our last billet before 'going in.'

It is afternoon, the day following. The whole brigade is on the move in readiness to fight. The men march in file under the avenues of poplar-trees. The points where the various companies enter the sector have all been detailed, and officers who have been down to the sector before act as guides. At a cross-road the colonel on his horse watches the men break off for their different directions, and receives reports from time to time; nevertheless, in the darkness, the transport which I am temporarily with goes too far, and we have to halt for instructions.

By this time our guns are booming out. We don't know whether there is some 'stunt' on, or whether they are merely firing to cover our 'changing over.' Some thousands of men are 'coming out' and 'going in.' It is a difficult operation. The noise of shell-fire is great, and now we can see the festoons of flares going up in the Hun lines. The lieutenant has inquired, and he says we are right and must go on. I don't believe it. I have been down the road and I saw a parapet. I wish I had not come with the transport. They are so visible on the white road. At any time we may be discovered and a machine-gun turned on to us. The horses are getting restive. The doctor has kindly lent me his horse, and it is jumping about. I seem so high up and exposed there in the saddle, and yet I cannot hold the beast when I dismount.

The wagons, too, make such a distinct noise as they rumble over the metal road. I agree with one of the men whom I hear declaring to a chum that 'the whole bally thing is "no bon."' The men inquire, when a fresh gun-shock is heard, 'Is that ours or theirs?' With a brave optimism, I assure them that all the guns in action are ours. They take me for a veteran, and say, 'It's all right; the padre says they are all ours.' Most of the men who have been in action before add to their authority by agreeing with me. But I have a shrewd suspicion that, like me, they *think* they are all ours, and I know they *hope* they are all ours. With a splendid audacity and tone of finality, reminiscent of my cricket-umpiring days, I continue coolly to announce to every inquirer, 'Yes, of course that's one of ours.' At last a shell breaks on the road with a vicious 'whiz-bang.' No one is hurt, thank God, but it was close, and the horses are playing up. Amid the silence which follows, one of our Australians cries out: 'Now, then, padre, what about that? Is that one of ours?' Such a question, and at such a time, demands a moment's thought. But I answer quite confidently, 'Yes, that's ours—now.' Everybody laughs, but it relieves the tension. It is relieved more by the fact that the lieutenant, realizing that we *have* gone too far, has given the order to 'About turn,' and we are getting the horses and wagons behind the bend of the road.

More inquiries. I've lost my faith in the transport. The doctor's groom has come for the restless 'Rosinante,' and I'm free. If I am to get to the Battalion Head Quarters, I must proceed 'on my own.' But first I will turn into this little shelter, a forsaken dug-out covered with stout beams and sand-bags.

Two of us light up our pipes, but a profane sentry draws near. 'Now, then, you blighters, put out those pipes. You mustn't show the Huns a light. Don't you know you're in a very dangerous place?'

It's all dangerous, but we didn't know that this place was specially dangerous. I must make some inquiries of my own. I would have to leave the transport some time. Why not now? I get into a long communication sap. Like many another on the Western Front it is called Watling Street. But it gives me a cue. I remember now that it leads into Convent Avenue, and that, I heard them say, leads into Plug Street, and that is the road to the Battalion Head Quarters.

I pull my tin-hat firmly down, and when the banks are low I crouch, for the machine-gun bullets are whistling overhead, and all the choir and orchestra of the guns on both sides are in full voice now. The Concert of Europe has, by a metallic crescendo, reached its fortissimo.

The full diapason is out, but, as always in war, the *vox humana* is silent. There are little islands (traverses) in the communication trench, and suddenly emerging from the sap near one of these, I nearly bump into a sturdy machine-gunner I know well. He is a member of my Church, a sweet singer in my choir when he is at home. And this is the night for the choir practice, too. I see it now as in a vision. The choir is gathered round the great organ, and the conductor raps out his admonitions with the baton. They are practising one of my favourite anthems, 'Send out Thy Light.'

'You must duck your head here, padre; it is a bad place, and you are not supposed to loiter.'

But I must wait. I am asking myself, 'Are these guns sending out the Light and Truth?' 'Yes, they are,' I say to myself. It is a quick mental process, but I am satisfied with the conclusion.

We crouch down together and talk of the old church. He gives me more information, and I press on again. I am talking to myself, a bad sign, but the meeting and the memory has stirred up emotions not to be stilled.

'We must have two anthems next Sunday,' I say to the conductor as though he were present. 'First, "Send out Thy Light," and second, "The Radiant Morn."'

I wonder if, after this fury, there will be a radiant morn for Europe; not one that has passed away.

When wilt Thou save the people?
O God of mercy, when?
Not kings alone, but nations!
Not thrones and crowns, but men!
Flowers of Thy heart, O God, are they;
Let them not pass like weeds away,
Their heritage a sunless day.
God save the people!

A few more turns of the sap, and then I come to three trenches meeting, and it is a dangerous spot, for shells are dropping close. But the sentry, with bayonet fixed, is on guard.

'A hot place here.'

'Yes, padre, you can plop one any time here. I keep to the left side as much as possible under the bank.'

'You're wise; and what are you here for?'

'Men of the "Fifty-fifth" are to be directed down this sap to the front line, and men of the "Fifty-fourth" go down that, and by this you can find your way to the Battalion Head Quarters.'

'Eureka! I've found it. *Bon soir,*' and '*bonne chance, sonny*'; my present troubles are over.

Arriving at the Battalion Head Quarters, I find it to be a farmhouse, ruined beyond recognition as such. Kindly nature has covered it with a screen of verdure, rendering it almost invisible. The cook is there and his assistant. My kit has not come down to trolley-line yet, but the major, who has been 'in' some days, shows me my dug-out, a mere hole.

Hours after the officers begin to turn up after various adventures. They seem surprised to see me in first. 'Our padre is the limit,' says the colonel. 'Chuck him into the centre of Darkest Africa, and he would strike out for home.' They glare at me with vengeful jealousy, but they have to confess I got supper on the way with the help of the cook.

Hot coffee melts them. It is professional jealousy. I tell them we ought to have a few non-combatants to settle this war. We're good pals after all, and I know they would not care for a padre who got lost; worse still, they wouldn't want one who didn't *go in* with them at all.

There's nothing like sticking up to these fine young fellows now and again. Mutual admiration, tempered by strong opinions on irrelevant questions. The colonel is jubilant because our battalion is right in now without a casualty. Others, both going in and getting out, have, unfortunately, not been so lucky.

Bed made at last. Fritz is still letting off fireworks.

Now to get to my dug-out. I walk quietly to the left behind a wall of sand-bags, then going through an opening, I run smartly for the hole, for machine-gun bullets are splitting the air. I have a bag in front of my dug-out, and a sheet of corrugated iron to keep in the light. All night long the guns boom, but you sleep all the same.

When we get our papers up a day afterwards, we read of this particular night a neutral paragraph, headed, 'A Quiet Night on the Western Front.'

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

